

Report on "With Malice Toward None" by Stephen B. Oates

About the Author

Stephen B. Oates is a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the author of eight other books, including *The Fires of Jubilee* and *To Purge This Land with Blood*. His task in this biography was to perpetuate Lincoln as he was in the days he lived. His purpose of this biography was to bring the past into the present for us and his students.

The Life of Abraham Lincoln

Although other states such as Indiana lay claim to his birth, most sources agree that Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, in a backwoods cabin in Hodgeville, Kentucky. In an interview during his campaign for the presidency in 1860 Lincoln described his adolescence as "the short and simple annals of the poor." (p 30). His father Thomas was a farmer who married Nancy Hanks, his mother, in 1806. Lincoln had one sister, Sarah, who was born in 1807. The Lincoln family was more financially comfortable than most despite the common historical picture of complete poverty. They moved to Indiana because of the shaky system of land titles in Kentucky. Because the Lincoln's arrived in Spencer County at the same time as winter, Thomas only had time to construct a "half-faced camp." Made of logs and boughs, it was enclosed on only three sides with a roaring fire for the fourth. The nearest water supply was a mile away, and the family had to survive on the abundance of wild game in the area. Less than two years after the move to Indiana, Mrs. Lincoln caught a horrible frontier disease known as "milk sick.". Thomas Lincoln returned to Kentucky to find a new wife. On December 2 he married Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with three children, and took them all back to Indiana. Although there were now eight people living in the small shelter, the Lincoln children, especially Abe, adored their new stepmother who played a key role in making sure that Abe at least had some formal education, amounting to a little less than a year in all. To support his family it was necessary that Abe worked for a wage on nearby farms. "He was strong and a great athlete, but Abe preferred to read instead. Although few books were available to a backwoods boy such as himself, anything that he could obtain he would read tenaciously" (p 56). Although his formal education had come to an end, his self-education was just beginning. After a three month flatboat journey along the Ohio and Mississippi, the 19 year old Lincoln returned to Indiana with an enthusiasm for the lifestyles that he had just encountered. Unfortunately, his new-found joy did not last long as his sister Sarah died in childbirth on January 20, 1828. In 1830 the Lincoln family decided to leave Indiana in hopes of a better future in Illinois. It was soon thereafter that Abraham became a leader in the town of New Salem while operating a store and managing a mill. The next step for such an ambitious man was obvious--he entered politics, finishing eighth out of thirteen in a race for the Illinois House of Representatives in August of 1832. Abraham Lincoln was a strong supporter of Whig founder

Henry Clay and his "American System." This system that arose from the National Republicans of 1824 was in opposition to the powerful Democratic party of President Andrew Jackson. Lincoln agreed with Clay that the government should be a positive force with the purpose of serving the people. Internal improvements were high on both men's lists, and this stand made the relatively unknown Lincoln popular in rural Illinois from the start. As the Whigs rose in stature throughout the 1830's, so did Lincoln, but not without paying his dues along the way. For eighty days in the spring and early summer of 1832 Lincoln served in the military. On a constant search for Black Hawk, war leader of the Sauk and Fox Indians, he never saw any fighting but he did prove to be a superior leader of men in some of the most trying situations, including threats of desertion. "In return for his eleven and a half weeks of service Lincoln earned a mere \$125, but the connections that he made with future leaders of Illinois and the experiencing of life from a soldier's viewpoint proved to be priceless in his future political career" (p 80). During this time Lincoln ran for and won a seat in the Illinois Legislature with bipartisan support. In 1846 Lincoln took his biggest step in politics to that point. He won election to Congress as the only Whig from Illinois. His single term was only memorable in that he took an unpopular stand against President James K. Polk and his Mexican War, which Lincoln saw as unjust. Lincoln made unsuccessful bids for an Illinois Senate seat in 1855, running as a Whig, and the Vice Presidency in 1856, running as a Republican. In his early days as a lawyer and an Illinois Legislator, Lincoln was a frequent guest of the Edward's family and Mrs. Edward's younger sister, Mary Todd, immediately caught Abe's eye. She was like no woman he had ever known before. Her beauty, intelligence, charm, and ability to lead a conversation was enough to cause the usually unemotional Abraham to propose. Yet he felt he did not love her and they broke up the engagement. Almost immediately thereafter, Lincoln began to feel terrible guilt and unhappiness over what he had done and what he then realized he had lost. He became so depressed that for a short time many of those around him feared that he was going to commit suicide. Until he longed for her so much that a spark was reignited between the old lovers and they remarried. After receiving the Republican Party nomination for the 1858 Illinois senatorial race, Lincoln gave his historically famous, yet questionably radical "House Divided" speech. Lincoln had lost this election against Douglas but he had strengthened the Republican Party and won national recognition in the process. As a result of holding his own with the "Little Giant" (referring to Douglas's physical stature and political power), the entire nation was able to see just how great and powerful of a leader Abraham Lincoln could become. Lincoln put the Senatorial defeat in its proper perspective six years later when he said, "It's a slip, and not a fall." (p 143) After Illinois chose Lincoln over the more radical William Seward and Edward Bates, he almost reluctantly turned his attention to the national scene. Lincoln's true desire was to be a Senator, where Abe believed that he could concentrate on the most important issues more closely. Since he honestly did not believe that he had a chance of actually winning the presidency, one of the main reasons that he was running was

to gain more notoriety for the 1864 senatorial. Nevertheless, Lincoln had thrown his hat in the ring and he ran on the Republican platform of: 1) opposition to the extension of slavery 2) opposition to "nativist" demands that naturalization laws be changed to limit the rights of immigrants 3) support of federally sponsored internal improvements, a protective tariff, a railroad to the Far West, and free land for Western settlers. This stand was obviously very attractive to Northern and Western voters. When election day finally came, Lincoln simply waited, first in his office at the statehouse and later in the telegraph office. When the final results came in at about two o'clock in the morning, Abraham Lincoln had become the sixteenth President of the United States with 1,866,452 popular votes. However he, did not receive a single vote in ten Southern states, and largely because of his victory, frustrated, humiliated, and defeated Southerners began the process of secession, beginning with South Carolina in 1860. Abraham Lincoln was chosen by destiny as the man to lead the Nation through its most trying hour, and it is quite probable that he understood just how trying it would be. Upon recalling how he felt immediately after learning of his victory, Lincoln replied, "I went home, but not to get much sleep, for I then felt as I never had before, the responsibility that was upon me." (p 231)

