

Danielle Fernandez  
TAH Paper #3  
Book Review: *Age of Lincoln*, by Orville Vernon Burton  
September 15, 2010

*The Age of Lincoln*, by Orville Vernon Burton is an engaging and readable synthesis of the events and ideas that shaped 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Burton's work is clear, cogent and is remarkably comprehensive; he begins his story in the antebellum era, focusing on the religious, economic and political changes that generated the secession crisis and follows the war through its conclusion, connecting its outcomes to the creation of a variety of new problems for the nation to solve in the postwar years and into the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the heart of Burton's analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century continuum is the concept of liberty. For Burton, what it is, how it is defined, and to whom it applies, perhaps more than any other idea, shapes the events, ideas and realities of the complex "Age of Lincoln". This central idea helps to bind the work together and create connections; in fact, Burton's narrative is especially effective because rather than depicting history piecemeal and in isolation, he skillfully presents the individual events, personalities and ideas of a complex century as connected and closely dependent on one another, thus creating a history that leaves the reader with a deeper understanding of the cause and effect relationships that shaped the era.

*The Age of Lincoln* begins in the antebellum period, when Americans, Burton explains, had vision of millennialism; that is, they held the belief, expressed in the book of *Revelation*, that Christ will establish a one-thousand year reign of the saints on earth before the Last Judgment. More broadly defined, 19<sup>th</sup> century American millennialists expect a time of supernatural peace and abundance here on earth (Merriam-Webster *Encyclopedia of World Religions*, 1999) and thus sought to fashion a perfect, godly society. As Burton argued, "millennialism permeated

antebellum political debate, undergirded the presumption of Manifest Destiny, and buttressed the understanding of honor." Rather than uniting the nation towards a common vision, however, the religious spirit of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tended to deepen existing divisions. "Extremes eroded any middle ground," Burton maintains, "as powerful constituencies rallied to intransigent positions." For example, Burton points out that while the religious groups that formed out of the Second Great Awakening, such as the Shakers and the New Light Baptists, exalted individual freedom and thus condemned the practice of slavery, elite planters in the South believed that such notions were misguided and fallacious, even going so far as to institute their own religious schools, so that preachers could learn the "proper" way to think about theology and slavery (33). Thus a paradox existed; Americans during the antebellum period did not share a common view of the particulars of religious values but were nevertheless fervent believers in their own brand of religion as they saw it. Such vehemence in both North and South left little room for compromise when conflicts came.

Thus, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American nation was poised for rupture, with the controversy primarily focused on the question of slavery. Burton places the complex character of Abraham Lincoln at the center of this stage, distinguishing him, especially in his early political career, as ironically distinctly "southern" in nature. Citing Lincoln's southern roots in Virginia and Kentucky, his storytelling and patterns of speaking, his understanding of and respect for southern honor (which at one point even brought him almost to a duel) and the opinion of several of his contemporaries, Burton argues that "for all his American representativeness, Lincoln lived as a southern man, a southern husband, a southern farmer. (109) Early in his career, like many Southerners of the day, Lincoln rejected social equality among races, readily admitting that he was "in favor of the race to which I belong having the

superior position”. Lincoln too, was never pro-abolition, stating that “the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends to increase rather than abate its evils”, and during his presidential candidacy he claimed no intention to eradicate slavery where it existed, remarking that the U.S. Constitution gave “no lawful right to do so.”(116) What Burton makes clear, however is that Lincoln was always strongly antislavery, and while social equality for African Americans may not have been his end goal, political equality was. “Lincoln loathed the artificial bonds that society and government placed on an individual’s ability to work hard, accumulate property, and rise upward” contends Burton, and “came to insist upon a new understanding of liberty: equality of opportunity in the race of life.”(111-112) It was this position that made Lincoln, for all his innate southernness, such a threat to the southern faction, who due to the precarious nature of slavery’s existence in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century believed his election would result in the eradication of the world and society they held to dear. Lincoln, for his part, attempted to maintain a middle ground, writing to a North Carolina senator in 1860, “You think slavery is right and ought to be extended; we think it wrong and ought to be restricted. For this, neither has any occasion to be angry with the other.” (105) By this point, however, issue of slavery had become so enflamed that avoiding anger was all but impossible. For many in the South, Lincoln’s election was the equivalent of a declaration of war, and precipitated the secession of eleven southern states, making civil war a certain outcome.

