

The Children of Lincoln: White Paternalism and the Limits of Black Opportunity in Minnesota

Dwain Coleman
University of Iowa

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2019 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Coleman, Dwain. "The Children of Lincoln: White Paternalism and the Limits of Black Opportunity in Minnesota." *The Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 304-306.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12596>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

However, given the high stakes involved, the Leagues' actions seem eminently reasonable. The book ends with a chapter on the spread of Union Leagues in the South, as they struggled unsuccessfully to graft Northern fraternal ideals onto a society riven by racial division.

The signal virtue of this book is its abundant research. Scholars seeking to build our still limited understanding of Union political thought, among other topics, will do well to use this book's footnotes as a guide. Iowans such as Samuel Kirkwood appear in cameo roles, but the book is predominantly shaped by debates in more established states. Taylor's prose is reasonably accessible, but the audience for this book is scholars and the most highly motivated lay readers.

The Children of Lincoln: White Paternalism and the Limits of Black Opportunity in Minnesota, 1860–1876, by William D. Green. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. xi, 498 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Dwain Coleman is a Ph.D. history student at the University of Iowa. The Iowa History Center recognized his master's thesis, "Still in the Fight: The Struggle for Community in the Upper Midwest for African American Civil War Veterans" as the outstanding master's thesis in Iowa history for 2017.

William Green's *Children of Lincoln* is a welcome addition to the growing historiography of emancipation and Reconstruction studies. Green reveals the rich history of racial politics in Minnesota and the rest of the Midwest and the critical role racial politics played in the political and demographic development of the nation during Reconstruction. At the same time, Green explores the often paradoxical positions that white "Lincoln Republicans" took concerning race.

At over 400 pages containing meticulously researched information taken from newspapers, journals, and letters, Green's book makes a statement about the rich history of Reconstruction in Minnesota and the Midwest and the transformative role it played. Green takes great care to reconstruct the national, state, and local context in which Minnesota's Republican Party stalwarts developed and espoused their political and social views on race during Reconstruction. Green's examination challenges the standard narrative of Northern racial progressivism during this period and reveals the often complicated reality of racial politics and the limits of white paternalism. Green scrutinizes four prominent white Lincoln Republicans from Minnesota as he charts the multifaceted nature of the efforts of white Republicans to reform the political, social, and demographic makeup of the state and nation.

The first Lincoln Republican Green analyzes is Morton S. Wilkinson, a prominent U.S. Senator from Minnesota who championed black suffrage. During the Civil War he worked tirelessly to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia and throughout the nation. At the same time, he was also a member of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee and advocated the protection of property of Indians who adopted the habits of "civilized life." Green uses the reactions of Wilkinson and other Lincoln Republicans to the U.S. Dakota War, the mock trial and execution of those accused of atrocities during the war, and the expulsion of Native Americans and confiscation of their lands to the benefit of white businessmen and settlers to demonstrate the limits of their egalitarianism.

Another of Green's subjects is Thomas Montgomery, an Irish immigrant farmer turned soldier during the U.S. Dakota War and an officer of a U.S. colored regiment during the Civil War. Green uses Montgomery's letters to examine his reasons for serving, perceptions concerning the black soldiers he commanded, and his continuing self-interest and paternalist mindset after service.

Daniel D. Merrill is another similar example Green uses to demonstrate the limits of Republican paternalism. As a church and business leader in St. Paul, Merrill enables Green to explore the complex racial divisions within the state capital's churches and education system. Merrill and other white Baptist churchgoers of the community supported the creation of a black Baptist church in St. Paul. They were, however, unwilling to relinquish control to black congregants to choose their own black leader.

The fourth prominent leader that Green explores is Sarah Burger Stearns, a woman suffragist in Minnesota. Through his examination of Stearns's rhetoric and her fight for women's voting rights, Green demonstrates the heated tension and widening chasm that emerged between advocates of black male suffrage and those supporting white woman suffrage.

For those interested in Iowa history during this period, Green's examination of Minnesota's Lincoln Republicans provides rich parity with other midwestern states. Like Minnesota, Iowa passed black laws and exclusionary acts to control black residents living in the state and to prevent further immigration. Like Wilkinson, Iowa Republican leaders—Governor Samuel Kirkwood and others—worked during and after the Civil War to convince a reluctant white constituency to support the formation of a black regiment as well as Reconstruction reforms like the state passage of black male suffrage, which became law just months before Minnesotans' similar reform.

Green's dense narrative, although an extensive read that is occasionally encumbered by the inclusion of extensive quotations, reveals the complex realities of state, regional, and national politics during the Reconstruction Era. Green's work joins a growing chorus of historians, such as Leslie Schwalm, Elliott West, and Steven Hahn, who argue for a "Greater Reconstruction" narrative that examines the whole continent and the effects of Reconstruction rather than an isolated Southern account. Green's work should become required reading for those interested in the contradictory positions taken by white Republicans who championed black suffrage and equal citizenship rights but eventually abandoned black citizens to navigate by themselves continuing racial hostility and inequalities in both the North and South.

Pictures of Longing: Photography and the Norwegian-American Migration, by Sigrid Lien, translated by Barbara Sjøhom. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. x, 290 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$120 hardcover, \$29.95 paperback.

Reviewer L. DeAne Lagerquist is Harold H. Ditmanson Distinguished Professor of Religion at St. Olaf College. She is the author of *In America the Men Milk the Cows: Factors of Gender, Ethnicity, and Religion in the Americanization of Norwegian-American Women* (1991).

Photography and photographs convey anticipation and memory in *Sweetland*, Ali Selim's film adaptation of Will Weaver's short story "A Gravestone Made of Wheat." When his parents arrange for him to marry German Inge Altenberg, Olaf Torvik, a Norwegian farmer in the Red River Valley, sends her a letter, enclosing a photograph of himself. She carries both with her to Minnesota. But, because a crease in the folded photograph obscured his face, initially Inge does not recognize him. In the train station she mistakes his friend Franzen for Olaf. At Olaf's farm, Franzen makes a photograph of Inge in her traveling clothes in front of the house. Before the film ends, we see Franzen and Inge looking at the photo after Olaf's funeral and then watch her grandson gaze at her image as a young woman as he considers selling the farm. None of this appears in Sigrid Lien's intriguing book, and yet her nuanced, detailed, and theoretically rich exploration of photography and Norwegian American migration suggests the absolute rightness of Selim's use of photographs and photography to convey a range of emotions, including longing—both for what is not yet and for what is no longer.

Although its format is small for the genre, this volume offers far more than what might be expected from a coffee-table book illustrated with interesting, old photographs. Certainly there are interesting, old