By Lincoln's inauguration day in March of 1861, seven states had already seceded from the Union, electing Jefferson Davis as President of their Confederacy. In his inaugural address Lincoln attempted to avoid aggravating the slave states that had not yet seceded. He asked the South to reconsider its actions, but also reinforced his belief that the Union was perpetual, and that states could not secede, saying, "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not mine, is the momentous issue of civil war." (p 288) Lincoln also announced that because secession was unlawful he would hold the federal forts and installations in the South. All sided with the Union basically because they were assured by Lincoln that the war was being fought to preserve the Union, and not to destroy slavery. In a letter to Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, on August 22, 1862, Lincoln confirmed this position saying: "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that." (p 290) Just as he had previously said that he would, on January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln declared that all slaves residing in states and districts still in rebellion against the United States were to be free. Although this was a bold move meant to upset the Southern war effort, the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation had no immediate affect because it applied only to the Confederate states over which the federal government had no control. The proclamation did not apply to the slave states under Union control because there was no legal justification for Lincoln to apply it in those places. It had to be classified as a "military measure," such as depriving the South of the services of her slaves. Lincoln realized that in order to peacefully integrate the former slaves into American society he decided to train them as regular soldiers, and they fought gallantly. Some 186,000 colored troops had been enrolled in the

Union army by the end of the war. The famous poet
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow remarked, "At last the North
consents to let the Negro fight for freedom." (p 340)
Jefferson Davis, and his war-torn South, had one final hope --
the defeat of Lincoln in the election of 1864. Davis knew
that as long as Lincoln was in the Office, the industrial
superior North would continue to fight, and the South could not
withstand the war much longer. If a new "peace" candidate were
to be elected, then the Confederacy might survive.
"Luckily for Lincoln the tide of the war turned dramatically in
September of 1864 when General Sherman took Atlanta,
an extremely important Southern rail and manufacturing center.
Morale was boosted greatly in the North, and the
victories continued to mount under Lincoln's new-found leaders
in Ulysses S. Grant and General Sherman. By the time of
the election in November, Lincoln won overwhelmingly with 212
of the 233 possible electoral." (p 402) The very weary
President addressed the Nation the next day with less than
victorious words. He stressed that the South should be dealt
with mildly in order to bring the entire Nation back together
as soon as possible. "Let us all join in doing the acts
necessary to restoring the proper practical relations between
these states and the Union." (p 409) What should have been
Lincoln's finest hour was probably one of his most stressing,
because it was now up to him as to where the Nation was to
go next. It was Good Friday, April 14, 1865, only five days
after the end of the war. Despite numerous warnings from
some of his closest advisors, President Lincoln insisted on
attending an evening performance of Our American Cousin at
Ford's Theater. Since General Grant was expected to attend the
play with President Lincoln, the President's attendance
was highly publicized. John Wilkes Booth, a staunch Southern
supporter, was a well known and popular actor who felt it
necessary to redeem the lost cause of the Confederacy. He had
previously planned to kidnap President Lincoln, but when
that plan did not work he decided to assassinate him instead.
He had the help of three others in his plot, with the intention
of also assassinating Vice President Johnson, Secretary Seward,
and General Grant. The wounded Lincoln was rushed
across the street to the Petersen house where he was attended
to for nine hours. After fighting for life like only he could,
President Abraham Lincoln passed away at 7:22 a.m. on the
morning of April 15, 1865. "Even he who now sleeps, has,
by this event, been clothed with a new influence...Now his
simple and weighty words will be gathered like those of
Washington, and your children, and your children's children,
shall be taught to ponder the simplicity and deep wisdom of
utterances which, in their time, passed, in party heat, as idle
words." --Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, 1865 "A greater
work is seldom performed by a single man. Generations yet
unborn will rise up and call him blessed." --Reverend James
Reed, 1865 "...In all America, there was, perhaps, not one man
who less deserved to be the victim of this revolution, than
he who has just fallen." --The London Times, 1865 "Abraham
Lincoln...was at home and welcome with the humblest,
and had a spirit and a practical vein in the times of terror
that commanded the admiration of the wisest. His heart was as
great as the world, but there was no room in it to hold the
memory of a wrong." --Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1876 "If one

would know the greatness of Lincoln one should listen to the stories which are told about him in other parts of the world.

I have been in wild places where one hears the name of America uttered with such mystery as if it were some heaven or

hell...but I heard this only in connection with the name Lincoln." --Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) "In the days before antiseptic

surgery, Lincoln had foreshadowed his own demise; his efforts to preserve the life of the nation had been successful at the cost of its strongest limb." (p 446)

My View on the Book

I found this book interesting and was surprised it was not another documentary style written biography. It was actually

interesting to read due to Oates' creative writing style. And being a factual historical story I learned a little about the life

style of the post-colonial period and of course, the life of Lincoln himself whom I know like a close relative now due to

the deep personal as well as external imagery expressed in this biography.