Becoming Lincoln
By William W. Freehling
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BY DAVID S. REYNOLDS

Another account of Abraham Lincoln? Aren't there enough of them? Actually, no. Among the 16,000-plus books on Lincoln, there have been many superb ones, some of them long (e.g., the 10-volume 1890 opus by John Nicolay and John Hay); others short, such as James McPherson's lean biography of 2009; and others midsize, like David Herbert Donald's single-volume classic, titled simply "Lincoln" (1995). There is always room for another, of course. But any new work faces the question: What is being added to the Lincoln literature?

In the case of William W. Freehling's "Becoming Lincoln," the answer is notable clarity and concision and an especially shrewd account of Lincoln's political formation. Mr. Freehling's chronicle traces Lincoln's life up to the Civil War, followed by an epilogue that summarizes his major decisions during the war years. To read along in such a chronicle is like watching an expert carver give shape to something otherwise formless or burdened by a profusion of material. