

Knowing Him by Heart: African Americans on Abraham Lincoln

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Review

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In an 1883 speech on the anniversary of emancipation in the District of Columbia, Frederick Douglass declared, “We all know Abraham Lincoln by heart.” Preserving the union of American states and emancipating slaves, achievements that led to his assassination and popular glorification as “the first martyr president,” elevated Lincoln into the pantheon of American presidents rivalled only by George Washington. As Washington was eulogized as “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen,” so too did loyal Americans receive Lincoln into their hearts—especially Black Americans.

But as editors Fred Lee Hord and Matthew D. Norman reveal in their rich collection, *Knowing Him by Heart: African Americans on Abraham Lincoln*, what Black Americans know by heart about Lincoln plumbs deeper than his reputation as the Great Emancipator. Even the fact of his presidential order to free the slaves in rebel-held states was a disputed one, as Black Americans disagreed over the timing of Lincoln’s proclamation and his rationale for doing so—both at the time and ever since. For example, on February 25, 1863, James H. Hudson of California criticized “our honest but incompetent President” for being “too dilatory,” as well as for “adopt[ing] a half-way measure,” when the “proclamation should have been made to include every bondsman on the soil of America” (p. 92). Black Chicagoans chose to equate the proclamation with “the immortal Declaration of Independence” and declared that Lincoln’s “acts have been blessed of God, and will be embalmed in the hearts of his countrymen” (p. 88).

In their perceptive introduction, Hord and Norman describe the diverse Black opinions about Lincoln’s role as emancipator as one of “persistent ambivalence” (p. 2). Reflections conveyed in this volume through “speeches, essays, books, editorials, sermons, [and] poems” juxtapose “the image of Lincoln as a messiah who bestowed emancipation as a gift to a passive, but grateful recipients” with their own “sense of African American agency in securing their

freedom” (p. 2). Careful readers of Lincoln’s preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1862, would notice that the president understood that war-time liberation would require both the authority of the federal government (read: President Lincoln as commander-in-chief) and the initiative of the slaves who would need to flee across Union lines. As Lincoln put it, “*the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom*” (emphasis added, Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*, ed. Don. E. Fehrenbacher, Library of America, New York, 1989, p. 368). In sum, Black Americans have always wrestled with how to honor Lincoln as the Great Emancipator because they wrestled with the nature of their emancipation and how best to commemorate a pivotal episode in their history that also drew attention to their former enslaved status.

This public wrestling, as shown by documents that span from Frederick Douglass’s August 2, 1858, speech to President Barack Obama’s February 12, 2009, speech, includes appeals to Lincoln’s legacy that range from reverence to criticism and for purposes of public commemoration of his birthday to political activism. The editors present a brief historiography of earlier collections of Black American reflections on Lincoln and remind the reader of the use and abuse of Lincoln in the early twentieth century by white Americans who sought to bridge the sectional divide to the neglect of securing the full protection of rights and privileges of Black Americans. Hord and Norman call attention to the relative lack of female commentators prior to the modern Civil Rights era, but nevertheless manage to include female opinions that should be better known for their insights regarding Lincoln’s relevance to them as Black Americans and as women: Figures from the 20th century like Mary McLeod Bethune, Barbara Fields, and Mary Frances Berry are joined by Black American women of the 19th century like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Harriet Tubman, Elizabeth Keckly, Sojourner Truth, and Annie Davis, an enslaved woman from Maryland who wrote Lincoln in August 1864 to “please let me know if we are free,” given her residence in a state where the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply (p. 136). (Maryland ratified a new state constitution abolishing slavery in November 1864).

The question of what makes Lincoln worth remembering to Black Americans, which this volume shows stretches beyond the Emancipation Proclamation and the preservation of the

Union, becomes even more relevant today when one considers if there is anything more about Lincoln that all Americans know by heart. Given the prevailing fashion to highlight the apparent failings of Lincoln more than his achievements (witness Nikole Hannah-Jones's *1619 Project*), are Americans taught to know anything about Lincoln that is worth remembering? If Americans, Black or white, are no longer united by what we know by heart about Lincoln, it indicates not simply a division regarding Lincoln's importance to the nation but also a division over the meaning of America—in particular, the principles and institutions, as well as the habits of heart, that should govern a free people.

Americans once looked to Lincoln because even though he was not perfect, he saw the best that they could be and called forth “the better angels of their nature.” The value of a book about Black American opinions of Lincoln resides not only in the neglected history it tells, but also the possibility it can rejuvenate a discussion of what an excluded people saw worth saving in the Great Emancipator and the nation he thought worthy of the saving.

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