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Lincoln: A Very Short Introduction

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Lincoln: A Very Short Introduction

Description

Beneath the surface of the apparently untutored and deceptively frank Abraham Lincoln ran private tunnels of self-taught study, a restless philosophical curiosity, and a profound grasp of the fundamentals of democracy. Now, in *Lincoln: A Very Short Introduction*, the award-winning Lincoln authority Allen C. Guelzo offers a penetrating look into the mind of one of our greatest presidents.

If Lincoln was famous for reading aloud from joke books, Guelzo shows that he also plunged deeply into the mainstream of nineteenth-century liberal democratic thought. Guelzo takes us on a wide-ranging exploration of problems that confronted Lincoln and liberal democracy--equality, opportunity, the rule of law, slavery, freedom, peace, and his legacy. The book sets these problems and Lincoln's responses against the larger world of American and trans-Atlantic liberal democracy in the 19th century, comparing Lincoln not just to Andrew Jackson or John Calhoun, but to British thinkers such as Richard Cobden, Jeremy Bentham, and John Bright, and to French observers Alexis de Tocqueville and François Guizot. The Lincoln we meet here is an Enlightenment figure who struggled to create a common ground between a people focused on individual rights and a society eager to establish a certain moral, philosophical, and intellectual bedrock. Lincoln insisted that liberal democracy had a higher purpose, which was the realization of a morally right political order. But how to interject that sense of moral order into a system that values personal self-satisfaction--"the pursuit of happiness"--remains a fundamental dilemma even today.

Abraham Lincoln was a man who, according to his friend and biographer William Henry Herndon, "lived in the mind." Guelzo paints a marvelous portrait of this Lincoln--Lincoln the man of ideas--providing new insights into one of the giants of American history. [*From the publisher*]

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, President, Washington DC, White House, Mary Todd, Republican Party

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Comments

Attached is the introduction of Allen Guelzo's book, *Lincoln: A Very Short Introduction*.

Introduction

No man could have loved fame more than Abraham Lincoln. “Oh, how hard [it is] to die and not be able to leave the world any better for one’s little life in it,” Lincoln once complained, and one of the rewards he cherished for issuing his Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, was the expectation that “the name which is connected with this act will never be forgotten.” And fame, certainly, is what Lincoln won, not only in America but around the world. He is one of the five Americans who, we can confidently say, are known the world over, alongside George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Martin Luther King.

But the elements that explain that fame have varied from place to place, and even from era to era. To Americans in the years after his death at the hands of an assassin in 1865, he was famous for exactly the reason he himself most expected to be remembered, as the Great Emancipator of America’s four million slaves. But the laurel of Emancipator proved a heavy one for the next American generation to hold over Lincoln’s head. The slaves whom Lincoln freed in 1863 were Negroes, and the continued sway of white racial supremacy in the minds of the vast white population of the United States eventually created an insufferable tension between public policies that quickly re-bound the freed slaves and their offspring to a legalized apartheid, and praise for the man who, by freeing them, had created that tension in the first place.

And so the Emancipator's laurel would be replaced by a succession of substitute laurels, almost a cafeteria of laurels, in which Americans could choose the one for Lincoln that that best suited the politics or the preferences of succeeding generations—Lincoln the Savior of the Union, Lincoln the Man of the People, Lincoln the Martyr, and so forth.

It has become possible, under this heap of disjointed laurels, to despair of ever locating the man himself, the man as he really was. Lincoln himself did not help matters. In an age of compulsive diary-keeping, he kept not even a scrap log of daily reflection. He did not live to write a memoir, as his lieutenants, Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, and McClellan did, and the two short autobiographical sketches he wrote in 1859 and 1860 for campaign purposes were pressed out of him by the importunities of newspaper editors. His infrequent references to his past were unrevealing and, at times, a little irritated, as though he were suspicious of the motives of those who wanted to unearth details of his dirt-farmer background. To one nosy inquirer, he merely remarked, "I have seen a good deal of the backside of this world," and that was as much as he cared to say. The eight volumes of his *Collected Works*, laboriously pieced together by Roy P. Basler and his staff and published in eight volumes in 1953 as one of the great documentary editing accomplishments in American scholarship, are filled mostly with day-to-day ephemera that give little sense of what shaped Lincoln's thinking and values. The tedium of unremarkable letters and odd jottings in the *Collected Works* are, of course, punctuated by his powerful speeches and his great state papers. But even those communicate little of what shaped Lincoln's ideas, since only on the rarest of occasions did he take time to identify the sources he was drawing upon.

