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Lincoln's Forgotten Middle Years

Abstract

It would be difficult to find two books on Abraham Lincoln published in the same year and yet more unlike in their conclusions than Sidney Blumenthal's *Wrestling with His Angel* (the second installment in his multi-volume survey of Lincoln's "political life") and Elizabeth Brown Pryor's *Six Encounters with Lincoln*. Blumenthal's narrative of Lincoln's "wilderness years," from 1849 to 1856, begins with Lincoln at the lowest pitch of his professional life, returning to Illinois from his solitary term in Congress, an embarrassment to his fellow Whigs, only to rise, phoenix-like, from the firestorm of the controversy over slavery in "Bleeding Kansas." Pryor's Lincoln, on the other hand, makes his debut a week after his inauguration as president, in what should have been his greatest moment of political triumph, only to be exposed as a bumbling, awkward poseur incompetently stumbling from pillar to post. Blumenthal is urgent, unflagging, so full of a sense of an impending doom for the republic that, by the end of the book, it almost seems beyond belief that any one person could rise equal to the task of saving it. Pryor is prickly, condescending, and schoolmarmish, contemptuous not only of Lincoln but of everyone who sees him as more than an oafish political hack. One sees in Lincoln the political sorcerer; the other sees nothing but the sorcerer's apprentice. Here is biographical schizophrenia in spades. [excerpt]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

Review of Sidney Blumenthal's *Wrestling With His Angel* and E.B. Pryor's *Six Encounters with Lincoln*.



Lincoln's Forgotten Middle Years

As the nation was moving apart, he was coming together.

by [Allen C. Guelzo](#)

It would be difficult to find two books on Abraham Lincoln published in the same year and yet more unlike in their conclusions than Sidney Blumenthal's *Wrestling with His Angel* (the second installment in his multi-volume survey of Lincoln's "political life") and Elizabeth Brown Pryor's *Six Encounters with Lincoln*. Blumenthal's narrative of Lincoln's "wilderness years," from 1849 to 1856, begins with Lincoln at the lowest pitch of his professional life, returning to Illinois from his solitary term in Congress, an embarrassment to his fellow Whigs, only to rise, phoenix-like, from the firestorm of the controversy over slavery in "Bleeding Kansas." Pryor's Lincoln, on the other hand, makes his debut a week after his inauguration as president, in what should have been his greatest moment of political triumph, only to be exposed as a bumbling, awkward poseur incompetently stumbling from pillar to post. Blumenthal is urgent, unflinching, so full of a sense of an impending doom for the republic that, by the end of the book, it almost seems beyond belief that any one person could rise equal to the task of saving it. Pryor is prickly, condescending, and schoolmarmish, contemptuous not only of Lincoln but of everyone who sees him as more than an oafish political hack. One sees in Lincoln the political sorcerer; the other sees nothing but the sorcerer's apprentice. Here is biographical schizophrenia in spades.

Wrestling with His Angel is really two narratives, one about Lincoln's retreat into political oblivion in 1849, and the other about the nation's plunge toward civil war. Blumenthal's most extraordinary accomplishment lies in how he prevents these two narratives from drifting away from each other.

Blumenthal opens his first chapter in Kentucky, where the 1850s begin with an ominous foreshadowing of where the nation is heading. For the first half century of the life of the republic, virtually every serious American thinker was convinced that the country's economic reliance on slave labor was an anachronism that the principles of the revolution and the inefficiencies of slavery would gradually wipe out. There were elaborate plans for emancipations through state legislatures and the courts, and equally elaborate but less dignified plans for disposing of the freed slaves to the West African settlement of Liberia. And there should have been no better showcase for these plans than Kentucky, which in 1833 adopted a nonimportation law that turned off the spigot supplying slaves to Kentucky buyers.

The bill's authors regarded it as the first step on the path to statewide emancipation. But by 1833, cotton had emerged as the single most prized commodity in the transatlantic economy, accounting for more than half of all American exports, and slave labor was the most profitable way of satisfying the world's demand for it. Virginia had been rocked two years before by a slave rebellion, led by Nat Turner, which struck out murderously against all whites, slave owners or not. Slavery became an us-or-them scenario, and in 1849, the nonimportation act was repealed after a bitter and exhausting battle between Kentucky's pro-slavery paladin, Robert Wickliffe, and the state's most famous politician, Henry Clay, and his merchant-prince ally, Robert S. Todd.

Todd was Abraham Lincoln's father-in-law and also a casualty of Kentucky's political warfare over slavery. He died of cholera at the height of the campaign to save the nonimportation law and became something of a martyr to the opponents of slavery in Kentucky.

Lincoln became embroiled still further in this contest when he arrived in Kentucky after Todd's death to disentangle a lawsuit Todd had filed against Wickliffe. In 1826, Wickliffe married a Todd relative, Mary Owen Todd, who died in 1844. Wickliffe immediately claimed ownership of her property, since her only child from a previous marriage had died in 1822 without marrying. But in fact, Mary Owen Todd Wickliffe had a *grandson*, Alfred Francis Russell—the illicit offspring of her son and a mulatto slave. Mary Owen Todd had freed Russell and his mother, but

Wickliffe refused to acknowledge their existence, and it became Robert Todd's burden to ride to the rescue of her estate (and her mixed-race grandson's title to it).