Focusing on the Civil War itself, Burton underscores his thesis of the paradoxical nature of the American identity, when he indicated that ironically, young men on both sides of the conflict rushed to sign up to fight for the same ideal: liberty. Of course the conception of liberty was different depending on which side one fought. For southern soldiers, liberty meant the freedom to pursue their accustomed way of life, while for northern soldiers liberty meant the

preservation of the very institution that guaranteed liberty; the union. Additionally, to further emphasize the parallel yet contradictory nature of religious belief in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Burton presents evidence that both sides fervently believed God to be on their side. He writes, “Indeed, soldiers on both sides were overwhelmingly Protestant and prayerful and often invoked millennial aspirations of helping to bring about God’s kingdom on Earth.”(139) In this way, Burton shows the continuum of the millennial theme running through the Civil War itself.

Overall, Burton’s presentation of the Civil War is sobering and thought-provoking. He indicates that at the outset neither side had any indication of its ultimate destructiveness. Military theorists of the time expected the war would be short and decisive. “This was a romantic age”, Burton points out, “that believed that the fate of a nation could hang on a single battle”, and just as Europe had hung in the balance at Waterloo, so to would the fate of the American nation be decided succinctly and decisively.(145) Contrary to these initial predictions, however, the Civil War dragged on for four long years, exacting a crushing toll on human life, six hundred thousand soldiers and many civilians, as well as untold human suffering on both sides. Burton also points out the financial cost, more than \$6.5 billion. Here, he makes the particularly poignant point that this staggering sum would have been more than enough to cover the cost of purchasing from all the slave owners all the four million slaves, which is what Lincoln had advocated all along. There would even be enough left over to give each African American family 40 acres, a mule, and some cash.(235) Such an analysis highlights the fruitlessness of the Civil War, and causes one to question the senselessness of war in general.

Burton’s work concludes with an assessment of Reconstruction and beyond, weaving his thematic treads of millennialism and conceptions of liberty all the way through to the Populist movement of the 1890’s. For Burton, in post-Civil War America there existed a new definition

of liberty, one afforded by the Constitution in the form of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments, a liberty that was imagined by Lincoln to apply to all men, regardless of race. There were however, significant limits to this liberty, which in many cases existed in definition only, and Burton suggests the new economic system created by the waging of the Civil War actually redefined liberty in such a way as to restrict the rights of many Americans and to distort and corrupt Lincoln's vision.

To raise the money needed to fight the war, the Republican government was forced to increase the government's size and increase existing as well as create new taxes. "Before 1861 the federal government was a remarkably small, simple organization, claims Burton, "but the war changed all that." Congress began to tax almost "everything but the air", and the trickle down effect of these higher taxes affected the working poor, lowering real wages by about one-fifth. To keep up with inflation, workers frequently went on strike, only to have their liberties suppressed by the government and federal soldiers. As the century wore on, as a result of the new economic structure created by the Civil War, asserts Burton, the growth of government, industry and corporations continued, and many urban workingmen noticed that defeating slavery had not brought them greater freedom, but had only fostered a new industrial aristocracy that, according to one labor newspaper, "has the same control over us as the aristocracy of England had during the time of the Revolution."(335) Thus, as the nineteenth century was concluding, the egalitarian vision of American liberty that Abraham Lincoln had championed was becoming less and less of a reality for many American people.

Burton ends his story of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fittingly, with an examination of the Populist movement, which he sees as bringing the nation full circle to the millennial movement of a half-century ago that did so much to shape the Age of Lincoln. The Populists were, according to

Burton, “the last of Lincoln’s people”, concerned with equality of opportunity and millennial perfection. (353) Whereas in Lincoln’s times these concerns centered around issues of racial equality, in the age of Populism the concerns were more of class equality; Populists believed that the subjugation of the rights of the poor to the rich was inimical to American freedom and needed to be changed. Thus, for Burton, the 19<sup>th</sup> century ended in much the same way as it began, in a search for an expanded version of liberty for American citizens. For Burton, what defined and galvanized this century was the meaning and expansion of freedom, which is the very essence of American identity.

I immensely enjoyed reading and analyzing Burton’s work, and would highly recommend it to anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the immense importance of the Civil War in the larger context of American liberty and identity. While the book is scholarly and painstakingly researched, it is at the same time highly readable and accessible, and could effectively be used in a high school classroom as a supplement to the text. In addition, the book’s companion website, [www.ageoflincoln.com](http://www.ageoflincoln.com), provides access not only to the author’s extensive notes but also to primary sources, images, graphs and tables that serve to enhance both the reader’s experience as well as to provide resources for classroom use.

### **Bibliography**

Burton, Orville Vernon. *The Age of Lincoln*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007.

Merriam-Webster *Encyclopedia of World Religions*, 1999  
<http://www.bu.edu/mille/people/rlpages/millennialism-mw-encyl.html>