

Ronald C. White. *Lincoln in Private: What His Most Personal Reflections Tell Us about Our Greatest President*. New York: Random House, 2021. Pp. xx, 328, illustrations, appendix, select(ed) bibliography, notes, illustration credits, index. Hardcover, \$19.97 (as of 6-28-21, was \$28.00); Kindle, \$13.99.

Reviewed by D. Leigh Henson

*Note:* As an undergraduate (early 1960s), I read that a review should identify a book's purpose and evaluate how well the book fulfills that purpose. Since then, experience has taught me that if possible a review should also evaluate the book's purpose, and I have applied that principle here. This review was written for first publication at Amazon.com, and the maximum length for such a review is 5,000 words. This review is 3,270 words. Of 40 Amazon reviews of this book (as of 7-7-21), this one is the more extensive of only two "critical" reviews.

Ronald C. "Ron" White is a publisher's ideal academic author—two of his books are *New York Times* best sellers: biographies of Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant. *Lincoln in Private: What His Most Personal Reflections Tell Us about Our Greatest President* has the potential to reach that distinction. As of this writing (6-21), *Lincoln in Private* is an Amazon.com Editor's Pick for "Best Books of 2021 So Far." It is the first book exclusively about the 111 fragments and notes written by Abraham Lincoln that he used for various purposes (more purposes than White identifies, as explained later) but not for publication, as White often reminds us. White maintains that these compositions "served as repositories for his most important insights," but these "private reflections have been mostly overlooked by scholars and general readers alike."

It is worth noting that among recent Lincoln books written by scholars, who surely explore far and wide and dig deep to discover new Lincoln treasure, only Michael Burlingame's *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) and Fred Kaplan's *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer* (HarperCollinsPublishers[sic], 2008) discuss a couple of the fragments/notes.

Lincoln buffs and history buffs as well as professional Lincolnists and historians will enjoy *Lincoln in Private*, but general readers are more likely to learn from this book than specialists. White's accounts of the provenance and contexts of the fragments/notes are informed by his extensive knowledge of Lincoln and history gained from decades of research and publication. White is a masterful storyteller in developing these accounts—the bulk of White's discussion of the fragments/notes—and he augments those accounts with insightful interpretation and commentary on their significance.

White does a commendable job of choosing the fragments/notes that express some of Lincoln's most important thoughts and feelings, but White's analysis of the collective body of the fragments/notes could have been more fully developed as background and context for his purpose. Also, White misses an opportunity to explain further how some of Lincoln's fragments/notes relate to his speeches. White's treatment of the fragments/notes is limited; his book had "room" for more discussion, and such an explanation would have been well worth doing because of the light it would shed on Lincoln's composing process—a valuable contribution to Lincoln studies that would appeal to both general readers and specialists.

*Lincoln in Private* engages readers with its visual appeal and readability. The book features sixty-nine grayscale images. Opposite the first page of all of the chapters except the second is a full-page photo of Lincoln relating to the time period of the fragment(s)/note(s) discussed in that chapter. Various other kinds of images decorate the chapters: photos of contemporary leaders and buildings, political cartoons, other drawings, and newspaper clippings. Photostatic color copies of the fragments/notes discussed in the book appear in a special section in Chapter 9. Each chapter begins with a fragment/note discussed in it, and the text of that fragment/note appears offset in a light-gray box. The text of that fragment/note appears in a slightly smaller serif typeface version of the typeface of the chapter text. White's chapters do not give the titles of the fragments/notes that are assigned to them in the index. Also, numbering the fragments/notes in the index would have allowed for easy cross-referencing in the chapters. The page layout has ample white space, and the chapters are short, averaging twelve pages.

Chapter 2, *The Humble Lincoln: A Lawyer's Vocation*, is the longest chapter, at fifteen pages. Analysis of its 3,556 words using MS Word's built-in spelling/grammar/readability feature yields these details: paragraphs, 49; sentences, 165; average number of sentences per paragraph, 3.3; average number of words per sentence, 21.5; Flesch readability ease, 48.1; Flesch-Kincaid grade level, 11.5; passive sentences, 7.2%.