When Todd died, management of the suit fell to his son-in-law, Lincoln. Hence, on the doorstep of the tumultuous 1850s, Abraham Lincoln found his own antislavery instincts fused with family interests. As Blumenthal writes, Lincoln "witnessed firsthand the unbridled arrogance and grasping of the pro-slavery forces as they re-wrote the state constitution to fling open the gates to the slave trade and not coincidentally step over the grave of Lincoln's father-in-law, who had opposed them."

The case of *Todd Heirs v. Wickliffe* is just the first example of Blumenthal's skill at dovetailing intensely specific details of Lincoln's life from 1849 to 1856 with the larger, more familiar story of the republic's self-immolation over slavery. This is no small achievement, since Lincoln's withdrawal from politics in those years was painful and substantial. For fifteen years, Lincoln had built a political career through the Illinois state legislature, through his marriage into the Todd clan, through his prominence in the Illinois Whig Party, and, finally, as a U.S. congressman, through his reckless opposition to the Mexican War. His reward for these labors was to find himself howled down at home for failing to support the troops, and ignored in Washington as politically expendable. Lincoln buried his disappointment, and his political future back in Springfield, by practicing "law more assiduously than ever before" and "losing interest in politics."

But Lincoln's ambitions did not stay buried. Instead, Blumenthal follows Michael Burlingame, the greatest Lincoln biographer of our time, in seeing maturation of Lincoln's personality beneath the embers of his public career. "When he went underground into a rather ordinary provincial existence," concludes Blumenthal, "withdrawing from public life not by choice but by rejection, he slowly began assimilating the lessons of Washington and Kentucky. He entered his wilderness years a man in pieces and emerged on the other end a coherent steady figure."

The coherence that Lincoln gained as a person was matched by the dissolution of coherence across the nation on the slavery question. Blumenthal provides us with as enlightening a political narrative of the great Compromise of 1850 as we have had since the days of Allan Nevins and David Potter. The Compromise was supposed to stamp out all the threatening fuses lit by the national argument over slavery, but it lit fully as many new ones over the legalization of slavery in the western territories. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill of 1854 was supposed, in turn, to settle *those* questions, but only ignited worse ones, paralyzing the Democratic Party, wrecking the Whig Party, and giving rise to a new antislavery party, the Republicans.

Pacing these collisions at every point is the figure of Lincoln, rising gradually to more and more prominence as the controversy “raised such an excitement . . . throughout the country as never before was heard of in this Union.” *Wrestling with His Angel* ends with the outbreak of violence in Kansas, the organization of the Illinois Republicans, and Lincoln’s failed bid to return to Congress in 1855—a failure, but narrow enough to induce him to abandon the ruins of the Whig Party and try again in 1858 as a Republican. Like wrestling Jacob, he had struggled through the night, and at last extorted the angel’s blessing to prosper.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor sprang to national attention in 2007 with her biography of Robert E. Lee, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters*, based on previously unpublished Lee documents to which Pryor had persuaded the Lee family to grant her access. She had worked for the National Park Service and the State Department in a career that took her to Vienna, South Africa, and Sarajevo, before reconfiguring herself as an independent historian. Until her death in 2015 at the hands of a lunatic motorist in Richmond, she had turned her attention to Lincoln, managing to complete enough of her manuscript to make it publishable this year.

Six Encounters is, unquestionably, a book for the snobbish end of the anti-Lincoln sofa. There have always been Lincoln haters, starting in his own time and running through Edgar Lee Masters’s *Lincoln the Man* (1931), Lerone Bennett’s *Forced into Glory* (2000), and Thomas

DiLorenzo's *The Real Lincoln* (2002), but they have generally had political axes to grind, and not very noble ones at that. Pryor had no noticeably political arguments with Lincoln; her antipathy toward him was purely a matter of taste. Pryor's previous books—a 1987 biography of Clara Barton and the Lee letters book—both adopted a similar querulous, fault-finding tone, but in neither of them is the pick-a-little approach so unrelenting.

The six “encounters” Pryor takes as her portal into Lincoln's presidency begin with a White House reception on March 12, 1861, for the senior officers of the U.S. Army then serving in the District of Columbia. From the moment Lincoln shuffles into the East Room, we are made to realize what a gawd-help-us Lincoln is: he has no understanding of etiquette, he has offended the professionals by installing Simon Cameron as secretary of war, he has allowed southern officers to resign and head south without interference, and in general he sows the seeds of chronic disobedience and erratic leadership. His handling of the Fort Sumter crisis was a particular “preview of Lincoln's shunning professional military expertise to rely on amateurs with whom he had personal ties.” This becomes a pattern for Pryor's Lincoln, who “shrank from exercising crisp authority,” and instead offered only “erratic leadership” that “often led directly to battlefield losses.”

