

Everybody's History: Indiana's Inquiry and the Quest to Reclaim a President's Past

Thomas R. Turner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Turner, Thomas R. (2012) "Everybody's History: Indiana's Inquiry and the Quest to Reclaim a President's Past," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.4.13

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss4/12>

Review

Turner, Thomas R.

Fall 2012

Erekson, Keith A. *Everybody's History: Indiana's Inquiry And the Quest to Reclaim a President's Past.* University of Massachusetts Press, \$26.95 ISBN 978-1-55849-915-7

Examining the Meaning of Lincoln in Indiana

Who owns history? Is it the realm of professional historians or is history open to everyone? Do amateurs have a role to play and, if so, what is that role? Keith Erekson investigates these and other questions by examining the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society and its Lincoln Inquiry in his book *Everybody's History: Indiana's Inquiry and the Quest to Reclaim a President's Past.*

John Igelhart, a railroad lawyer who read history in his spare time and the founder of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society in February of 1920, noted that while Lincoln had lived one-quarter of his life in the state, biographers had virtually ignored his Indiana years. The reason for this neglect appeared to be the perception that southwestern Indiana was so backward that Lincoln's time in the state was not worth studying. This uncivilized region could have had little impact on his life and career except possibly in a negative manner.

With the establishment of the Lincoln Inquiry, Igelhart set out to reverse this negative stereotype by employing interviews with pioneers to reveal the real Lincoln of the Indiana frontier, a Lincoln freed from myth and errors. The Inquiry chose to do history collectively and, in a move far ahead of its time, membership was open to anyone, including women. Most members were educated, conservative, property holders, people with small town roots, who came together to learn more about the history of their ancestors and communities. As head of the society, Igelhart assigned topics for members to research. They then presented papers based on their findings at meetings which also served as social events.

The decade of the 1920's was the golden age of Lincoln studies but while the Lincoln Inquiry believed it was making a great contribution with its collecting of oral tradition, many professional historians disparaged oral history. Lincoln's secretaries John Nicolay and John Hay who produced a ten-volume study of the sixteenth president wrote scathingly that "most reminiscences are worthless." Well-known scholars Albert J. Beveridge, William E. Barton, and Louis A. Warren argued for the use of written documentary sources which would restrict Lincoln studies to the realm of professionals. They ridiculed claims by Lincoln Inquiry members that they could determine the validity of a respondent's story by subtle hints; for example, if an elderly woman smoked a corn cob pipe she was obviously an original pioneer and therefore her reminiscence was likely true.

Although working at the local level and collecting oral history, the Lincoln Inquiry was, in turn, exposed to the work of professional historians. Igelhart corresponded with Frederick Jackson Turner who had gained fame with his "Frontier Thesis," arguing that many good traits which Americans possessed, including democracy, had been produced by the frontier. Through this contact, members of the Inquiry became familiar with scholarly articles being published in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. He also corresponded with Barton and Beveridge and met Ida Tarbell. Igelhart was quick to challenge the professionals, confronting Beveridge when he felt that his work perpetuated the negative stereotypes about southwestern Indiana.

While the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society occasionally made discoveries that found their way into the wider literature, their success in affecting the broader Lincoln field was limited. For example, Igelhart's discovery that the first law treatise Lincoln read was probably *The Revised Statutes of Indiana* (1824) was incorporated into the literature by many Lincoln historians but there was much more debate about the revelation that Lincoln had read *Quinn's Jest*s. Beveridge accepted that Lincoln had read the work but Warren, who was also a minister, denied that Lincoln could have read and used such ribald humor. In general, the Inquiry never produced a wider synthesis for public consumption.

The existence of the Lincoln Inquiry was also rather short-lived. By 1933 the group dropped one of its three yearly meetings, the last book was published by a member in 1934, and by 1939 the society had ceased to exist. By the 1930's

the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society faced competition from the Indiana Lincoln Union headed by Bess Ehrmann. The membership of the Indiana Lincoln Union consisted more heavily of people who came from the northern part of the state and whose ancestors had come from New England. They praised Warren's research and attempted to control and interpret the Indiana Lincoln sites. They were as apt to think that their southwestern neighbors were as uncivilized as they had been portrayed.

