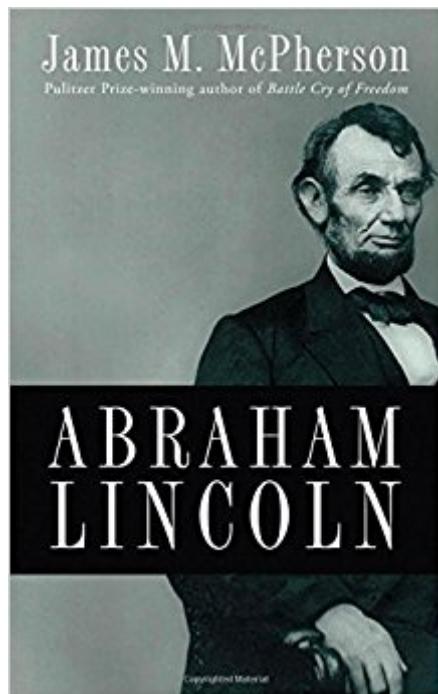


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Abraham Lincoln



Synopsis

Best-selling author James M. McPherson follows the son of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks from his early years in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, to his highly successful law career, his marriage to Mary Todd, and his one term in Congress. We witness his leadership of the Republican anti-slavery movement, his famous debates with Stephen A. Douglas (a long acquaintance and former rival for the hand of Mary Todd), and his emergence as a candidate for president in 1860. Following Lincoln's election to the presidency, McPherson describes his masterful role as Commander in Chief during the Civil War, the writing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and his assassination by John Wilkes Booth. The book also discusses his lasting legacy and why he remains a quintessential American hero two hundred years after his birth, while an annotated bibliography permits easy access to further scholarship. With his ideal short account of Lincoln, McPherson provides a compelling biography of a man of humble origins who preserved our nation during its greatest catastrophe and ended the scourge of slavery.

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Customer Reviews

Marking the two-hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birth, this marvelous short biography by a leading historian offers an illuminating portrait of one of the giants in the American story. It is the best concise introduction to Lincoln in print, a must-have volume for anyone interested in American history or in our greatest president. In the discussion below, noted historian and author of *Lincoln and His Admirals*, Craig L. Symonds, talks to James M. McPherson about Lincoln's relationships with his generals, beginning with the controversial commander of the northern army, George

McClellan, whose soldiers referred to him as the "the young Napoleon." Both historians share the prestigious 2009 Lincoln Prize for the year's best books on Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War.

McPherson's *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* and Symonds's *Lincoln and His Admirals* were the winning books. A Conversation Between Two Lincoln Historians: James M. McPherson and Craig L. Symonds Symonds: George McClellan is clearly a central character in this story. In your view, was Lincoln too patient with Little Mac, not patient enough, or just about right? Would the Lincoln of 1864 have tolerated McClellan as long as the Lincoln of 1862 did? McPherson: In one sense, he was too patient. McClellan deserved to be fired after his failure to reinforce [General] Pope at Second Bull Run, as a majority of the Cabinet wanted Lincoln to do. But in another sense, Lincoln was absolutely right that only McClellan could reorganize the army and restore its morale, and if the president had fired him then, the army might have broken down. In the end, Lincoln's timing on removing Mac from command--just after the fall elections in 1862--was just right. Symonds: What about the so-called political generals: did Lincoln appoint and tolerate them out of perceived political necessity or because he believed that some of them, at least, had genuine merit? And, for that matter, did any of them have genuine merit?

