

Prospects for “Lincoln 2.5”

Douglas L. Wilson

Matthew Pinsker’s extraordinary survey of the field of Lincoln studies is a valuable piece of historiography, offering Lincoln scholars and historians generally an opportunity to reflect on the varied directions and range of topics that have been pursued in recent years. Pinsker’s findings suggest persuasively that the field has undergone notable reorientation over time, both in subject matter and in sources; issues previously regarded as settled have been forcefully reopened and sources previously disparaged or discredited are being reconsidered. Because knowledge and understanding are always in flux the one “true path” has not, of course, been found and the prevailing wisdom is never unassailable. What follows are some brief observations on a few of the matters addressed in Pinsker’s survey.

One of the developments that he identifies—a resurgence of interest in Abraham Lincoln’s personal life—would surely have seemed misguided, and perhaps even counter-productive, to J. G. Randall in 1936, given his assumption that the professional study of history should mainly focus on the subject’s public life, in this case, Lincoln’s political career and his presidential administration. Randall was a great scholar but, like all of us, a product of his time. By his lights, such things as Lincoln’s romantic relationships with women, his intense interest in poetry, his emotional vulnerabilities, and his troubled domestic life were largely distractions, siren songs luring serious students away from what was important about the historical Lincoln. But for scholars working in the field today, who have, in Pinsker’s words, “pushed deeper into the narrative of Lincoln’s self-propelled rise,” these “distractions” constitute very promising avenues for getting at critical aspects of Lincoln’s formative experience and his development over time.¹

Although offered as contributions toward the same general goal of better understanding and appreciating the historical Lincoln, such efforts necessarily alter and expand the research agenda. The lists that both Randall (in 1936) and Mark E. Neely Jr. (in 1979) provided of persons connected to Lincoln for whom biographical information would be helpful, for example, apply almost exclusively to Lincoln’s political career. To help further illuminate the personal Lincoln and restore some of what Pinsker calls the “lost connective tissue essential for a more dynamic portrait of Lincoln,” additional information about a wider range of informants is clearly desirable.² Take, for example, some potential sources

Douglas L. Wilson is co-director of the Lincoln Studies Center and George A. Lawrence Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at Knox College.

Readers may contact Wilson at dwilson@knox.edu.

¹ Matthew Pinsker, “Lincoln Theme 2.0,” *Journal of American History*, 96 (Sept. 2009), 421.

² J. G. Randall, “Has the Lincoln Theme Been Exhausted?,” *American Historical Review*, 41 (Jan. 1936), 270–94; Mark E. Neely Jr., “The Lincoln Theme since Randall’s Call: The Promises and Perils of Professionalism,” *Jour-*

of information on Lincoln's relations with women. These might include Elizabeth Abell, a woman who showed a remarkable interest in the young Lincoln—she was his landlady, adviser, and matchmaker, and (in New Salem gossip) she possibly filled other roles; her sister, Mary Owens, who turned down Lincoln's repeated proposals of marriage; Matilda Edwards, the woman he thought he was in love with in the winter of 1840–1841, a circumstance that played a role in his serious mental breakdown; and Sarah Rickard, a young woman who was apparently involved with both Lincoln and his roommate Joshua F. Speed. Knowing more about these women would almost certainly shed light on the repeated difficulties in courtship that wreaked havoc with Lincoln's emotional life as a young man and threatened to derail his career as a rising politician.

Another consequential aspect of his evolution—his keen and persistent interest in poetry—affected both his feeling for expressive language and a distinctive sensibility that combined tenderness and toughness, melancholy and humor, open-handedness and reserve. For insight into the early stages of this development, it would be a great advantage to know something more about his relationship with his mentor, the illusive Jack Kelso, a legendary New Salem fisherman who was reportedly deeply versed in Lincoln's favorite poets, William Shakespeare and Robert Burns, and whose literary acquaintance Lincoln seems to have actively cultivated. But the most promising source of insight into the interconnections of poetry and Lincoln's personality is surely Joshua Speed. While he offered many useful recollections of his old roommate, Speed was generally reluctant to delve very deeply into Lincoln's serious emotional crises. When he first conferred with William H. Herndon, however, he was surprisingly full of hints as to how Lincoln's attachment to poetry, especially that of Lord Byron, was related to the psychological problems, including thoughts of suicide, that plagued Lincoln in his early thirties. Unfortunately, all that is known of this interview is some highly telegraphic and cryptic notes that Herndon hurriedly jotted down. As Lincoln's most intimate friend and confidant at the time, Speed was in a position to know about such things. Anything further that can be learned about Speed could prove useful, especially because Lincoln expressly acknowledged that his emotional temperament and preoccupations were much the same as Speed's.