The demise of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society might be viewed as the end of the effort to involve the public in Lincoln studies. Several months after Igelhart's death, noted Lincoln biographer, James G. Randall, issued a new call to ban amateurs from the Lincoln field. To be fair the Lincoln story had become so encrusted in myth and legend, even in the hands of some so-called professionals, that Randall was calling for a more realistic portrayal of Lincoln. But Randall's call seemed to leave little room for the oral history investigations of the Lincoln Inquiry.

Fortunately for the legacy of the society, the story didn't end there. Eventually academic historians began to reassess the value of oral history. In the 1930's the Federal Writers' Project interviewed former slaves and aged Native Americans, Allan Nevins started an oral history project at Columbia University in 1948 and, by 1966, a professional oral history association was founded. More recently, Lincoln scholars such as Douglas Wilson, Rodney Davis, and Michael Burlingame have published numerous, well-received books based largely on oral history sources. Most modern Lincoln researchers require no convincing that oral history is essential to understanding the early period of Lincoln's life.

Ironically, both Igelhart and Randall moved closer to a consensus about the role of oral and public history. Randall who at one time wanted to exclude amateurs eventually conceded that history "is everybody's subject." And Igelhart, while still touting the importance of oral history, admitted that the field required common standards.

This is an excellent study which should be essential reading for anyone interested in oral history, public history, or Abraham Lincoln. Erikson clearly demonstrates that areas of historical study move in and out of fashion. While oral history may have been controversial in the 1920's and 1930's, today oral history is very much in the mainstream with students able to major or minor in public history at many American colleges and universities.

Erekson's work also points the way to an additional area of investigation. There are still many Lincoln groups and societies in existence throughout the United States and it would be interesting to examine their origins, purpose, and effect on the wider field. As a long-time member and former president of the Lincoln Group of Boston which was founded in 1938, there are some striking parallels between the Boston and Indiana groups. While the Lincoln Group of Boston was not set up to collect oral history, it was established to uncover accurate information about the sixteenth president. Membership was open to all, including women, and a woman was a charter member. The president, a well-known Lincoln scholar and Boston *Herald* editor F. Lauriston Bullard, assigned paper topics to members which he thought were worthy of investigation. Membership was a wide-ranging mix of professionals and amateurs including academics, lawyers, judges, ministers, librarians, and business people.

Of course there were also differences. The Boston group, partially by design, never reached the large membership of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society. One member used to delight in recounting how Bullard had told him he would have to wait for membership despite holding a Ph.D. since there were too many members associated with Boston University and he felt that the group should be more diverse.

Through its publications and speaking engagements the Boston group also had some impact on the wider Lincoln field. While members presented papers which were sometimes published, historians such as Randall also addressed the quarterly meetings. It would be interesting to examine whether the history of other Lincoln groups was similar or different.

Although the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society has been defunct for almost 75 years and its direct influence on the study of Lincoln was limited, it paved the way for more modern historical trends. Erekson reminds us that, while in 2012 historians may still do traditional research in climate controlled archives, they also practice history in a variety of other locations including dusty courthouses, overstuffed attics, gravesites, river bends, and re-constructed villages.

In returning to the original question, "Who owns history" Erekson concludes that there are many benefits when a thousand minds participate in the public

study of history "Because history is everybody's subject, everybody's history matters." It is difficult to disagree with his conclusion.

Dr. Thomas R. Turner is Professor Emeritus of History at Bridgewater State University where he taught from 1971-2010. He is the recipient of Bridgewater's V. James DiNardo award for excellence in teaching and the Lifetime Achievement award for research. His most recent book is Not to Be Ministered Unto but to Minister: Bridgewater State University 1840-2010. He can be reached at tturner@bridgew.edu.