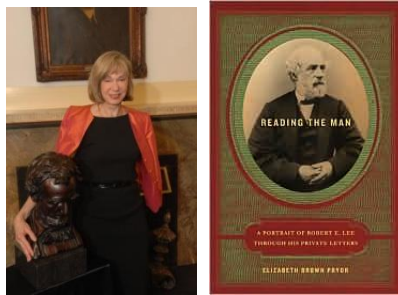


2008 LINCOLN PRIZE WINNER ELIZABETH BROWN PRYOR FOR *READING THE MAN: A PORTRAIT OF ROBERT E. LEE THROUGH HIS PRIVATE LETTERS*



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Winning the Lincoln Prize is such a singular honor that it is probably superfluous to say that I am delighted to be here. But of course I *am* delighted and I want to thank the Lincoln and Soldiers Institute of Gettysburg College, its director Gabor Boritt, the jury members who so generously considered my book, and of course Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman who graciously endow this prize.

Well...Robert E. Lee and Abraham Lincoln! As Mr. Gilder noted in his kind introduction, Robert E. Lee is a name that has not generally been associated with the Lincoln Prize and maybe it does seem a little bit incongruous. But then...Lee always did want to have a big victory on Lincoln territory...so maybe this is finally his moment!

You know, these two great Civil War leaders only met once. It was at a reception President Lincoln gave for 78 regular army officers on March 1, 1861, just a few days after his inauguration. Lee was there, in full dress uniform. We do not know what they said to each other—maybe not much given the nature of such receptions. But Lincoln was impressed enough that within a fortnight he promoted Lee to full colonel of the 1st U.S. Cavalry. And Lee accepted right away. On April 1, 1861, just 143 years ago today, he signed an oath—an oath he had taken many times before—committing himself to defend the United States “against all enemies and opposers whatsoever....” And we know that less than three weeks later he found himself unable to uphold that commitment and resigned his commission in the United States Army.

Lincoln never forgave him for it. If you read John Hay's diary you will find the president's aides gossiping about Lee's defection and when Lincoln wrote out his justification for suspending the writ of habeas corpus, Lee is mentioned by name as just the sort of fox in the henhouse the president was trying to root out. In 1864 Lincoln enthusiastically backed a plan to turn Arlington, the Lee family estate, into a federal cemetery, ensuring that no matter what the outcome of the war, the Confederate general could not go home again. Lee also never lost his mistrust of a man he believed had raised an army with the purpose of invading and oppressing the South.

What interested me most about this terrible springtime decision, was how *trivialized* it had become in collective memory. There seemed to be a kind of common wisdom that there wasn't any question which way Lee would decide. This was purveyed by a long string of historians (no Lincoln Prize winners I am happy to say) who called Lee's decision "the answer he was born to make;" or made statements like "Of course the poor man had no choice" or "It was a no-brainer." But the available documents tell a different story. There were four Virginians at that White House reception on March 13. Two—Lee and Joe Johnston—chose to go with the South; but two others—General Winfield Scott and George Thomas—remained with the Union. A Washington clergyman—a confidant of Lee—remarked that Lee "desperately" hoped Virginia would not secede, and spent days in agony as he tried to follow his heart's truth. His own kin were sharply divided. Lee wrote that he could not raise his hand against his family, yet he knew his sister supported the Union, as did nephews and close cousins, many of whom fought with distinction for the Union forces. In fact, as Lee's wife stated, it was the "severest struggle of his life." Lee himself admitted years later that he sat on his resignation letter for a day before sending it, the moment was so painful.

A "no-brainer?" I don't think so.

What this points up to me is how very important it is for us to reach beyond what we *think* we know—to test our tired assumptions—and return again and again to the tangible historical fragments that are left to us. All of us know how easy it is to drown in the well of what previous historians have said—especially on a subject as exhaustively studied as the Civil War. We all know how critiquing other

scholars, rather than truly analyzing historical materials, becomes a kind of re-tread history, causing us to parrot historical errors, and moving us farther and farther away from the original subject.

No matter how brilliant the synthesis or presentation, modern historians cannot hope to match the words of those who lived the adventure. This is particularly true for the Civil War era, which stands as one of the great expressive moments in American history. Never before had this country produced such an outpouring from statesmen and common foot soldiers, plantation mistresses and self-styled journalists. All of them had an opinion, and all of them apparently felt impelled to offer it. And for the first time, nearly everyone had the literacy, and the paper, and the ink, to express their thoughts. It is their words—the words of the participants—that must lead us, for they are the only ones who can really tell us what it was like to be there.