As Pinsker suggests, an important impetus to recent scholarship has been the reconsideration of evidence and sources of information that have long been known. Lincoln's reading is an old subject, but scholars continue to show that there is still much to be learned. A detailed study of the White House Library that Lincoln had at his disposal is about to be published. Robert Bray is working on a comprehensive study of Lincoln's reading that promises to identify previously unknown works that Lincoln read and thus point us in new directions. At the same time, there is also much to be learned from what we already know. Lincoln's boyhood acquaintance with the textbook known as Dilworth's Speller, for example, is old news, but Fred Kaplan has recently demonstrated how a closer look at its contents can yield a better sense of the impact Lincoln's first textbook may have had on him as a budding writer.³

Lincoln conceived an early love for Shakespeare, but it would be worth knowing what editions of Shakespeare's works he read once he got beyond the selections in textbooks. Why? Because this was an age of competing editions that were often surprisingly at vari-

nal of the Abraham Lincoln Association, 1 (1979), 10–70; Pinsker, "Lincoln Theme 2.0," 419.

³ Catherine M. Parisian, *A Catalogue of the First White House Library* (University Park, forthcoming). Robert Bray, "What Abraham Lincoln Read—An Evaluative and Annotated List," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 28 (Summer 2007), 28–81. Fred Kaplan, *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer* (New York, 2008).

ance, such that a discriminating reader would soon become aware of differences in the texts of his favorite passages and plays. This was, after all, the heyday of Thomas Bowdler, the originator of a popular but heavily expurgated Family Shakespeare. Moreover, many of Shakespeare’s plays had been refashioned in the Restoration and eighteenth century, and the resulting editions were not only still in circulation but were often favored over more authentic texts. Versions of *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet* were famously given happy endings by the Irish poet Nahum Tate, and those editions continued to find favor with English and American audiences into the nineteenth century. This should give us pause when we read the testimony of a friend that Lincoln’s favorite play was *King Lear*. The young Mary Todd, in an allusion to Abraham Lincoln, her erstwhile and ailing suitor, wrote to a friend in 1841 that she wished “that he would once more resume his Station in Society, that ‘Richard should be himself again.’” It is sometimes acknowledged that she is here quoting *Richard III*, which is indeed the case, but not Shakespeare’s original, for the line “Richard’s himself again” belonged to a popular revision of the play by the eighteenth-century actor, Colly Cibber. *Caveat lector*.⁴

As Pinsker has shown, the Lincoln field is such that sources potentially important for their Lincoln-related material are not always greeted with open arms. At least one source of abundant new information on Lincoln’s early career has recently been made available, but so far it remains largely unrecognized or unacknowledged. The first two volumes of Richard Lawrence Miller’s *Lincoln and His World* (2006, 2008) contains a massive infusion of new material on Lincoln’s initiation into politics and his rise to a position of leadership. Miller’s survey of Illinois newspapers for these years is beyond anything previously attempted for the same purpose and extends to newspapers statewide. Another impressive feat is Miller’s mining of the political handbill collection in the Illinois State Historical Society, whose potential Neely noted in 1979, but which has been largely overlooked. Miller’s two large volumes have not been widely noticed nor have they found much favor with reviewers, partly one suspects because of his lack of a track record in Lincoln studies, as well as his insistence on the kind of thick description of Illinois politics that generates minimal narrative flow. But whatever the merits of other aspects of this biographical project, Miller’s documentation of the political world Lincoln inhabited up to 1842—the large and ever-changing cast of characters, the personal networks and hidden agendas, the grudges and resentments, the hijinks and dirty tricks, the fistfights and infighting, the unseemly race-baiting, the tireless partisan warfare in the newspapers—constitutes an invaluable contribution. By comparison, the estimable Paul Simon’s account of Lincoln’s years in the Illinois legislature is only a primer.⁵

⁴ Andrew Murphy, *Shakespeare in Print: A History and Chronology of Shakespeare Publishing* (New York, 2003). Mary Todd to Mercy Ann Levering, June 1841, in *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters*, ed. Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner (New York, 1972), 27.

⁵ Richard Lawrence Miller, *Lincoln and His World: The Early Years—Birth to Illinois Legislature* (Mechanicsburg, 2006); Richard Lawrence Miller, *Lincoln and His World: Prairie Politician—1834–1842* (Mechanicsburg, 2008); Paul Simon, *Lincoln’s Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years* (Norman, 1965).