White cites the publication of Lincoln's notes/fragments in John Nicolay and John Hay's publications; *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Roy P. Basler et al.; and the more recent *Papers of Abraham Lincoln*. White's book is engaging and informative, but it does not address the full complement and purposes of these compositions. As a useful resource for both Lincoln specialists and generally educated readers, the book's appendix presents the texts of the 111 fragments/notes, which constitute 35% of the book (this reviewer took advantage of that resource).

White observes that Lincoln composed fragments/notes privately so that his "best thoughts" would not "escape him," referring to these compositions as "building blocks that can help us reconstruct Lincoln's thought processes as he approached history-altering decisions" and that he likely composed many others. White also describes these compositions as "private reflections" and "highly personal scraps of writings." Indeed, like most writers, Lincoln composed privately, but none of his fragments/notes are about such personal concerns as his relationship with his parents, marriage, or fatherhood.

White's book discusses twelve of Lincoln's fragments/notes, using the term *notes* "except where editors have specifically labeled them fragments." White observes that "almost every surviving Lincoln fragment begins with a problem or challenge." White might have mentioned that twenty-two of the writings with *fragment* in their title came before his presidential election; only four came after it. Fourteen of the writings with *note* in their title came before his presidential election; sixty-two came after it. The few remaining others do not have either *fragment* or *note* in their titles. Only three of the titles of Lincoln's fragments/notes assigned to his presidency relate to public discourse: *Fragment of the House Divide Speech* (December 7, 1860), written after the speech was given (June 1860) in response to an autograph request; *Fragment of Speech Intended for Kentuckians* (February 12, 1861?), which White discusses in Chapter 9 (that speech was never given); and *A Meditation on the Divine Will* (September 2, 1862?). Most of the sixty-two presidential notes concern appointments and promotions, sometimes referring to correspondence. Others relate to election data, military strategy, or campaign concerns.

White's purpose is ambitious and original: to "present a fresh perspective on Lincoln just when we believed there was nothing new to say about this monumental leader." The book consists of ten chapters organized in three parts. Each part has a two- or three-page introduction. Part One: Lawyer. Chapter 1, The Lyrical Lincoln: The Transcendence of Niagara Falls. Chapter 2, The Humble Lincoln: A Lawyer's Vocation. Part Two: Politician. Chapter 3, The Fiery Lincoln: Slavery and a Reentry to Politics. Chapter 4, The Defeated Lincoln: Failure and Ambition. Chapter 5, The Republican Lincoln: The Birth of a Party. Chapter 6, The Principled Lincoln: A Definition of Democracy. Chapter 7, The Outraged Lincoln: Pro-Slavery Theology. Part Three: President. Chapter 8, The Unity Lincoln: Secession and the Constitution. Chapter 9, The Kentuckian Lincoln: An Undelivered Speech to the South. Chapter 10, The Theological Lincoln: A Meditation on the Divine Will.

Most of the topics in the titles of White's book are familiar to readers of recent Lincoln biography and the history of his times: his humility, temper, frustrated political ambition, and passionate antislavery, pro-democracy views. White points out the brief expression of intense emotions in Lincoln's unpublished writings. White might have mentioned that Lincoln's public discourse was not without emotional expression and appeals. His speeches sometimes included brief expressions of humility and infrequent temper flares, and he continually struggled with frustration and anger over Douglas's personal attacks and other demagogic methods before, during, and after the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates. Lincoln's speeches express emotion toward policies, positions, and rivalry with Douglas through denotative and connotative language, often figurative, but scholarship on Lincoln's rhetoric has emphasized his use of appeals to reason (logos) and his credibility (ethos), including humility, far more than his emotional appeals (pathos).

White's commentary on a fragment/note is often more original than the story of its provenance or context. An exception is Chapter 6, The Principled Lincoln: A Definition of Democracy, which documents the provenance of the shortest fragment/note discussed in the book: "As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a *master*. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy." Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, had possession of this fragment and gave it to a woman who had helped her gain release from "a private sanatorium for disturbed women." White is the first to tell "the story of how Lincoln's fragment became this unusual present [as] one of intrigue, controversy, and determination."