McPherson: Lincoln appointed the political generals in order to mobilize their constituencies for the war effort. Northern mobilization for the war in 1861-62 was a from-the-bottom-up process, with important local and state political leaders playing a key part in persuading men to enlist in this all-volunteer army, and political generals were a key part in this process, which increased an army of 16,000 men in April 1861 to an army of 637,000 men in April 1862. And while we are all familiar with the military incompetents among the political generals, some of them were actually pretty good--John Logan and Frank Blair, for example. Symonds: Why did Lincoln put up with [his chief war advisor] Henry Halleck? McPherson: Lincoln used Halleck to translate presidential orders and wishes into language that military commanders could understand, and to translate their reports and requests and explanations into language that Lincoln understood. That was what Lincoln meant when he called Halleck a "first-rate clerk." Of course he had wanted him to be more than a clerk, and that is why Lincoln finally appointed Grant as General in Chief and booted Halleck upstairs into the new office of "chief of staff," where his clerkly qualities were needed. Symonds: Lincoln was clearly relieved to turn over military operations to Grant in 1864, but did he also fear Grant as a potential political rival? McPherson: He had been concerned about Grant as a potential political rival, until Grant let it be known throughout intermediaries that he unequivocally and absolutely had no political ambitions in 1864 and strongly supported Lincoln's reelection. After that, Lincoln had no more concerns. Symonds: Now that you will be the owner of two busts of Lincoln by Augustus St.

Gaudens, along with your many other prizes, isn't your house getting pretty full? McPherson: There is still room in the house, but since my grandchildren are interested in Mr. Lincoln in bronze, I may deposit this bust in their house, where I can visit it whenever I want (they live ten miles away). Read more

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian McPherson (*Battle Cry of Freedom*) contributes to the slew of Lincoln biennial books with this succinct biography, weighing in at a lean 70 pages (plus notes), that delivers gracefully on McPherson's promise to capture "the essential events and meaning of Lincoln's life without oversimplification or overgeneralization." McPherson is a precise writer with a masterful command of the subject, guiding readers through the evolution of Lincoln's thinking on race, his lifelong struggle with depression, his improbable rise to political power, his anguish over the breakup of the union and his determination to see it made whole again. For anyone wanting to fill the gaps in their understanding of the Great Emancipator by the end of President's Day, this efficient account from a noted Civil War scholar is a near-perfect solution. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

James M. McPherson is the author of one of the best histories of the Civil War ever written, and one of my favorite books of history. His short study of Abraham Lincoln is certainly not intended to replace other massive accounts of the great president, whether in multiple volumes or single massive volumes, but it gives a clear account of Lincoln's life in compact detail and offers up-to-date discussion of many of the issues that have recently been raised about his presidency, particularly his opposition to slavery -- when did it begin? How much was it a part of his intentions as commander-in-chief during the war? Certainly there are bigger and fuller books about Lincoln, to say nothing of editions of his writing, but this gives an excellent way to get the real meat of the basic information about the man and his significance in a quick read.

James M. McPherson's 2009 biography *Abraham Lincoln* attempts to capture the life of our 16th president in a mere 65 pages (plus 12 pages of notes and bibliography). As I just finished reading David Herbert Donald's magnificent *Lincoln* (see my review that work here on), which weighs in at 600 pages (plus 114 pages of notes and bibliography), this is an interesting contrast. McPherson's account moves briskly through Lincoln's life, and is very precise and efficient. You don't get much in the way of specific details or anecdotes, but McPherson doesn't miss any of the major points of Lincoln's life, either. The writing is engaging, and given that it's only 65 pages, it ends up being a

page turner without many pages to turn. You'll find more facts about Lincoln on the many Wikipedia pages dedicated to him than in this book, but you won't find the well-crafted narrative that McPherson presents (and I say this as a huge Wikipedia fan). It's difficult to compare McPherson's biography to a full-length work like Donald's as they strive towards different goals. With Donald's Lincoln, the sum of all the well-told details and insights adds up to paint a clearer picture of the man and his era, and allows the reader to develop a greater appreciation for Lincoln. McPherson does a great job and conveying Lincoln's life in a short and interesting manner, but it just won't let you get to know Lincoln as well as a longer biography. I enjoyed McPherson's Abraham Lincoln, and I would recommend it to either the Lincoln novice looking to get a brief overview of the man, or to the well-read Lincoln fan looking for a quick refresher. The latter reader will not find much that they aren't already familiar with in McPherson's book, but the familiar is well-told by McPherson.

