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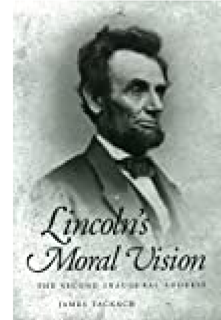
James Tackach. *Lincoln's Moral Vision: The Second Inaugural Address.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002. xxvii + 176 pp. $28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57806-495-3.



Reviewed by Randal Allred (Department of English, Brigham Young University, Hawaii)

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Lincoln's Moral Vision and Slavery

It is paradoxical that America's most written-about figure is perhaps one of the most elusive as well. Surely, his complexity as a man and statesman will ensure that we will not see the last word on him very soon. A cursory glance at the titles published over the years may remind us of his elusiveness: *The Lincoln Legend*, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows*, (and *The Lincoln No One Knows*), *The True Abraham Lincoln*, *The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln*, *Lincoln Reconsidered*, *The Hidden Lincoln*, *The Lincoln Image*, *The Real Abraham Lincoln*, *The Real Lincoln*, *Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myths*, *The Intimate Lincoln*, and others. For years, writers from Edmund Wilson (*Patriotic Gore*) to Allen C. Guelzo and David Donald have been trying to rescue Lincoln from the bowdlerized Nicolay-Hay image of Lincoln and the mythologized Lincoln of Carl Sandburg and popular folklore. Many of us are waiting for the real Abraham Lincoln to please stand up.

James Tackach's *Lincoln's Moral Vision: The Second Inaugural Address* takes a new approach, in a field that seems unlikely to yield anything new. Rather than relying on other historical documents, anecdotal material–a central criticism of works such as the infamous biography by William Herndon–or the poetical imagination (a la Sandburg), Tackach, a literary scholar, undertakes a rhetorical analysis of Lincoln's own words and texts. In so doing, he assesses Lincoln's attitudes and development (a most crucial term in this book) as a moralist and thinker, presenting the Second Inaugural Address as the culmination of Lincoln's philosophical and–dare we say it?–theological reading of the Civil War. The idea that Lincoln evolved is not a new one: indeed, the author points out that Fawn Brodie and others have argued this. What Tackach does is note how we can map this evolution in the language of his writings and speeches. He admits that this book "better fits the category of literary criticism â¦ than biography or history" (p. xxiv).

Tackach's announced premises are these: that Lincoln, being "neither Satan nor saint," is neither the saintly Emancipator of popular myth, the Machiavellian opportunist of more recent studies, the "unregenerate fascist" of still other recent studies (p. xiv), nor the tyrant avenger of an oligarchical North upon a democratic South; that his attitudes on religion, race, and slav-

ery were never fixed and evolved perceptibly during the War; that Lincoln's evolving views are in fact reflected in his writings and speeches; and, that the Second Inaugural Address articulates his conclusive resolution of these central issues. Tackach suggests that scholarly neglect of the Second Inaugural Address may be due to the fact that it "does read like a sermon, as Mark Neely suggests"–that it is "too religious for a secular age" (p. xxvii).

Judgment about Lincoln in our time hinges mostly on his views on race. Since he kept his personal views close it is difficult to tell just where his personal feelings and his announced political intentions coincided. Although many biographers, such as Stephen J. Oates, defend Lincoln's racial attitudes as advanced for his time, Tackach does not try to diminish Lincoln's racism, noting that Lincoln did not consider blacks to be the social equals of whites, and that he decidedly dodged the issue in the debates of 1858 with Stephen Douglas for political reasons. Although in the House Divided speech Lincoln denounces the deleterious effects of slavery on the republic, and in the Cooper Union speech he condemns it on moral and Constitutional grounds, Tackach puzzles over Lincoln's keeping aloof from it in the Presidential campaign of 1860 and in the First Inaugural Address.

Most Lincoln biographers have discussed his troubling tendency to downplay the abolition issue in order to save the Border States and placate War Democrats and conservative Republicans. He also opposed the use of black troops in combat at first, unconvinced of their potential for hard discipline and valor, although changed his mind most dramatically when black troops in battle shattered these illusions. Most have read this as racism at worst and political pragmatism at best–that his race views were shaped by mere expediency.

Tackach also notes the contradictions: that Lincoln never minced words about his belief that the slave was a human being, not property, that the Kansas-Nebraska Act was immoral and unconstitutional, and that the U.S. government had the right to block slavery's spread into the territories. On the one hand, he declared that there should be no inferior or superior races, and that we should "unite as one people" (p. 42). On the other hand, on many occasions Lincoln suggested that blacks were different, and could not stand as social equals with whites–although whether this was from his own preferences or simply a pragmatic acknowledgment of the day's realities is rarely clear from such statements. This may have been the reason for his having favored the scheme of colonization of freed blacks and why he held on to the idea long after it was prudent to do so.