A more typical example of a chapter in which the commentary on a fragment/note is more original than the account of its provenance or context is Chapter 2, The Humble Lincoln: A Lawyer's Vocation. Lincoln wrote the notes discussed in this chapter in preparation for a lecture on the law (never given). White summarizes the familiar history of Lincoln's law career as background for interpreting these notes. The notes advised would-be lawyers to practice humility, diligence, and extemporaneous speaking. White's commentary on the first two of those qualities is more insightful than his commentary on the third. White does not mention that Lincoln began speaking extemporaneously as a youth in Indiana and as a young adult in New Salem. Rather, White cites Lincoln's 1838 The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions, a lyceum lecture, as "a maiden address." On the contrary, Lincoln had previously spoken to the Illinois legislature. Further, Angela G. Ray, professor of communications at Northwestern University, indicates that this lyceum lecture was not extemporaneous: "It is likely that Lincoln read the speech from a prepared text, which was a common means of delivery of lyceum addresses at the time, in keeping with expectations for formal public speech" (*Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 13.3, [2010], 350).

One of White's recurring observations needs qualification: "Although a few of the notes appear to be part of a first draft or preparation for a more polished public speech, the large majority are reflections and analyses that did not reappear anywhere else." Yet of the first thirty-nine fragments/notes written before Lincoln's presidential election, the editors' titles and dates for sixteen of them (41%) specify they were prepared for speeches or debates at named places. For some of the fragments/notes White discusses, he could have better accounted for their correlation to Lincoln's public discourse, as explained below, but this criticism is not a deal-breaker for the overall merit of *Lincoln in Private*.

White observes that Lincoln did not use the two fragments bearing the suggested date of July 1854 in his famous Peoria address that fall, concluding "that was not the purpose of the fragments. Rather, they served as intellectual primers that allowed Lincoln to think through a most critical issue from many different angles." White notes that "Lincoln did not use any of the contents of these two small fragments in the sprawling seventeen-thousand-word speech he delivered in Bloomington, Springfield, and Peoria." On the other hand, the antislavery moral argumentation of the Peoria speech—widely recognized as the foundational speech of Lincoln's second political career—is grounded in the equality language of the Declaration of Independence, and Lincoln expressed the importance of that principle in his second fragment of July 4, 1854: "*Most governments* have been based, practically, on the denial of equal rights of men, as I have, in part, stated them; *ours* began, by *affirming* those rights."

The fragments dated July 21, 1856, and February 28, 1857, cite controversy over whether the question of slavery extension into free territories was a sectional, not a national, issue. White explains, "By 'sectional,' critics meant that the new [Republican] party represented voters only in Northern and western states, and, unlike its Whig predecessor, did not include voters in the South," concluding that "these fragments about the birth of the Republican Party show that while Lincoln seldom spoke about problems confronting the new party in public, he wrestled with these challenges in private." Actually, Lincoln often refuted the accusation the Republican Party had only sectional interests, beginning with his 1854 Peoria speech and extending through the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates and into 1859 prior to his 1860 presidential nomination.

White's interpretations of Fragment on Pro-Slavery Theology (October 1, 1858?) and Fragment on Divine Will (September 2, 1862?) benefit from his master's degree in divinity from Princeton and doctorate in history and religion also from Princeton. Early in his discussion of the first of these fragments, White notes that both Southern and Northern proponents of slavery drew upon "the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition" to justify their position—that God sanctioned slavery—and that Lincoln "did not underestimate the power" of that justification. White's discussion of this fragment centers on Lincoln's criticism of the proslavery theology published in Frederick A. Ross's popular *Slavery Ordained of God* (1857), which White speculates Lincoln read in October 1858 between the fourth and fifth Lincoln-Douglas debates.

White observes that Lincoln "never mentioned Ross in any public speech. The point of many of Lincoln's notes to himself was not to rehearse language for ideas for subsequent speeches. Instead, they served as a private pressure valve so that he could better use his persuasive combination of calm logic and humor to make the case against slavery." Yet White might have mentioned that the first paragraph of this fragment presents an antislavery religious argument that Lincoln used before October 1, 1858, the questionable date of this fragment. That first paragraph in its entirety says, "Suppose it is true, that the negro is inferior to the white, in the gifts of nature; is it not the exact reverse justice that the white

should, for that reason, take from the negro, any part of the little which has been given him? ‘Give to him that is needy’ is the Christian rule of charity; but ‘Take from him that is needy’ is the rule of slavery.”

