

Before Macbeth

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Robert Bray *READING WITH LINCOLN* 261pp. Southern Illinois University Press. \$29.95.

978 0 8093 2995 3 Alexander Nemerov *ACTING IN THE NIGHT* "Macbeth" and the places of the Civil War 299pp. University of California Press. £27.95 (US \$39.95).

978 0 520 25186 1 Americans in recent years have displayed a keen interest in their presidents' literary habits. Throughout his term in office, President George W. Bush, though married to a school librarian, often appeared wary of the written word. Accordingly, many of his constituents were stunned when, as he prepared to vacate the White Office, his top political strategist and righthand man, Karl Rove, revealed that the President had read "hundreds of books" over the preceding eight years. Rove's boss favoured histories and biographies, it turned out. But the President also sometimes dabbled in the work of Camus, a revelation that surely brought his critics up short. To that point, many observers most associated Bush the reader with somewhat lighter fare: a didactic picture book, *The Pet Goat*, which, on September 11, 2001, he continued to read to schoolchildren for seven minutes after hearing word that a second airliner had just exploded into the World Trade Center.

As for President Obama, Americans have spent more time obsessing over what he has written - or over what he purportedly has not written - than over what he has read. Specifically, a cottage industry has emerged to peddle the notion that the President, when a younger man fuelled by burning ambitions, did not write his first memoir, *Dreams from My Father*. Waves of outraged debunkers have taken to the television airwaves and to the internet, using methods typically associated with close studies of the Trilateral Commission's ties to the Rothschilds, trying to demonstrate that Bill Ayers, now an education reformer but once upon a time a member of the radical Weather Underground organization, penned all or most of Obama's book. Leaving aside the oddball character of this theory, the activists devoted to throwing back the curtain on the Obama-Ayers Praxis of Evil are unwittingly suggesting something deeper: that a leader's literary predilections reveal a great deal about the man himself. In this view, Ayers, either just an acquaintance, or maybe a friend, or perhaps actually a terrorist cellmate of Obama's, produced the document that somehow provides a window into the President's world-view, if not his corrupted soul. That Obama put his name to Ayers's work, then, discloses not just the President's inherent dishonesty, nor even his approval of the contents of *Dreams from My Father* - including mild indictments of institutionalized racism in the United States, episodes of recreational drug use, and, perhaps most threatening of all, scenes of Obama family sojourns in such deeply un-American places as Indonesia and Hawaii - but also his ratification of Ayers's extreme and longsince-discarded perspectives.

President Obama, for his part, has been eager to refocus the public's eye on what he reads rather than writes. Recognizing the American people's fascination with the books on his night table, Obama has ridden this cultural current while channelling it towards another: the nation's enduring fascination with the era of the Civil War and the man who presided over it. Time and again emphasizing his love of books about Abraham Lincoln, Obama has tried to recast himself not as a dangerous foreigner, a fifth columnist with a funny name and a birth certificate shrouded in mystery, but as quintessentially American. He hopes to echo the country's most beloved leader; Obama, too, is

politically rooted in Illinois, a great orator, and a self-made man helming a divided nation during wartime.

But what of President Lincoln himself? What if we want to go to the source, to understand Lincoln by understanding the books he read? Robert Bray is on hand with answers. Bray's *Reading with Lincoln* is close kin to Timothy Ryback's recent *Hitler's Private Library*; it provides a bibliographic portrait of a historical figure. Bray is never so crude as to suggest that Lincoln was nothing more than the sum of his reading materials. Instead, he argues that the sixteenth President took from his books a gift for politics as performance, "that is, he used his reading to help him speak and write with greater authority". And, Bray continues, "this verbal authority allowed him to reach the American people and lead them through the national crisis of the Civil War".

Bray's is a monumental work of historical reconstruction; he pieces together a jigsaw of titles to assemble something like the complete library of Lincoln's life. From childhood, when he worked his way through school primers, Aesop's Fables, and the occasional joke book, through his coming of age, when he engaged with Thomas Paine and other freethinkers, to his adult years, when he relied on Blackstone for the law and the white supremacist George Fitzhugh for insight into the Southern way of life, Lincoln, Bray suggests, turned to books as a way of understanding the world around him and, perhaps more important, for literary allusions and analogies that allowed him to make that world discernible to his varied audiences.

