

Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre

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Matthew Pinsker's thoughtful and compelling essay reminds us of the enduring legacy of David Donald. It offers not tricks and treats of the coming season, but rather a bicentennial Santa bag overflowing with presents, including (whiz-bang!) the gift of an online bibliography.¹ The clichéd question "What new can be written about Abraham Lincoln?" has been given a digital update, and Pinsker's challenging and creative framing of this topic provides a rich mapping of historical fields. Some of us might wish that his essay could have featured more intersections between new academic themes and topics (such as environmentalism, cultural studies, queer theory) and the boom of interest in Lincoln studies, but Pinsker is not at fault. Then again, some of us might wish to remain with the narrow topic that lures crowds into museums, readers into libraries and bookstores, and promises a rosy future: Abraham Lincoln, whose star continues to rise.

Sister and fellow Lincolnistas may want to quibble with finer points of interpretation—or even to bawl and brawl over specifics. But Pinsker has done a heroic job piecing together major themes and suggesting new avenues ripe for exploration. Because I have been tagged as someone who might have additional suggestions, and especially because Pinsker is so open to constructive commentary, I offer observations and thank the *Journal of American History* for this invitation.

First and foremost, as Pinsker indicates, Lincoln studies has "been one of the more open fields in academia and perhaps the most oriented toward the general public," and lecture audiences are at times filled with buffs or self-described "wing-nuts"—as one audience member identified himself at a recent Lincoln conference at the Huntington Library.² We have had the luxury of scheming that our manuscripts will find a publisher. With the \$50,000 Lincoln Prize on the horizon for nearly twenty years, many have dreamed beyond publication—to fame and perhaps other rewards.

Second, Pinsker's emphasis on the digital age reminds us that we are in a period of transition, especially concerning publishing. The Lincoln bicentennial intersects with a publishing crisis that may have enormous consequences. Commercial publishers are competing for declining sales, and many university presses are fighting just to survive. All of us keen on reading, writing, and keeping American history alive hope the life support sup-

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¹ Between the time when this essay was written and when it went to press, David Donald passed away on May 17, 2009. For the bibliography, see *Building the Digital Lincoln*, <http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/projects/lincoln/media/>.

² Matthew Pinsker, "Lincoln Theme 2.0," *Journal of American History*, 96 (Sept. 2009), 439.

plied during this downturn can keep books on shelves and new readers for our research and ideas.

Although I welcome many of Pinsker's suggestions about new research initiatives, I would caution that we must not abuse our position. The Lincoln scholarly establishment needs to spur a younger generation toward embracing populist, engaging intersections of interest. Pinsker makes a persuasive argument for pursuing a research agenda that would include many of the concerns raised by Mark E. Neely Jr. and Gabor Boritt in the 1970s, and he outlines an ambitious series of political biographies that would add to our appreciation of Lincoln's rise in Illinois. But before I sent anyone off in search of William W. Danenhower, the Chicago bookseller who led the Illinois Know Nothings, I might suggest that a vibrant new age of Lincoln studies could pursue other roads not yet taken.³

Perhaps to find some common ground, biographies of neglected figures, as Pinsker suggests, would be most welcome. I would advocate some innovative biographical projects, moving toward a place I like to call "Beyond Frederick Douglass." We have Jennifer Fleischner's fine 2003 study of Elizabeth Keckly and her relationship with Mary Lincoln, but we suffer from too few, and relatively sketchy, views of Abraham Lincoln's relationships with African Americans. Yes, there are recent major treatments examining Lincoln and Douglass (by Allen C. Guelzo, James Oakes, John Stauffer, and Paul Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick).⁴ But I suggest that several other African Americans would be worthwhile subjects because of their proximity to Lincoln—William de Fleurville of Springfield and William Slade of the District of Columbia, to name just two. A dynamic new generation of researchers might explore a radically different cast of historically significant characters who influenced Lincoln's wartime policies: Robert Smalls or Sojourner Truth, for example.

Although Pinsker hints at some of Lincoln's most stringent critics, a group colloquially known as "Lincoln haters," I am disappointed at our lack of understanding of the demonization of Lincoln within his own lifetime. This aspect of Civil War history requires more and better investigations to appreciate the transformations witnessed by Lincoln's contemporaries, research that gauges both his popularity and how it shapes the sixteenth president's legacy. Many new studies look at the Civil War press, but few move beyond a handful of New York papers. Pinsker suggests that digging in archives can turn up fresh avenues for research and that digitization combined with online access also provides an expanding portfolio of resources for future investigations.

