

### Pilgrimage To Springfield: A British Writer's Look At Lincoln And Modern America

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## Review

### PILGRIMAGE TO SPRINGFIELD

#### A British writer's look at Lincoln and modern America

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**Morris, Jan** *Lincoln: A Foreigner's Quest*. Simon and Schuster, ISBN 684855151

In war: resolution. In defeat: defiance. In victory: magnanimity. In peace: goodwill." If Jan Morris has captured her subject with any degree of accuracy, those words by Sir Winston Churchill might aptly have draped Lincoln's funeral train as it snaked its way to Springfield, Illinois. Lincoln is the central hero in Churchill's *The American Civil War*, and Churchill, of course, shared that hero's "almost lackadaisical genius" and "hopeful fatalism" (in Morris's words) in leading his own people through terrible conflict.

Morris's stimulating and delightfully crafted quest for the "true" Lincoln commences with the funeral cortge in 1865, and promises visits to Lincoln sites from Sinking Springs to Ford's Theatre that will allow us to sharpen our judgment of the sixteenth president and of the impact of his reputation on the American mind. It is an ambitious itinerary for 208 pages.

In the modern Academy, historians make reputations by debunking legends, which, generally, they view as sinister Establishment conspiracies -- or myths, rather -- foisted on a nave public and, as such, disorders requiring professional "reeducation" as therapy. For the English, no more Churchillian beef! The Ameri-can counterpart: should the world's remaining superpower be weaned off "Honest Abe?"

Legendary figures such as Lincoln (and Churchill) are different things, with different purposes and different roots, from their historical identities. Legends might instruct perceptive travelers about a foreign society; historians may destroy historical reputations through incisive professional research. Mixing the two will likely confound both purposes. Jan Morris, a resident of Wales and

distinguished both as a travel writer and an historian, is awkwardly poised for her journey.

This book's easy and engaging style provides a smooth ride into the Civil War for those who know only the beginning and the ending; specialists are unlikely to be enlightened. There is some breadth in context, but necessarily little depth; Lincoln's Whiggery and the economic significance of the Kansas-Nebraska Act are touched upon, but backroom, political wheeling-dealing is glossed over and the southern slave-owning interests come across as Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead* in brownshirts.

Though she is drawn to a complex and ambiguous admiration of her subject, Morris's evenhandedness with the sources suggests that that there is actually little mysterious about the historical Lincoln. "My paramount object is to save the Union," Lincoln wrote to Horace Greeley, and from that frequently repeated objective we can trace the qualities that Churchill noted, for better -- defiance in the bleak years of 1861-62, and a promise of magnanimity and goodwill in victory -- and, arguably, for worse -- the resolution, that could fairly be termed "fanaticism," to implement a Whig, statist imperium. Indeed, Lincoln was a fanatic like Churchill, capable (as most of us are) of discovering later the ethical imperative in long-held and self-serving desires.

For Morris, however, this resolution is transformed by a moral change she sees him undergo during the War: in the Gettysburg Address, we read, he "made up for" earlier guile and deception with words reflecting his "loyalty to his wife, his inexhaustible love for [his children], his pride of country, his sympathy for animals, his kind understanding of ordinary people." That Morris is prepared to give Lincoln such benefit of the doubt here is not a result of disregarding evidence but, perhaps, of her desire to make the legend fit the facts.

Morris the historian and Morris the travel writer unwittingly become Morris the therapist. Accordingly, she travels first class, as it were, and too purposefully to hear ordinary people on their own terms. Instead, we are presented with some disappointingly stereotypical natives: "hugely bulbous" white trash in modern Illinois, a boring small-town joker in a straw hat, and an "I've seen it all" cockney-like doorman in Washington, D.C. There is a wonderfully evocative description of contemporary Springfield, but why could we not have more criticism of the "heritage" monuments? There is a moving account of Lincoln's visit to Richmond in the last month of his life, but why not some meatier

thoughts from the modern-day locals?

Finally, as one must expect nowadays from self-proclaimed iconoclasts, the contemporary comment is predictable: Lincoln, for example, is contrasted to the "young zealots . . . urgently propagating their callow ideologies -- Mrs. Thatcher's disciples" (how quickly some historians forget the real zealots). By way of conclusion, we are warned that, although Lincoln's aims were apparently purified by 1865, the conspiracy to ingrain into Americans "a sense of privilege, so irritating to foreigners today, and the belief that the U.S.A. has the right -- the duty indeed -- to intervene in the affairs of other cultures, had its origins in Lincoln's victory." There: so much for thinking the good guys won the Cold War!

In fact, as Morris acknowledges, the Lincoln legend, like that of Churchill, is fading. From where will the new legends come? The natural historical attachments of the English are being severed by a deeply ignorant, or careless, government; it seems that Americans are deterred from even forming such attachments by the continuing presence of powerful groups with money to make from grinding axes. Yet there is surely a wisdom, not a conspiracy, that lies behind the unsystematic historical affections of societies, and that such a book as this might have addressed. We should keep on searching for that wisdom because, as Churchill wrote (and Lincoln might have wished to have said): "If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future."

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