Lincoln was, as his friend and admirer, David Davis, once said, "the most reticent—Secretive man I Ever Saw—or Expect to See." His law partner of fourteen years, William Henry Herndon, agreed: "the man was hard, very difficult to understand, even by his bosom



1. Lincoln at Alexander Gardner's new Washington studio, August, 1863.

friends and his close and intimate neighbors among whom he associated.”

But there *was* a man of ideas behind this determined, private shield, and those ideas might be glimpsed. Henry Clay Whitney, who met Lincoln for the first time in 1854, thought that the first impression Lincoln usually made on people was that of “a rough intelligent farmer.” But Lincoln’s longtime friend and colleague, Leonard Swett, knew better. “Any man who took Lincoln for a simple minded man would very soon wake [up] with his back in a ditch.” He took up the profession of law in 1837, without having graduated from a law school (or any school, for that matter), but purely on the strength of his mastery of a few elementary law textbooks and the mentoring of John Todd Stuart, an influential lawyer who had taken a liking to the twenty-eight-year-old Lincoln. Yet he rose to become a successful attorney, with a practice that handled more than 5,600 cases in the state and federal court system of Illinois and the United States, and Whitney was awed by how Lincoln could become as “terrible as an army with banners” in cross-examination. “He understood human nature thoroughly, and was very expert and incisive in his examination and cross-examination of witnesses,” wrote Whitney, “If a witness told the truth without evasion Lincoln was respectful and patronizing to him, but he would score a perjured witness unmercifully. He took no notes, but remembered everything quite as well as those who did so.”

Lincoln’s intellectual curiosity frequently overspilled even the professional requirements of lawyering. John Todd Stuart told a campaign biographer in 1860 that Lincoln had a “mind of a metaphysical and philosophical order—His knowledge of the languages is limited but in other respects I consider a man of very general and varied knowledge.” Unlike many of his legal peers, Lincoln “has made Geology and other sciences a special study” and “is always studying into the nature of things.” A British lawyer, George Borrett, who interviewed Lincoln as president in 1864, was

amazed when Lincoln “launched off into some shrewd remarks about the legal systems of the two countries, and then talked of the landed tenures of England,” then rounded the conversation off with some commentary “upon English poetry, the President saying that when we disturbed him he was deep in [Alexander] Pope.” John Hay, one of Lincoln’s primary presidential staffers, was just as amazed to find himself in “a talk on philology” with Lincoln, “for which” the president “has a little indulged inclination.” And even in the last few weeks of his life, the president who was better known for reading aloud from joke books reminded the San Francisco journalist Noah Brooks that he “also was a lover of many philosophical books,” and then reeled off a list of the most influential books in American and British philosophy—Joseph Butler’s classic *Analogy of Religion* on natural law, John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, and even the formidable eighteenth-century Calvinist, Jonathan Edwards, on free will and determinism.

But politics was Lincoln’s “heaven,” and “on political economy he was great.” Lincoln, wrote Herndon, “liked political economy, the study of it.” As well he might, since Herndon remembered Lincoln’s most intensive book-reading resting on the most “important ones on political economy” in the nineteenth century: John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), Henry Carey’s *The Harmony of Interests, Agricultural, Manufacturing and Commercial* (1851) and *Principles of Political Economy* (1837), Sir Herbert Spencer’s *Social Statics: or, the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified* (1851), and Francis Wayland’s *Elements of Political Economy* (1837). In particular, “Lincoln ate up, digested, and assimilated Wayland’s little work.” That string of authors and titles will not be too easily recognized today, but in Lincoln’s time, they aligned perfectly along the intellectual and literary axis of English-speaking liberal democracy. And it is along that axis that, at last, we have a key to understanding Lincoln as he understood himself.

Liberalism has come to mean in our times an unpopular combination of sentimentality, hedonism, and a selective

conviction that problems are the fault of social systems and that solutions are the province of government. But in the European and American worlds of the nineteenth century (and in continental European political philosophy today), liberalism was the political application of the Enlightenment. Its basic argument was that government is not a mystery handed down from the heavens to a certain anointed few (like kings or dukes or princes), or an unchangeable river of experience, which could not be altered or dammed, and people are not born, like medieval peasants, with a certain unchangeable *status* which they must bear all through life (*noble* or *common*, *saved* or *damned*, *slave* or *free*). People are born with *rights*—"certain inalienable rights," as Thomas Jefferson put it in the Declaration of Independence—which they must be free to exercise as a natural aspiration of their humanity. Liberalism was thus passionately devoted to freedom, and especially the freedom to *become* anything that your talents and the free exercise of your rights open up.