On this issue scholars are divided–that is, whether to hold Lincoln responsible for his racism or to chalk it up to the times. Tackach reminds us that Lincoln was very familiar with the views of many who were much more liberal and progressive than he in regard to race, such as Garrison, Phillips, Weld, Douglass, Parker, the GrimkÃ© sisters, and others, who all endorsed the idea of full negro suffrage and social enfranchisement. He had a choice in choosing his own views, even in the 1860s. Tackach adds that Lincoln would not have had to sacrifice his political career to do so, either, since William Seward and Thaddeus Stevens, among others, were proponents of civil rights for blacks and yet had prospered politically (pp. 69-70). However, I would counter that Illinois is not New York. One reason Seward was rejected for the presidential nomination is because his views would not have appealed to the Midwest and Upper South as much as Lincoln's might have. As for Stevens, it is much easier to get elected in a House district in Pennsylvania as an abolitionist than it is in a presidential election. Whatever else Lincoln was, he was a realist in politics.

Tackach, however, sees a transformation in Lincoln that only came to the forefront of his thinking with his bitter opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. We find his great speeches sprouting from that seed, starting with his October 16, 1854 speech in Peoria, Illinois–in which he declared, "If the negro is a man â¦ there can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another" (p. 13)–through the House Divided Speech, the 1858 Senate debates with Douglas, the Cooper Union Address, the Gettysburg Address, and the Second Inaugural. Still, he vacillated. But Tackach argues a progression in Lincoln's philosophy–that, more and more, he reverted to his childhood Calvinism, seeing God's hand controlling the affairs of the nation and the war as a punishment to North and South for tolerating and abetting slavery. For Lincoln, Tackach asserts, "history was not a random series of events ... but a sequence of related episodes," which would lead to some purposeful conclusion, that America was a nation set apart by God and that all the world would look to it for moral leadership (p. 68). "Even before the war," notes Tackach, "Lincoln's speeches clearly reveal that the Victorian skeptic, the infidel from Springfield, was already beginning to see the slavery debate and the division between North and South in religious terms" (p. 72). Lincoln had earlier wondered whether the war was to punish the entire nation for its sins; this question persists until Lincoln answers it in the affirmative in the Second Inaugural Address.

Tackach sees the Second Inaugural as a latter-day descendent of the old Puritan Election Day sermon, a jeremiad of dire consequences, calculated to stimulate reformation and renewal of the nation. He cites Sacvan Bercovitch and other American literature scholars in showing parallels with the Election Day speech in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, as well as historical sermons by Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Hooker, and others. Lincoln's speech follows a time-honored American rhetorical tradition. Perhaps, like Edwards, Lincoln is telling "his countrymen and countrywomen that they were sinners in the hands of an angry God" (p. 130). The address deploys a complex series of rhetorical and ethical maneuvers–for instance, proposing that although the South chose the wrong path and fought for an unholy cause, nevertheless the North did not have all virtue on its side. Events were beyond mortal control. Tackach points out how Lincoln's self-deprecating "If we shall suppose" diminishes himself as a prophet figure (p. 137). He does not adamantly declare, but humbly suggests, that the war will not end "until every drop of blood drawn by the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword" in order to accomplish God's design (p. 138). Tackach offers his assessment of the Second Inaugural: "Now he was informing the nation that it had sinned, that those who had for so long embraced and tolerated slavery, himself included, had offended God" and that the bloody war was just punishment for it (p. 142).

For Tackach, it becomes clear that, however much of a pagan he may have been in his younger days, Lincoln was clearly a God-fearing man by 1865–reflected in his private as well as public writings. As for Lincoln's racially unenlightened views, Tackach does not excuse them but argues cogently that they had changed and developed, and that the worst we can say about Lincoln is that it took him longer to change than others.

Tackach's final assessment offers this reading of Lincoln's influence, present and unfulfilled: that Lincoln's policy for reconstruction, always aimed at reconciliation and reducing vindictiveness against the South, might have prevented much of the hostility between North and South during the Civil Rights era of the late twentieth century. He adds, concluding the book, "Lincoln's abrupt death in 1865, just more than a month after he revealed to his fellow Americans a truth needed to be told for then and for all time, was the nation's greatest tragedy, one from which it has never truly recovered" (p. 155).

Tackach offers us a Lincoln who is clearly flawed and inconsistent, and yet is not the manipulative politician who would wear any mask for the sake of expediency. Rather, he was a sincere and innovative thinker, often a plodding problem-solver, who came slowly to his conclusions about his faith and the role of God and slavery in America. He wanted to do the right thing and yet still preserve the law and the American ideal.

Tackach is adept at touching base with past Lincoln scholars on each point he raises and charting his course in relation to their varied judgments on Lincoln and race. He maintains a clear, uncluttered prose that is exceptionally readable and yet rich with primary texts skillfully woven into the narrative. *Lincoln's Moral Vision* is still a valuable and articulate addition to the ongoing discussion about our most written-about president.

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