Bray's argument is powerful and persuasive at times. There is no doubt that Lincoln relied on the Bible in many of his greatest speeches, invoking, for instance, the precarious fate of divided houses, or that he turned to humour to disarm his opponents and win favour with constituents. But when Bray extends himself beyond providing brief glimpses of the books that Lincoln read and tries also to suggest some sense of the meaning that the President, either as a young or a mature man, might have taken from the words contained therein, *Reading with Lincoln* strains and creaks with effort before petering out, a fascinating conceit without much in the way of explanatory heft. In fairness, Bray is remarkably learned and writes well. He is also able to skip lightly from classical studies to political rhetoric to Romantic poetry and back. And yet, as a cultural historian, positing clear links between text and context, he is continually hamstrung by a lack of useful source material. Lincoln did not annotate his books, unfortunately; he left no clues about how he felt about what he read. Bray, consequently, must lard *Reading with Lincoln* with hedging qualifiers - "it is quite possible", "we may with some confidence venture", "it may not be amiss" - and sometimes even rank speculation, as when he suggests that early exposure to schoolbooks with a subtle anti-slavery bent might have influenced the President as he pondered emancipation late in his life.

Bray deserves recognition for acknowledging the limits of his evidence, but all of the uncertainty and guesswork yields an analytically neutered work. By its closing passages, *Reading with Lincoln* feels like a series of prefatory essays portending the appended back matter in which Bray finally cuts to the chase: offering the full catalogue of titles that Lincoln read during his abbreviated lifetime. For most readers, Bray's work will amount to little more than an exercise in well-intentioned antiquarianism: sometimes charming, often a bit musty, and, in the end, not very revealing.

Given the exhaustive nature of Bray's work, it is surprising how little time he spends with the literary masterpiece most closely associated with Lincoln: *Macbeth*. In 1863, writing to a Shakespearean actor who had recently sent him a work of criticism, Lincoln famously remarked, "I think nothing equals *Macbeth*". Alexander Nemerov uses this quotation as one jumping off point for his ambitious, eclectic and offbeat *Acting in the Night*: "*Macbeth*" and the places of the Civil War.

Nemerov explains straightaway that *Acting in the Night* is not a standard scholarly monograph.

Readers should take careful note: "This book grew out of my wish to study a single night's performance of *Macbeth* from sometime in the mid-nineteenth century in some American city. My plan was to understand events of that day in that place by the light, or darkness, thrown by the play". "The idea", he continues, grew out of "Wallace Stevens's poem 'Anecdote of the Jar', with its famous account of the centrifugal power of aesthetic acts". Inspired by a poem to write a book about the long reach of a play, Nemerov settles on a performance of *Macbeth* that Lincoln attended: a benefit for the US Sanitary Commission staged on October 17, 1863 in Washington, DC.

Nemerov is at his best when he focuses on the quotidian, the moment-to-moment events that, when experienced by a diverse dramatis personae introduced throughout his text, formed the backdrop to one day during the Civil War. His treatment of Lincoln, for example, focuses on a decision the President grappled with in the hours before he attended *Macbeth*: whether to pardon David Wright, a Southerner convicted of killing a Union soldier who had led a detachment of African American troops through Norfolk, Virginia the previous summer. Nemerov takes readers deep inside the Wright case, drawing parallels between his crime and the text of *Macbeth*. From there, he considers the relationship between Lincoln's choice and cultural artefacts as far-flung as monumental trees, a plaster cast of the President's face, the use of light in visual art, and many others. If at times these connections can be dizzying, especially when there appears to be no ligature binding them together other than Nemerov's whims, the overall effect is nevertheless edifying. By turning readers away from the war's front lines and focusing their gaze on the many ways the conflict turned an entire society upside down, Nemerov suggests that aesthetic acts had causal weight, that they sometimes acted as historical agents.

But he is not always so convincing. Like Bray, Nemerov sometimes finds himself pleading a case without the necessary evidence.

His chapter on acoustic shadows is almost painfully convoluted, suggesting connections - especially between the staged violence of *Macbeth* and a bloody Union victory won at Bristoe Station, Virginia, three days earlier - that are evident only to Nemerov. "But the play on that night", he asserts, "taking place in a city abuzz with news of Bristoe Station ... would have been obliged to contain these murmurs, to frame and hold them within the reassuring spectacle of a unified production whose characters spoke words tried and true." Maybe. But just as likely, maybe not. Without knowing anything concrete about the actors' or the audience members' perception of the relationship between the play and the ongoing war, Nemerov's argument rings hollow.

And there's the rub. Bray's and Nemerov's books suggest that our desire to understand ever more about Lincoln may finally be banging up against the limits of what is knowable. In part this is so because although presidents live relentlessly public lives, the act of reading, or of consuming culture more broadly, remains largely private. Which is to say, yes, President Obama's decision to publicize his interest in Lincolniana is an overtly political act, and Lincoln himself turned to biblical allusions to neutralize charges that he despised Christianity or Christ. Still, what these men made of the books they read is almost entirely hidden. Given that, reading too much into what people take away from a book or a play runs the risk of obscuring more than it reveals.