

Prairie Defender: The Murder Trials of Abraham Lincoln

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cost of St. Louis and New Orleans). Most of the context is based, appropriately enough, on secondary sources. Sometimes the choice of secondary source is questionable; for example, his account of the famous 1854 Grand Excursion on the recently completed Chicago & Rock Island route from Chicago to Rock Island and then up the Mississippi by steamboat to St. Anthony Falls relies on a 1933 article in the *Palimpsest* by William J. Petersen rather than the more recent and more thorough book, *Grand Excursion*, by Steven J. Keillor (2004). If there's nothing particularly new here for scholars, however, the narrative is clear and engaging enough for the book to appeal to any lay person who might be interested in the topics it covers. McGinty's book complements the earlier privately published book by Larry Riney, *Hell Gate of the Mississippi: The Effie Afton Trial and Abraham Lincoln's Role in It* (2006) in illuminating an important legal case for the development of Iowa and the Midwest.

Prairie Defender: The Murder Trials of Abraham Lincoln, by George R. Dekle Sr. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017. xiv, 248 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.50 hardcover.

Reviewer John A. Lupton is executive director of the Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission. He was formerly an assistant editor on *The Papers of Abraham Lincoln* and has written extensively about Lincoln as a lawyer.

Since the publication of the *Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition* (LPAL) in 2000, new books on Lincoln's pre-presidential career have enlightened readers not only on his 25-year law practice but on midwestern antebellum society as well. In *Prairie Defender*, George Dekle Sr. relies on 30 years of experience as a criminal lawyer paired with the documentary record made available by LPAL to examine Lincoln's criminal cases generally, and murder cases specifically.

Dekle argues against a long-standing misconception that Lincoln detested criminal practice and was not good at it (2). He focuses primarily on Lincoln's 18 murder cases but mentions other criminal cases — most notably, a child-rape case in which Lincoln served as prosecutor. He devotes one chapter to Lincoln's pardon practice and concludes the book with a summary assessment of Lincoln's murder cases, deconstructing several popular myths about his criminal caseload.

By examining famous (Almanac, Harrison, and Goings) and not-so-famous (Patterson, Longnecker, and Bantzhouse) murder cases, Dekle provides, for the first time, a complete study of Lincoln's murder cases, demonstrating that Lincoln was a competent and successful criminal

lawyer. The author thrives in his legal analysis. His chapter on the Goings case, in particular, shines. The elderly defendant, Melissa Goings, charged with murdering her husband, failed to appear in court. After she asked for a drink, Lincoln allegedly suggested that she flee by telling her there was good water in Tennessee (138). Dekle discounts the story and convincingly argues that Lincoln most likely repeated a joke from fellow lawyer Usher Linder, who had used a similar story previously. It is well established that Lincoln frequently borrowed stories and inserted himself into them.

With murder cases constituting less than 0.5 percent of Lincoln's total caseload, Dekle does not argue that these cases are representative. Lincoln was a general practice attorney who occasionally represented and prosecuted alleged criminals. Murder cases are better known because of their intrinsic interest and extensive contemporary newspaper coverage. Lincoln's entire criminal practice also was a small percentage of his total caseload (approximately 6 percent), which previous biographers have used as proof that Lincoln did not like criminal law. Dekle counters this notion effectively but could have strengthened his argument by noting that Lincoln's criminal caseload generally mirrored the court docket as a whole.

Two interesting threads appear frequently in Dekle's analysis. First, the social nature of the criminal courts is best exemplified by the unfavorable treatment Tom Patterson received, despite a pretty clear case of self-defense, because he was a newer resident in the community who had killed a long-time resident (153). Dekle does not investigate as deeply, however, the socioeconomic reasons for leniency in murder/manslaughter cases. Many juries were reluctant to convict if the accused had a family lest his wife and children become dependents of the community. Dekle alludes to this type of leniency with respect to John Hibbs, who had been found guilty of manslaughter, and Lincoln assisted in obtaining a pardon for him (93). Second, Dekle implies that Lincoln did not work as hard on a case when he knew he would receive little or no compensation (53, 189-90). The implication is that Lincoln, who argued that lawyers should be paid for their services, was perhaps less effective when there was no compensation, contributing to the longstanding narrative of Lincoln's lack of interest in criminal cases.

Despite minor interpretive issues of not delving into certain matters more deeply, this is an engaging and interesting book that effectively demonstrates that Lincoln was indeed a successful criminal lawyer. More importantly, it illustrates a clear evolution in Lincoln's skill as an attorney in general.