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The Literary Lincoln

Discovering what Abraham Lincoln read offers important clues about who he was, according to a new book by English Professor Robert Bray.

Story by Rachel Hatch & Tim Obermiller

The pastoral image of Abraham Lincoln as a boy reading late into the night by the dying embers of a log-cabin fireplace has become an iconic piece of presidential folklore.

In his new book, Robert Bray casts that romantic image in a more illuminating light. Bray, the R. Forrest Colwell Professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan, examines the books Lincoln read and how they reflect his thoughts and influences in *Reading with Lincoln* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2010).

“I like to think of it as looking over Lincoln’s shoulder while he’s reading,” says Bray, who tied the materials Lincoln read to his speeches, writings and political policies. “It’s an attempt to isolate what he really did read, as opposed to what people say he read. The more difficult aspect of this is to try and find out how the content of his readings influenced his professional and political lives.”

Bray delved deeply into the world of Lincoln to research the book, reviewing everything from letters the 16th president composed for illiterate friends to books, pamphlets, poetry, plays and essays to which he was exposed. He spent a year compiling and reviewing materials in places such as the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the Huntington Library in Pasadena, Calif.

“I tried to find the editions that would have been available to him,” says Bray. “Not all editions are the same. You find some very interesting things in older editions that are not reflected in contemporary ones.”



Lincoln reading to his son Tad.

“I’m a literary person more than a historian,” Bray adds, “and of course communication and language were the most powerful instruments that Lincoln and the other politicians of his day possessed.”

Lincoln scholars are praising Bray’s literary approach in his book. According to historian William Lee Miller, author of two acclaimed books on Lincoln, “Robert Bray has not only discovered every book and text and poem and treatise and humorous sketch and Shakespeare play that Lincoln read; he has also read them himself, and he takes the reader inside those readings — and therefore inside Lincoln’s mind — in this excellent book.”

To create the volume, Bray first compiled a bibliography of the books people claimed Lincoln read. He assigned books a grade from A to D, with an A representing books that Lincoln himself mentioned, and D representing books it was highly improbable Lincoln read. “Some sources were indisputable, like those of Lincoln’s law partner William Herndon,” says Bray.



“Lincoln moved from a boy who would read what he could get his hands on, which wasn’t much, to an adult who was a very selective reader,” says Bray, shown above. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

“They are part of me.”

In the last chapter of his book, Bray poignantly describes how, just days before his assassination, Lincoln was headed back to Washington by steamboat after visits to Petersburg and Richmond, which fell in the last stages of the war. For several hours, Lincoln entertained his companions with “what was likely his final reading of Shakespeare,” Bray writes.

While Lincoln could never get enough Shakespeare, he chose to reference the Bible in his public writings, “which I think was an astute choice,” Bray says. “He could count on his audience connecting with him.”

Most surprising to Bray was that Lincoln did not read a vast array of books. “Lincoln did not read widely, as he did deeply. I think his self-education enabled him to ignore what he was not interested in,” Bray says, adding that the president favored books on history or political economy later in life.

“Lincoln moved from a boy who would read what he could get his hands on, which wasn’t much, to an adult who was a very selective reader. He seemed to know intuitively whether a book would be useful to him, and then, as Herndon put it, he would ‘assimilate it into his being’ with deep study.” Lincoln himself admitted he had not read all of Shakespeare’s plays, “but the ones he knew, he knew backward and forward. He even said of several plays,

“Shakespeare, by contrast, was much less well known, though to initiates like Lincoln his works comprised a kind of secular Bible, full of unimpeachable, universal, humanistic wisdom to match the divine — but not for those demanding certainty,” Bray writes in *Reading with Lincoln*.