One of the things I prize about the Lincoln Prize is that it has consistently recognized truly original research—the kind that discovers new documents or probes deeply into known sources—the kind that *transforms* our appreciation of the past. I spent many fascinating hours during the last year reading the works of my fellow finalists for this prize. Each one of them illustrates how the creative use of primary sources can change our perspective about issues—and people—and events—that we thought we already knew. James Oakes’s *The Radical and the Republican* brilliantly re-examines familiar documents to give us powerful new insights into the evolution of Lincoln and Douglass’s racial attitudes. The list of previously untapped sources in Chandra Manning’s *What This Cruel War was Over*, is an inspiration in itself. But her conclusions remind us that the more we read, the more we might be faced with Clio’s capriciousness—that additional sources do not necessarily mean clearer answers.

Robert Cook’s *Troubled Commemoration* is likely to become increasingly important as we march toward the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. That fine book also interested me because of the author’s agile use of contemporary resources. I am really intrigued by how historical documentation is changing. I doubt any of us would want to give up the wonderful, unselfconscious letters written by Civil War soldiers; but on the other hand, can we imagine recreating Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech without *hearing* that haunting cadence and clarion voice? Videotapes allow us not only to

eavesdrop on historical events, but to observe gestures and gauge reactions for ourselves, something that must make scholars of the Gettysburg Address weep with envy. And where we may be losing the art of writing private letters, the very public perceptions of bloggers and podcasts are going to be a bonanza for social historians. We are all going to have to adapt our methods and our thinking to effectively harness these tools. Robert Cook has begun to show us the way.

Robert E. Lee and Abraham Lincoln were very different personalities. But one thing they had in common was their literary ability. Both left us a rich legacy of fine writing. In Lee's case it is a fortune in guileless and beautifully phrased personal correspondence. His letters are so abundant that taken end to end they nearly constitute an autobiography. And they do something more: they release him from idealized memory; from what Stephen Vincent Benét called "the sick honey of the speechifiers." I want everyone in this room to close his or her eyes and picture General Robert Edward Lee. I suspect that virtually all of you have one of two pictures in mind: either the proud and defiant portrait taken by Mathew Brady just after Appomattox, or the noble equestrian statue that stands on Monument Avenue in Richmond. These are stirring images, but they have now added up to a kind of popular pabulum. As Professor Alan Guelzo once quipped to me: "Lee has become flavorless, odorless, colorless."

After reading some 10,000 manuscript pages of Lee's personal correspondence I see an entirely different person. Others might conjure up the dignified, unyielding Lee—and he was both of those things—but when I think of him I am just as likely to see a young army officer struggling to write his official correspondence with his two sons playing around him. Here is the scene as Lee describes it in 1839:

Boo & Rooney with four of their little playmates have been keeping such a laughing, bawling, jumping rumpous and a rioting around me that I hardly know what I have written, and Mr. Rooney is at this moment jerking the cover of my table with one hand and cracking me over the head with the broom with the other—Excuse therefore deficiencies & haste....

Now, being whacked on the head with a broom by a bunch of little scamps is not where we generally place Robert E. Lee. Yet how wonderfully it humanizes him! It is hard to call the man who wrote that passage remote or unknowable. Nor can we see Lee as invincible, or somehow above the

tragedy that surrounded him, when we look at a list of psalms he scribbled on the back of an envelope in 1863—for each of those psalms is a cry for God not to desert him. *Lee's* words, not those of people interpreting him, are what give him life, and give us an ability to identify with him.

You know, Robert E. Lee should never have been seen as unknowable, an enigma. He was there for us all the time—there in all his fabulous human fallibility—there in all his vulnerability—there, in his own straightforward words.

I had the privilege of reading Lee's marvelous letters because there were careful stewards who preserved them over the years. We have some of these far-sighted caretakers with us tonight and I think we are all indebted to them. Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman's magnificent collection of documents and Americana is justly renowned. (It is also a kind of candy store for lovers of history!) Some of my favorite Lee manuscripts are in their collection—delightful, irreverent, and very revealing letters that “Bob” wrote to his best friend from West Point. Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman's prescience in amassing this set of papers, and promoting history through an inspired menu of programs is a tremendous gift to everyone who believes that what is past is prologue—that if we lose our history, we lose our way.

I would like also to mention one other person who has been instrumental in preserving a very important set of papers—and that is Robert E. Lee deButts, Jr., General Lee's great-great grandson. He is here tonight and has himself done some excellent research and writing on his family's history. He has also been a vigilant guardian of his ancestor's papers. A few years ago he discovered a cache of more than six thousand documents that had been stored by Lee's eldest daughter at the Burke & Herbert Bank in Alexandria, Virginia. It's *his* story to tell, but let me just say that Rob showed great generosity in letting me look at these papers before they were available to other historians. I am in his debt for this, as well as for allowing me to share his remarkable historical family over the last few years.

I said at the beginning of these remarks that I was delighted to be here. I am also amazed to be standing before you as a Lincoln Prize laureate. The works by my fellow finalists are wonderful books and I felt it was a great compliment simply to have my book included with them. And as I look at the list of past laureates, such superb historians, many of whom are present tonight, well...I am not only

delighted to be here, and amazed to be here, and of course greatly honored to be here: I am quite humbled to be among you.