Lincoln and the Natural Environment
James Tackach

“Agrarian, industrialist, inventor—Abraham Lincoln was all of these as well as a politician and lawyer. The beauty of Tackach’s very original book is how he connects Lincoln to his environment in a meaningful way. He signed the bill for the transcontinental railroad and supported internal improvements for his state and the nation. The author makes us see Lincoln in a different and very progressive way.”
—Frank J. Williams, president of the Ulysses S. Grant Association and founding chair of the Lincoln Forum

Tracing Lincoln’s place in the natural world from the farm to Reconstruction

In this groundbreaking environmental biography of Abraham Lincoln, James Tackach maps Lincoln’s lifelong relationship with the natural world from his birth and boyhood on Midwestern farms through his political career and presidency dealing with the effects of the Industrial Revolution and the Civil War.

As a member of the Whig Party Lincoln endorsed the Industrial Revolution, which transformed the nation’s economy and its physical, social, and cultural landscapes, and he advocated for the creation of railroads, canals, roads, and bridges to facilitate growth and the distribution of products. Surveying the destruction of the environment in the mid-nineteenth century, Tackach outlines how some American writers, the first voices for protection and conservation, began to call attention to the results of deforestation and the overhunting of animals during Lincoln’s lifetime.

As commander in chief during the Civil War, Lincoln approved a strategy that included significant infrastructure and environmental damage. Tackach argues that midway through his presidency, Lincoln seemed to sense that postwar Reconstruction would have to be spiritual, political, economic, and environmental to heal the nation’s wounds. He signed the Morrill Act, creating the land-grant colleges, and the environmentally progressive Yosemite Grant Act, which preserved thousands of acres of forest in California.

The first scholar to thoroughly investigate Lincoln’s lifelong relationship with the natural environment, Tackach paints Lincoln’s personal and professional life against the backdrop of nineteenth-century American environmental history, issues, and writers, providing insights into contemporary environmental concerns.

James Tackach is a professor of English at Roger Williams University and the president of the Lincoln Group of Boston. He is the author of Lincoln’s Moral Vision: The Second Inaugural Address and numerous articles on Abraham Lincoln.

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Introduction

1. I Was Raised to Farm Work
   Traces Lincoln’s childhood and young adulthood on farms in the Midwest; his desire to escape a life of farming, which required arduous physical labor and made him vulnerable to environmental forces; his departure from the farming life; and the beginning of his career as an attorney and politician.

2. Internal Improvements
   Charts the beginnings of Lincoln’s political life. He joined the Whig Party, whose signature political issue was the need for “internal improvements”—the creation of railroads, roads, bridges, and canals—to facilitate the shipping of products created by the nation’s new industrial economy. This economy, and the infrastructure needed to enhance it, had serious environmental consequences, which Lincoln and the Whig Party did not address.

3. My Childhood-Home I See Again
   Despite Lincoln’s attempt to escape the harsh natural environment of his youth, the elements of the natural world remained with Lincoln throughout his lifetime. He consistently used metaphors and examples from the natural world in his speeches and writings. During his presidency, he enjoyed spending time at Soldiers’ Home, a presidential retreat in a wooded area outside urban Washington. He enjoyed reading nature poetry and travel narratives about the nation’s unsettled regions.

4. This Mighty Scourge of War
   Details the environmental damage caused by the Civil War. Lincoln had hoped to resolve the political differences between North and South that emerged in the wake of his election through negotiation. When war broke out, he hoped for a quick and decisive or limited war. The Civil War, however, became a total war, which cost seven hundred thousand lives and seriously damaged the environment.

5. The Fruitful Source of Advantage to All Our People
   Traces the environmental measures that Lincoln enacted during the final two years of his presidency. He enhanced the Department of Agriculture; signed the Morrill Act, creating the land grant colleges; and signed the unprecedented Yosemite Grant Act, which preserved land from development in Yosemite Valley, California.

Epilogue

Examines Lincoln’s environmental legacy, including the future developments of his advocacy for internal improvements and his environmental programs.

Acknowledgments

Notes

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