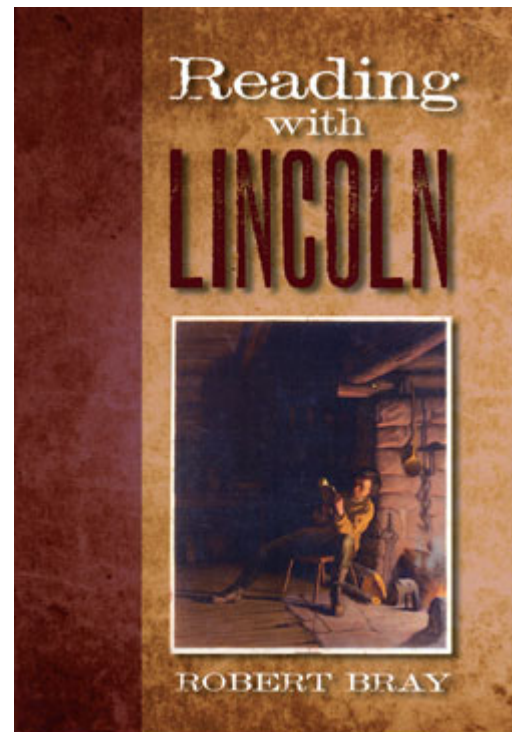
“In fact Lincoln used these two great sources very differently: the Bible he employed for his public utterances, while Shakespeare typically served as the final existential statement of how he, as a private person, saw the human condition. The Bible for the country: Shakespeare for himself.”

When Lincoln did publicly reference the Bible, he often did so with didactic rather than overtly religious intent, Bray notes. In his celebrated 1858 speech upon accepting the Republican nomination for U.S. senator of Illinois, Lincoln evoked the Gospel of Mark by announcing: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” In doing so, Bray writes, “Lincoln undertook his oratorical task *exactly* as a minister before a congregation. ... The point here is that both Lincoln and his audience would readily have known the verse — if not the rather obscure parable in which it occurs — and that the figuration was both logical and prophetic: to remain whole, the Union would have to ‘become *all* one thing, or *all* the other.’”

Because Lincoln had an almost photographic memory, he was easily able to pull references “from the Bible and Shakespeare to the rude dialect humor of mid-19th-century literary comedians: whenever Lincoln was moved by literature or needed its language for work, he committed his reading to memory and kept it ready for his own use, public or personal,” Bray writes in his book’s preface.

“My label for the public Lincoln is ‘political artist.’ That is, he used his reading to help him speak and write with greater authority; and this verbal authority allowed him to reach the American people and to lead them through the national crisis of the Civil War.”

Reading with Lincoln is just Bray’s latest exploration into Lincoln and his world. In his 2005 book *Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher*, he examined the life of Cartwright, who helped found Illinois Wesleyan, and his relationship with Lincoln during a contentious U.S. House race in 1846. Bray also helped commemorate the bicentennial of Lincoln’s birthday in 2009 by co-writing a play with Nancy Steele Brokaw ’71 about the future president’s time in Bloomington. His many other scholarly interests include literature of the Haitian Revolution and the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.



Bray’s new book (above) has won praise from several Lincoln scholars, including noted author Michael Burlingame, who called it a “subtle, insightful study.”

In the preface of his newest book, Bray explains how his appreciation for the literary side of Lincoln stems, in part, from his decades-long career as a liberal arts professor. “What I have long tried to accomplish with my students — better reading, better thinking, and better writing — he managed by himself, without formal schooling, and became one of the supreme communicators and leaders in United States history.”

Bray says he wrote his latest book with the intent that it be enjoyed by both fellow academics and the general public. He hopes that *Reading with Lincoln* will help humanize the 16th president in readers’ minds. “I think that the only way to keep him alive as an instrument of freedom is to accept him as a person, a human being.”

At the same time, Bray celebrates positive aspects of Lincoln’s iconic hold on the public imagination, as represented in the famed Washington, D.C., memorial built in his honor. “I marvel at what he is still able to project through that magnificent sculpture, and the idea behind it: that he led not as a tyrant leads, but for all men to be free.”