The ensuing five “encounters” only make Lincoln look worse. When a flag-raising ceremony in June 1861 goes awry because of tangled halyards, Lincoln's attempt to downplay it becomes a moment to deplore his “off-color jokes . . . lewd scenes and double entendres.” There is no “beautiful prose and inspired conversation” in the sixteenth president; to the contrary, he is “an awkward conversationalist, with a poor grasp of grammar,” not only “indecorous” but flippant, whose “papers are banal or workmanlike, unusually so for the nineteenth century.”

The third vignette, focusing on the moment Lucien Waters of the Eleventh New York Cavalry draws an impromptu sketch of Lincoln sitting on the steps of the South Portico of the White House, is parlayed into an opportunity to rake Lincoln's tardy path to emancipation and his insensitive use of the n-word. The fourth vignette, featuring the Cherokee chief John Ross, offers more or less the same judgment about Lincoln's indifference to the fate of the Plains Indians in

the Civil War. For all of Lincoln's rhetoric about self-determination and self-government, Pryor finds him guilty of an "ethnocentric vision of the Indians' future," full of "the standard platitudes and paternalistic tone of the day." The fifth vignette, which begins with Lincoln's interview with Harriet Beecher Stowe, reveals a Lincoln dismissive of "women with confident ideas or pointed demands." In the end, "Lincoln's long-term vision for Native Americans, freedmen, and women rarely extended further than the limited vision of the complacent masses."

Pryor's "encounters" are less a series of teachable moments and more a succession of sniffy opportunities to find Lincoln falling unforgivably short of modern expectations. In that respect, they are reminiscent of the viewpoint of Lincoln's own elite bureaucratic contemporaries—the acidulous Adam Gurowski, the unsatisfiable Wendell Phillips, the ambitious Salmon Chase—who could not imagine how someone as gauche and uncertified as Abraham Lincoln could possibly pilot the country through the shoals of chaos.

That Pryor's dismissals are as ill-founded as her predecessors' becomes evident, however, as soon as the numerous missteps in her own research become apparent: the Constitution's opening phrase, "We the People," was coined by Gouverneur Morris, not Light-Horse Harry Lee; there was no "3rd Infantry Division" in the U.S. Army in 1861 or at any point during the Civil War; the Washington *National Intelligencer* was a starchy old Whig newspaper that was hardly "administration-friendly"; Lincoln did not tell the *New-York Tribune* anything about his response to Horace Greeley in August 1862, simply because the response was sent to the *Intelligencer*, not the *Tribune*; the guard regiment at the White House was Company K, 150th Pennsylvania, not the "115th Pennsylvania"; the famous Confederate War Department diarist was Robert Garlick Hill Kean, not John Hill Garlick Kean.

These may seem like the sort of blunders that Pryor herself might have corrected had she lived to read the galleys. But there are holes even in her larger assertions. Take, for instance, her claim that "the record is clear" that the n-word was "part of Lincoln's private as well as public vocabulary." Certainly, the word was understood as a vulgarism even in the bleak racial climate of the 1860s. Stephen A. Douglas used it so viciously and so routinely that the *New York*

Times complained that Douglas's speeches in Congress had to be rewritten to expunge the offensive word before they could be printed in the *Congressional Record*.

But the term shows up in the eight volumes of Lincoln's *Collected Writings* only thirty times, and even then it's found in accounts of speeches as reported by others, rather than in Lincoln's own hand. In 1859, one anti-Lincoln newspaper actually complained that Lincoln's discussion of "the Nigger question" too circumspectly referred to the "eternal Negro" rather than using the profaner version the newspaper preferred. In fact, the n-word appears nowhere in any document written by Lincoln, except on three occasions in 1857 and 1858, where he is actually quoting *someone else's* use of the word.

Lincoln may not have been a racial saint, and certainly wasn't by today's standards. He used smoother, but no less condescending, terms, like "darky" and "aunty" (although when he used "aunty" in addressing Sojourner Truth, she bluntly objected, and Lincoln apologized). But Pryor was straining a point, and it was not the only camel she wanted to put through the needle's eye. In her sixth and last vignette, following Lincoln through the streets of defeated Richmond a week before his death, Pryor blamed Lincoln for having been too brittle and too uncompromising over slavery, and so, by implication, bearing responsibility for hellish destruction that surrounded him as he rode through the smoldering rebel capital. Lincoln thus falls short of "legitimate authority and respect," and Pryor speculates that "for all his aspiration," Lincoln could never have become "truly president of the entire United States."

Neither Pryor nor Blumenthal have claimed to be professional historians. Blumenthal is best known as the Clintons' most influential confidant, and Pryor only went as far as a master's degree in history at the University of Pennsylvania. But the depth of their research and the reach of their grasp certainly place them in the intellectual company of the academic professionals. The trouble, in Pryor's case, is that professional technique is not enough when put to the service of personal pique. Blumenthal has taken the wiser course, and given us, by far, the better Lincoln.

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