
7-2001

Book Review: Lincoln of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/jphs>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2001) "Book Review: Lincoln of Kentucky," *Jackson Purchase Historical Society*. Vol. 28 : No. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/jphs/vol28/iss1/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Murray State's Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jackson Purchase Historical Society by an authorized editor of Murray State's Digital Commons. For more information, please contact msu.digitalcommons@murraystate.edu.

Harrison, Lowell H. Lincoln of Kentucky. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000. 305 pp.

A Review

by B. Anthony Gannon, Ph. D., Assistant Professor of History
Murray State University

Lowell H. Harrison is quick to point out that his book is "neither a biography of Lincoln nor a history of the Civil War in Kentucky" (viii). Harrison proposes to discuss the "interrelationship" between Abraham Lincoln and the state and citizens of Kentucky throughout Lincoln's life. Rather than attempting yet another biography of America's most enigmatic president, then, Harrison hopes, for the most part, to explain a more narrow aspect of the president's life, Lincoln's virtual "obsession" with the state of Kentucky during the Civil War years. Harrison succeeds. While Harrison's narrative dutifully explains the circumstances of Lincoln's Kentucky birth, his tenuous relationship with his father, Thomas Lincoln, the family's several moves throughout the region, Lincoln's long-term relationships with his Kentuckian law partners, the wartime political situation in Kentucky during the Civil War, and, of course, his marriage with Kentuckian, Mary Todd, Harrison is at his best when describing the relationship between Lincoln and Kentucky during the military phase of the war.

Easily the most important most provocative in Lincoln of Kentucky is Chapter 10, "Lincoln and Military Operations in Kentucky." Modern historians have often overlooked the strategic importance of the state of Kentucky during the early phases of the Civil War; yet, as Harrison notes, political and military leaders on both sides recognized the necessity of controlling, militarily, key points in the state. Lincoln himself "paid considerable attention to the course of the Civil War in Kentucky" (155), although his attentiveness to military operations in the state began to wane after 1862, because "Kentucky was no longer an important part of the military front in the western theater" (174). During the early phases of the war, however, control of a technically "neutral" Kentucky was seen as a necessity for both sides. From the Confederate perspective, Albert Sydney Johnston, a Kentuckian in command of the Confederate Department Number Two, hoped to "control as much of Kentucky as he could" (158), to provide a buffer of protection for the Confederate state of Tennessee. He further thought that the military control of Kentucky might also induce that state's secession and allegiance to the Southern cause. From the Union point of view, Kentucky's

strategic importance became manifest after Winfield Scott proposed the Anaconda Plan in early 1861. Control of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, both of which border Kentucky were seen as key parts of this envelopment plan. Secondly, control of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers might provide a virtual stake that could be exploited and driven through the heart of the Confederacy from Paducah, Kentucky, to Knoxville, Tennessee; and, as Harrison notes, Lincoln was ever hopeful that Unionist sentiment in eastern Tennessee might be aroused by some sort of Union presence in the Knoxville area.

Achieving these ends, however, was another matter, and Harrison describes in vivid detail the problems that Lincoln faced in Kentucky during the early phases of the war. The lingering inability of Robert Anderson, in his Louisville command, to recover from the psychological "strain" placed upon him after the affair at Fort Sumter, the reticence of Henry Halleck and Don Carlos Buell to coordinate any sort of Kentucky offensive, the much-debated breakdown of William Tecumseh Sherman, who insisted upon a 250,000 man army before beginning Kentucky operations--all of these concerns Lincoln had to address before finally "prodding" his western generals to move forward. Although Halleck took considerable credit for the victories at Forts Henry and Donelson, on the Kentucky-Tennessee border, Lincoln had finally found a general, U. S. Grant, who held the presidential confidence. Moreover, from the Kentucky theater, Lincoln acquired a series of generals--Grant, Sherman, Sheridan--who would ultimately be able to lead the Union effort toward "victory and unification" (175).

Lowell Harrison's research and documentation in Lincoln of Kentucky are admirable; his prose is lucid and readable, and his mastery of Lincoln's relationship with Kentucky and Kentuckians is beyond question. Both the general reader and Kentucky historians will find the work of value in understanding not only Lincoln's association with Kentucky, but Kentucky's association with Lincoln; Civil War historians will surely find Harrison's military analysis of the Kentucky theater virtually indispensable, and all Kentucky historians, and Kentuckians in general, should applaud the fact that Lincoln's historical connection with Kentucky has been restored.