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Jefferson, Lincoln And America

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By [Timothy D. Naegele\[1\]](#)

Three books are worth reading about Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and America: the “Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson,” which was edited by his great-granddaughter, Sarah N. Randolph[2]; “Lincoln” by David Herbert Donald[3]; and “A History of the American People” by Paul M. Johnson.[4]

Jefferson was a giant, and the first book chronicles his extraordinary life through his letters and the letters of others, lovingly assembled and edited by Randolph. At various points, the book is moving and tearful; elsewhere it is joyous and humorous. At all times, Jefferson’s seemingly-unlimited talents and brilliance, as well as his qualities as a decent human being and his erudition, shine forth.

The greats of American history come alive through their correspondence and Jefferson’s letters to George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, James Madison, James Monroe, Patrick Henry and Alexander Hamilton, to name just a few—along with the Marquis de Lafayette and Napoleon Bonaparte of France. We witness firsthand the American Revolution, this nation’s founding, Jefferson’s years in Paris, the French Revolution, and his presidency.

Perhaps three things stand out most of all: the depth of his love for his family and the meticulous care with

which he nurtured each family member; his love for Monticello and his desire to return there and be rid of the burdens of public office; and his relationship with Adams that, once breached, is finally restored at the end of their lives.

Remarkably, both presidents died on the 4th of July, 1826. To paraphrase the words of Jefferson, two “Argonauts” sailed on, leaving this country forever changed and better because they had passed here. “I steer my bark with Hope in the head, leaving Fear astern,” Jefferson wrote to Adams in 1816. From being Secretary of State and Vice President to two terms in the presidency, involving the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Jefferson never lost his love for or his belief in this great country.

He was a farmer, scholar, scientist, diplomat, a leader and a politician. He was an accomplished horseman who was faithful to his belief in the need for at least two hours of exercise each day. He was a husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather; and he loved music, birds and his gardens in Albemarle County, Virginia. And he was an American.

In the second book, “Lincoln,” Donald writes brilliantly, and truly spans Lincoln’s life and gives one a sense of being there. Perhaps most striking is how the tide of events carried Lincoln and changed his views (e.g., with respect to the slavery issue alone, from colonization to emancipation). Also, Donald describes Lincoln as a master, very calculating politician, not unlike the politicians of today. He was certainly not the folksy backwoods caricature that often is presented, although he used that to his advantage (e.g., to disarm opponents and garner support).

Despite being wonderfully researched, and spreading out the facts for all to see, one gets the sense that what truly made Lincoln “tick” was unknowable, from a deeply personal standpoint. Having worked on Capitol Hill, my sense is that most senators are that way, possibly because they have been compromised again and again to reach high offices, and to be all things to all people.

Also, it was interesting how Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman “saved” Lincoln politically, while many of his other generals were either indecisive or utter buffoons. Lincoln knew that changes were needed, but he was often hesitant to “rock the boat” and make them. After his reelection in 1864, he seemed much more self-confident, which was cut short by his tragic death. The reader is left to wonder what he might have accomplished during his second term.

When the book ends somewhat abruptly, one’s interest has been whetted. It is only too bad that Donald did not do an appraisal of “what might have been.” There is no question that Lincoln was brilliant, and he was really maturing as a political leader when he was killed. What a remarkable four years might have followed. Also, with essentially no protection at all, it is surprising that more leaders of that time were not killed by the John Wilkes Booths of this world. Lincoln, God love him, was fearless and a true fatalist—or at least that is how Donald depicts him.

One is led to think about Lincoln’s law partner, William Herndon, who was so important in Lincoln’s life, and his thoughts about Lincoln’s life and death. Also, Grant’s memoirs—which are said to be the finest done by an American president—are wonderful to read, along with books about Reconstruction, the diaries of Lincoln’s two male “secretaries,” etc.

Years ago, I read an article about how one could only understand the Southern “mentality” by appreciating how conquered peoples—or the vanquished—have been able to survive throughout history under the rule of the victors; and Donald’s book sets the scene for that to take place. Also, one cannot help but be impressed

by what a monumental struggle the Civil War represented, and the human carnage that it left as well as the deep scars that remained. This book is truly fascinating, and Donald provides a brilliant “birds-eye view,” which is well worth reading.

The third book is “A History of the American People” by Johnson. For all of us whose ancestors came from distant shores, or however we ended up as “Americans,” this book is rich in details, events and trends that have been woven together to describe our history and what it means to be an American. This reader gained a new sense of pride in what America is and how our history has evolved, and where we are apt to go as a people in the future.

The United States is a melting pot, or a rainbow of different colors, religions and ethnicities, and therein lies its soul, strength, creativity and diversity, and yes tensions. Johnson’s weaving of minute facts into a tapestry that is “us” deserves to be read and reflected on by all. We may not agree with each and every observation or conclusion, but we cannot help to be impressed by the sweep of history that Johnson chronicles and how he methodically marshals the facts into a remarkable and coherent whole, of which each of us is an integral part.

I only hated to see this book end—which was true of the other two books as well—and I wished that that I could read about the next 100 years of this “grand experiment” called democracy, but those pages are being written in history with each passing day, month and year. While it took the arrival of a new millennium for Johnson to share this monumental undertaking with us, let us hope that similar brilliant works are forthcoming.

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[2] See http://www.amazon.com/Domestic-Thomas-Jefferson-American-Classics/dp/0804417598/ref=cm_cr-mr-title

[3] See http://www.amazon.com/Lincoln-David-Herbert-Donald/dp/068482535X/ref=cm_cr-mr-title


[4] See http://www.amazon.com/History-American-People-Paul-Johnson/dp/0060930349/ref=cm_cr-mr-title

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