Earlier in 1858 Lincoln used the main idea of that paragraph in two speeches. In his Chicago speech of July 10, 1858, Lincoln uses biblical allusion to impute evil to Douglas’s position: “This argument of the Judge is the same old serpent that says you work and I eat, you toil and I will enjoy the fruits of it.” In his Springfield speech of July 17, 1858, Lincoln argued, “Certainly the Negro is not our equal in color—perhaps not in many other respects; still, in the right to put into his mouth the bread that his own hands have earned, he is the equal of every other man, white or black. In pointing out that more has been given you, you cannot be justified in taking away the little which has been given him. All I ask for the Negro is that if you do not like him, let him alone. If God gave him but little, that little let him enjoy.” Lincoln apparently began his October 1, 1858(?) fragment disputing Ross with a previously conceived, written argument.

The 1858 Fragment on Pro-Slavery includes a passage that White quotes as the kind of private expression that Lincoln would never allow himself to use in a speech. White twice cites a passage to illustrate how Lincoln “lets his emotions explode” in private: “As a *good* thing, slavery is strikingly peculiar, in this, that it is the only good thing which no man ever seeks the good of, *for himself*. Nonsense! Wolves devouring lambs, not because it is good for their own greedy maws, but because it is good for the lambs!!!” White notes, “A triple of exclamation points appear once more, revealing the absurdity Lincoln encountered as he struggled to understand how religious leaders—supposedly pious men who lived in the same country he did and read the same Bible he read—could defend the immorality of slavery.”

One of White’s most insightful chapters is his last: Chapter 10, *The Theological Lincoln: A Meditation on the Divine Will* (September 2, 1862?). White traces the dispute over the date and year of this note’s composition, accepting Basler’s date of September 2, 1862(?). At that time Lincoln and many other Northerners were distraught over the Union defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run. White explains that Lincoln composed this note to probe God’s purpose in the Civil War and that the note reflects development in Lincoln’s religious thinking: “Lincoln may have been drawn to fatalism as a young man in the 1830s, but two decades later the ideas he wrestled with in this fragment started from quite a different viewpoint, one that believes in ‘God’s purpose.’” White claims that Lincoln’s note suggests he may have admitted what he could not say in public: that “the end of the war seemed nowhere in sight” and that God might “give the victory to the Confederacy.” White traces Lincoln’s personal familiarity with the ministers who may have influenced his view that God controls human history, and White maps the content similarity between the *Meditation on the Divine Will* and the Second Inaugural address.

In the Epilogue White tells about his Lincolnian outreach to high school students across the country, reporting their surprise at the “one or two hours” that Lincoln may have spent writing a fragment/note. White also says he has begun to find value in jotting down ideas as they occur to him, but he does not offer ideas about further research or discussion of Lincoln’s fragments/notes, including the need for further study of their relationship to Lincoln’s published compositions. The role of Lincoln’s fragments/notes in helping him develop positions and arguments for use in his speeches and other writings has particular significance for his rhetorical development that enabled him to compose the

Cooper Union address in February 1860. It is widely believed that speech helped to convince the Republican Party to nominate Lincoln for the presidency.

Also, a note on the book's construction, thanks to the research-informed technical writing of my editor-wife, Patricia L. "Pat" Hartman: With moderate reading use (not roughly handled like a textbook), the front right and left endsheets split apart at the hinge, and the entire text block came loose from the spine of the hardback cover. This same separation has occurred between some later pages. The copy of the book reviewed here, purchased by the reviewer for \$28.00, is falling apart because of glue failure.

Using Amazon.com's rating scale of 1 to 5, this reviewer assigns *Lincoln in Private* a rating of 4 on its design, purpose, and content, and a rating of 1 on its construction, thus an average of 2.5 (rounded to 3).

For information about this reviewer's book on how writers have analyzed and interpreted Lincoln's published speeches and other writings: [https://www.amazon.com/Inventing-Lincoln-Approaches-His-Rhetoric/dp/1540745643/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?dchild=1&keywords=inventing+lincoln&qid=1625158588&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.com/Inventing-Lincoln-Approaches-His-Rhetoric/dp/1540745643/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=inventing+lincoln&qid=1625158588&sr=8-1).