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That passion for *becoming* increasingly took the political form of republics rather than monarchies, and middle-class capitalism rather than Tory landowning. The English liberals, Richard Cobden and John Bright, understood that their struggle against the citadel of the British landowning aristocracy, the Corn Laws, was really "a struggle for political influence and social equality between the landed aristocracy and the great industrialists." The German liberal, Johann Jacoby, described liberalism in 1832 in the same dualistic colors: "two opposing parties confronting one another: on the one side, the rulers and the aristocracy, with their inclinations toward caprice, and their commitment to old, irrational institutions; and on the other side, the people with their newly awakened feeling of power and their vital striving toward free development." And it was a struggle, not merely for economic advantage but for a better world than the hidebound societies of dukes and baronets. "A republican government," claimed the great pamphleteer Tom Paine, "by being formed on more natural principles . . . is infinitely wiser and

safer . . . securing freedom and property to all men, and above all things, the free exercise of religion.”

Free *exercise* of religion, but *not* a religious authority. Liberalism was not necessarily the enemy of religion, but it was no more interested in taking guidance from divine revelation than it was from classical philosophy. Cobden, who embodied both liberalism’s hostility to aristocrats and its passion for measuring merit and talent by middle-class financial success, offered “scanty evidence of anything like an intense spirituality in his nature; he was neither oppressed nor elevated by the mysteries, the aspirations, the remorse, the hope, that constitutes religion.” The reverence of the liberal for reason weakened the liberal’s desire for submission to, and conformity with, the public manifestations of religion: belonging to a church, baptism, the ritual of worship, personal ethics. This, in turn, usually led to an indifference or even hostility to the public privileges Christianity still enjoyed in Europe, and to toleration for dissident forms of religion—not because the liberal had a fondness for religious underdogs, but because no religion seemed to the liberal to be worth quarrelling over.

Once turned loose onto the plains of freedom, liberals were confident there would be no limit on how far the reasonable and humane mind could push the progress of human knowledge and accomplishment. Because liberalism saw itself as the embodiment of reason, humanity, and freedom, it was confident that its own success was irresistible, and that overweening confidence that whatever represented progress also represented the triumph of liberty was the closest thing liberalism allowed itself to prophecy. Alexis de Tocqueville, the scion of the minor French nobility, had his moment of liberal epiphany in 1829, listening to the lectures of the liberal historian Francois Guizot at the Sorbonne and realizing that history was a record of the movement of progress, and that progress had equality as its goal. “It is my belief,” added John Stuart Mill, “that the general tendency is, and will continue to

be, saving occasional and temporary exceptions, one of improvement—a tendency towards a better and happier state.”

Or would it? The French Revolution, which began as a liberal movement in 1789 and then collapsed into a popular tyranny and yielded to an imperial despotism under Napoleon Bonaparte, splattered the reputation of liberalism with contempt, as did the stillborn republics carved by revolution from Spain's ancient empire in South America. Joseph de Maistre, a French aristocrat who survived the Revolution and Bonaparte, snarled in his *Study on Sovereignty*: “One of the greatest errors of this age is to believe that the political constitution of nations is the work of man alone and that a constitution can be made as a watchmaker makes a watch.” The natural political state of humanity, he claimed, was monarchy: “it can be said in general that all men are born for monarchy” and “even those nations destined to be republics have been constituted by kings.” With the defeat of Bonaparte at Waterloo in 1815, the old European political power rolled back over the map of Europe, reinstalling kings, redrawing boundaries, and devising leagues and alliances that would move at once to shut down any renewed upsurges of liberal revolt.

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Of all the hopeful liberal experiments, only one large-scale example survived, and that was the United States. And, by the 1850s, it was becoming increasingly plain that even the United States contained within itself the seeds of illiberal self-destruction in the form of an aggressive and arrogant “Slave Power,” which sought to fasten the legalization of human slavery to the rapid westward expansion of the American republic. It was in that indecisive decade that Abraham Lincoln first strode—in his homely, flat-footed, artless, and artful manner—to the front of the American national stage, to defend the idea of liberal democracy from its own American despisers. The biographies of Abraham Lincoln easily outnumber those written about any other single individual in the English-speaking world. This will be a biography of his ideas.