Complex portraits can emerge even if we concentrate only on prolific and plentiful New York resources—as I recently did while researching for the companion volume for "Lincoln and New York," an exhibition at the New York Historical Society (October 9, 2009–March 26, 2010).⁵ I encountered a striking level of criticism, even vituperation toward Lincoln from his contemporaries. Men and women in the staunchest Republican

³ Mark E. Neely Jr., "The Lincoln Theme since Randall's Call: The Promises and Perils of Professionalism," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 1 (1979), 10–70; Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Ocean* (Memphis, 1978).

⁴ Jennifer Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship between a First Lady and a Former Slave* (New York, 2003); Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York, 2004); James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York, 2007); John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2008); Paul Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick, *Douglass and Lincoln: How a Revolutionary Black Leader and a Reluctant Liberator Struggled to End Slavery and Save the Union* (New York, 2008).

⁵ Harold Holzer, ed., *Lincoln and New York* (New York, 2009).

circles provided some of these stinging critiques, along with the infamous chorus of Copperheads who spearheaded campaigns against the Illinois politician occupying the White House, throughout his first term and into his second. And it was the wives and daughters of politicians who in their letters and diaries often voiced some of the most scathing sentiments. The writings of women from the past, as I have suggested for several decades, may profit our historical portraits incalculably, and they need to be part of our expanding agenda of research.

We know that his 1865 assassination contributed to Lincoln's secular sainthood, yet there is no time like the present (that limbo between past and future) to contextualize Lincoln's unpopularity during his own lifetime. Some of his critics held identical views to those of Lincoln's current detractors. We must confront these difficult aspects of Lincoln's reign, including congressional end-runs and his expansion of war powers. A more severe scrutiny of Lincolnian prerogatives might be just the tonic, a steadying bicentennial counterbalance to the halo-polishing that dominates the field.

The late George M. Frederickson characterized Lincoln as possessing largesse and inconsistency, and so must the scholars who pursue him during the twenty-first century.⁶ Another helpful direction, then, might be to embrace Lincoln's contradictions and to contextualize them within the unfolding panorama of new work in American history. These vibrant transformations Lincoln undertook signify that even if he was not predisposed to the tenets that led to his reputation as the Great Emancipator, he did develop the moral and pragmatic sensibilities that led to his symbolic persona in the global historic fight for freedom.

Lincoln's every imperfection—real or imagined, disputed and debated—might be put under a microscope with the next crop of scholarly tomes.⁷ But even as we discover warts and all about our beloved Abraham Lincoln, we remain in his thrall.

Those of us intimately involved with Lincoln studies struggle to grow with the flow. Lincoln literature remains full of rich insight and nuanced appreciation, making me wonder what might be the compelling topics for reflection in the year 2109? We hurtle toward this complex and diversifying conundrum, renewed by our faith in Lincoln's endurance.

And in facing the world, we must, as Pinsker suggests, reach beyond our own borders: "scholars must continue to explore what the Lincoln fixation suggests about contemporary American politics or, for that matter, global politics, since invocations of Lincoln have by no means been limited by national boundaries." The sixteenth president's humble origins and extraordinary gifts transformed him into an icon for American schoolchildren, but he has also remained a touchstone for world leaders. In 1969 Willie Brandt, the newly elected chancellor of West Germany, cited Lincoln's "house divided" speech in addressing his hopes for his country's political future. As one who has departed from American shores and is teaching U.S. history abroad, this area of research is especially compelling to me. This topic requires vigorous inquiry, beyond bicentennial conferences such as the one on the global Lincoln held at Oxford University in July 2009. As that conference emphasized, we need to look more closely at Lincoln's international reputation, as "recently, Gordon Brown, Pervez Musharraf, and Barack Obama have invoked Lincoln in support of their domestic agendas." We might also explore how and why Lin-

⁶ George M. Frederickson, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008).

⁷ For a fascinating 818-page data-fest, see John G. Sotos, *The Physical Lincoln* (Mt. Vernon Book Systems, 2008).

coln statues and plaques can be found throughout Europe. From the first international memorial abroad (erected in Edinburgh in 1893) to subsequent and prominent tributes around the globe, there are many reasons to chart Lincoln's legacy and historical impact worldwide, and work in this area seems to have only recently begun to flower. The "Interchange" conversation on the global Lincoln in this issue of the *Journal of American History* is a welcome contribution to this widening conversation.⁸

For those of us continuing to explore the fascinating web of Lincoln's world and Lincoln studies, the inevitable inquiry remains: "When are you going to be done with Lincoln?" Judging by this special issue and Matthew Pinsker's provocative essay, I feel two clicks away from "Never."

⁸ Pinsker, "Lincoln Theme 2.0," 436; "The Global Lincoln Conference," July 3–5 2009, St. Catherine's College," *Rothermere American Institute*, <http://www.rai.ox.ac.uk>; "Interchange: The Global Lincoln," *Journal of American History*, 96 (Sept. 2009), 462–99.