

The *Lincoln* Herald

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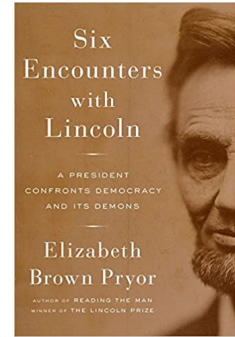
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Publication/Playback Review

Edited by Dr. Jason H. Silverman

Six Encounters with Lincoln: A President Confronts Democracy and Its Demons



Elizabeth Brown Pryor

5 ½ X 8 ½ inches, 480 pages

Penguin Books, New York, New York, 2018

\$18

Six Encounters with Lincoln has generally received mostly positive reviews, obviously based on its merits but perhaps also partially resting on the author's reputation which she established from one of her earlier books, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee* which among numerous awards received the 2008 Lincoln Prize. (Similarly, *Six Encounters* received the prestigious Barondess Lincoln Award.) Readers were apparently anticipating a repeat of the Lee book and one of the strengths of *Six Encounters* is its prodigious scholarship. For a book which runs almost 400 pages, the 126 pages of notes and bibliography are impressive.

Pryor is clearly a revisionist concerning Abraham Lincoln. She suggests that many works about the sixteenth president were prepared based on reminiscences published long after the fact and influenced by his assassination and the successful conclusion of the Civil War. She therefore concentrates on contemporary accounts which she believes provide a more accurate portrayal.

The Lincoln who emerges in her pages is hardly an attractive historical figure. He dresses in a sloppy manner, has little ability to interact with his military commanders, tells smutty stories which few can appreciate or even understand, is scorned by genuine abolitionists, and has little

tolerance for dealing with women or Native Americans. Admittedly, a fresh look at a person who is as mythologized as Lincoln can be refreshing; presenting him realistically might produce new insights and a more nuanced portrait.

Unfortunately, Pryor's account pushes Lincoln's image too far in the opposite direction. Ironically, she seems unaware as she describes the dashing Robert E. Lee in contrast to the flawed president (she calls the general a striking figure with matinee idol looks pp. 41-44) that she treats Lee exactly the way she accuses others of treating Lincoln. Lee has suffered historically from the same myth making as Lincoln causing Thomas Connelly to refer to him as "The Marble Man" and Alan Nolan to title his book *Lee Considered* as he felt Lee had never been critically evaluated. Lee may have looked a lot more like a general but in the end, it was Grant with his muddy boots, privates' uniform and lack of insignia who was the victor in the Civil War.

Her critique of Lincoln is also not as new or unique as she seems to believe it is. Most modern Lincoln biographers treat Lincoln much more realistically than earlier generations of hagiographers and would not be unaware of and perhaps agree with many of the points that she makes. It is hardly news to Lincoln scholars that numerous abolitionists believed the president to be too slow and timid or that he could hardly be considered a champion of the rights of women or Native Americans.

However even when Lincoln does demonstrate sympathy with these groups, she seems to give him little credit. He once said that he had no objection to women voting who owned property, a strikingly radical position in his day, which would probably have been opposed by 99% of the male population. Similarly, he saved several hundred Native American warriors in Minnesota from execution when the citizens of the state were clamoring that all should die and threatening lynching, not only because of racial prejudice but also the fact that the uprising was perceived to have helped the Confederacy. In short, Pryor seems to want Lincoln to be what he clearly was not, a modern liberal champion of the rights of African Americans, Native Americans and women. Even had he been such a champion of these causes in the 1860's, there were hardly vast numbers of the public supporting them, raising the question whether the president would have been wise to tackle such issues during a civil war that threatened

the nation's existence.

The most puzzling encounter which she covers is the one with Duff Green, newspaperman and a member of Jackson's kitchen cabinet. Green met with Lincoln before the outbreak of the war, impressing on him that a majority of southerners favored secession, and urging him to say something to avoid the conflict. While she correctly states that the president-elect badly overestimated Union support in the south, she offers no specifics as to what Lincoln might have said to defuse the situation. Nonetheless, she seems to put the major blame on the president for the outbreak of the war.

In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln clearly grasped the major cause of the Civil War when he said, "Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came." Most historians have accepted this verdict and it is hard to see how any words from Lincoln could have changed the situation.

Her basic methodology is also open to question. While she did not purposely start out to gather negative encounters, her choices of certain military men, women, and Native Americans inevitably led her in that direction. It would certainly be possible to utilize encounters with other contemporaries who admired Lincoln to write an account which would place him in a much more favorable light.

Tragically, Pryor was killed in an automobile accident in April of 2015, and her manuscript was readied for publication by her sister. Thus, she had no opportunity to receive the accolades her work has garnered or to address the comments of critics.

But even if one were to concede that many of her criticisms about Lincoln are correct, Pryor leaves the reader with one major unanswered question. If he was so fundamentally flawed, how did Abraham Lincoln overcome these defects and why 150 years later is he still considered our number one president by a substantial majority of historians as well as the American public. Unfortunately, the author does not provide an answer, leaving a reader whose only encounter with Lincoln came through her book to contemplate this paradox.

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