

Lincoln and Emancipation/Lincoln and the Thirteenth Amendment

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Lincoln and Emancipation, by Edna Greene Medford. Concise Lincoln Library Series. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015. 141 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 hardcover.

Lincoln and the Thirteenth Amendment, by Christian Samito. Concise Lincoln Library Series. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015. ix, 171 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$24.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Brian Dirck is professor of history at Anderson University. He is the author of *Lincoln and the Constitution* (2012) and *Lincoln the Lawyer* (2007).

From Southern Illinois University's superb Concise Lincoln Library series come two volumes that examine parallel and seminal events in Abraham Lincoln's presidency: the complex and often difficult path he pursued toward embracing emancipation as a central Union war aim and his embrace of the Thirteenth Amendment as the best means to finally eradicate once and for all the institution of American slavery.

Few subjects in Lincoln scholarship are as controversial as emancipation. To her credit, Edna Greene Medford brings to the task a balanced and well-informed perspective. Her Lincoln is neither saint nor sinner but a well-meaning man whose views on race and emancipation were essentially moderate and evolved over time. "Lincoln followed a less urgent and more detached path than the revolutionaries" like Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, she writes, and "while he saw advantage in gradual and peaceful abolition, the war escalated his timetable and altered his approach" (3).

Medford is careful to set Lincoln within the context of his times, particularly the volatile sectional politics of the 1850s, during which "Lincoln honed his argument in opposition to the expansion of slavery and availed himself of the opportunities presented to share his views" (23). Consistently denouncing the evils of slavery but just as consistently expressing misgivings about the possibility of a mixed-race American society and denying that anyone could properly interfere with the property rights of slaveholding white Southerners, Lincoln's arguments "comforted moderates" but alienated abolitionists (24).

During the war President Lincoln began by insisting on keeping slavery at arm's length, denying that the war was fundamentally about emancipation and supporting various gradualist antislavery schemes involving compensating white slaveholders and colonizing freed slaves out of the United States. But the war increasingly radicalized Lincoln. In the end he embraced not only emancipation as a war policy, but also the absolute end to slavery via constitutional amendment—a remarkable evolution.

Medford does not give short shrift to Lincoln's boldness in making this journey, yet she is clear that African Americans themselves were instrumental in obtaining their own freedom. "The quest for full inclusion in American society had not begun with Lincoln's proclamation," she writes. "Black men and women had agitated for their rights even before the nation as citizens now know it had been conceived" (111-12). She thus resolves the longstanding and flawed question of whether Lincoln freed the slaves or the slaves freed themselves; the correct answer is both.

As does Medford, Christian Samito brings a critical yet sympathetic perspective to his subject. He admires Lincoln's political sagacity, but he also observes that the president was not always a warm supporter of the Thirteenth Amendment. Nor does Samito read history backwards and treat the amendment as an inevitable outgrowth of the war. What seems to us today a natural measure was to Lincoln and many fellow Northerners a step fraught with difficulty, even hubris. They "viewed constitutionalism as a matter of properly interpreting the document, not revising it, with guidance from the Founders," Samito points out. There was a sense that amending the document was an implicit acknowledgment of the framers' failure to adequately address the slavery controversy (8).

But once committed to the "abolition amendment," Lincoln labored hard to ensure its passage, calling publicly for ratification and using his powers of presidential persuasion behind the scenes to secure votes from key congressmen. Exactly to what extent Lincoln did so is unclear; Samito reads the relevant extant evidence with appropriate restraint, pointing out, for example, in his discussion of Secretary of State William Seward's exertions on the amendment's behalf that it is "difficult to know exactly how much Lincoln knew of these efforts, or what he thought of them" (78). In the final analysis, though, Samito makes a convincing case that the Thirteenth Amendment enjoyed Lincoln's full support. "In hindsight," Samito argues, "Lincoln found the amendment the perfect solution in that it allowed him to resolve the tension between slavery and the ideals of the Declaration of Independence while remaining faithful to the Constitution and the will of the people" (123-24).

Neither *Lincoln and Emancipation* nor *Lincoln and the Thirteenth Amendment* proposes startlingly new or original interpretations of Lincoln, emancipation, or the Thirteenth Amendment. But this is not a failing. On the contrary, both fit exactly within the scope and purpose of the Concise Lincoln Library series, offering succinct, crisply written, and cogently analyzed overviews. Medford and Samito are top-notch

scholars who possess a mastery of their subjects and the all-to-rare ability to make complex historical events and ideas clear and readily understandable. Both books are valuable contributions to the literature on Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War.

Lincoln's Generals' Wives: Four Women Who Influenced the Civil War – for Better and for Worse, by Candice Shy Hooper. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2016. 432 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Stacy A. Cordery is professor of history at Iowa State University. She is the Web bibliographer of the National First Ladies' Library and author of *Alice: Alice Roosevelt Longworth, from White House Princess to Washington Power Broker* (2007).

Candice Shy Hooper, an independent scholar with an M.A. in history from George Washington University, has penned an engrossing book with a simple thesis that delivers both more and less than its title suggests. *Lincoln's Generals' Wives* explores the lives of Jessie Benton Frémont, Mary Ellen Marcy “Nelly” McClellan, Eleanor Ewing “Ellen” Sherman, and Julia Dent Grant, focusing on how they influenced their husbands—and, to a lesser degree, President Lincoln—and thus the course of the U.S. Civil War. Her conclusion is that Ellen Sherman and Julia Grant ably assisted their spouses during the terrible national crisis (“for better”) while Jessie Frémont and Nelly McClellan had an overall negative effect on their husbands’ careers (“for worse”).

Neither Jessie Frémont nor Nelly McClellan regarded Lincoln highly; that, Hooper asserts, is the path affecting the downward trajectory of their husbands’ initially promising careers. Much has been written about Jessie Frémont. Fiercely protective of her husband, she was also strongly antislavery and, of the four women, the most frustrated by the era’s gender limitations. Hooper suggests that the Frémonts’ manifold troubles increased when Jessie took herself to Washington in 1862 to try to convince President Abraham Lincoln that her husband was right to have issued the controversial Missouri emancipation proclamation. Her behavior appalled Lincoln. His shocked her. She thereupon fueled John Frémont’s every contemptuous anti-Lincoln feeling, including encouraging his presidential run against Lincoln in 1864. General Frémont’s promising career never recovered from Jessie’s tongue lashing of Lincoln.

Nelly McClellan similarly encouraged George McClellan’s disdain for Lincoln, but, as Hooper makes clear, she failed as well to overcome his most unsavory characteristics: hubris, self-absorption, and a mes-