Our United States should be thankful for the God given man that this historical and fascinating book outlined. I knew little of what was written in these pages but read with eagerness to know what he did as a wise and thoughtful leader that is sorely needed today. We have wreaked the ideal republic he fashioned years ago. He would turn in his grave if he saw what turmoil and loss of rights we have as a Nation under God. It's a shame. We will be lost unless we repent and turn our ways.

There was so much information regarding President Lincoln and that time of our country's history and the changes from then to now. One of the major founders of the Republican Party was Abraham Lincoln. The primary purpose of the Republican Party was the abolition of slavery. For Abraham Lincoln slavery didn't seem wrong. It was a practice that he abhorred with all of his being. Even though his main efforts in his first administration were those of Commander in Chief of the army and war effort his previous experiences in the state legislature enabled him to deal with the insiders trying to manipulate his strategies. It isn't a lightweight biography but it is definitely one to read and learn.

During the last several months, I have begun to read a number of biographies of Abraham Lincoln and recently finished two, this one and Ronald C. White, Jr.'s A. Lincoln. How different they are in terms of length as well as their scope and depth of coverage and yet they will, I am certain, attract and reward an abundance of appreciative readers. As James M. McPerson explains in his Preface, "I have written a lot about Abraham Lincoln in my career. [His most recently published work is *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*.] Others have written more. During this

bicentennial commemoration of his birth, a large number of excellent biographies and other books about Lincoln have appeared and continued to appear. [Note: McPherson has praised White's A. Lincoln for its 'brilliant analysis of Lincoln's principal speeches and writing' and for his analysis 'of Lincoln's evolving religious convictions, which shaped the core of his effective leadership, his moral integrity.' That's high praise indeed.] Most of these are substantial works; one definitive multivolume biography runs well over a million words. Amid this cascade of information, I believe there is room for a brief biography that captures the essential events and meaning of Lincoln's life without oversimplification or overgeneralization. This is what I have tried to do in the following pages."I urge those who are curious about this book not to be deterred by its length of only 65 pages, plus Notes and Bibliography. McPherson intended to write a compact book, is among the most distinguished of Lincoln scholars, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for writing *The Battle Cry of Freedom*, and may well receive another for *Tried by War*. He succeeds again brilliantly when achieving his chief objectives for this brief biography. Although the narrative is lively throughout, I never had the feeling that I was being rushed from one key period in Lincoln's life to another. I especially appreciate McPherson's frequent provision of what I view as summary insights that combine several key points. For example, during the years in New Salem, Lincoln developed "a purpose and direction": he joined the debating society, developed a lifelong love of William Shakespeare and Robert Burns, and also acquired a passion for politics and announced his candidacy for the Illinois state legislature in 1932. "Although he failed to win the election, he received 92 percent of the votes in the New Salem district, where he was known. When he ran again in 1834, he campaigned throughout the county and won decisively." Lincoln's devotion to learning and especially to self-improvement continued until his death. Here in Dallas, we have an area near downtown called the Farmers Market where several vendors offer a complimentary slice of fresh fruit so that people can have at least a taste of what is offered. In that spirit, I thought it would be of interest to those who read this review to sample an excerpt from the final chapter of McPherson's book that is representative of the quality of his analysis and the eloquence of his prose. Note how skillfully he addresses critically important issues "without oversimplification or overgeneralization." "Union victory in the Civil War resolved two fundamental, festering problems that had been unresolved by the revolution of 1776 and the Constitution of 1787. The first problem was the survival of the republic as one nation, indivisible. The republic established by the Founders was a fragile experiment in a world bestrode by kings, queens, emperors, czars, dictators, and theories of aristocracy... The second problem left unresolved by the events of 1776 and 1787 was the issue of slavery. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a nation founded on a charter that declared all people deserving of the

inalienable rights of liberty had become the largest slaveholding nation in the world. This was the 'monstrous injustice' that made the United States a monument of hypocrisy in the eyes of the world, as Lincoln had expressed it in 1854. With the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln started the United States on the road to living up to its professed belief that all men are created equal."For those interested in obtaining a brief and entertaining but comprehensive and historically sound discussion of the 16th President of the United States, here it is.

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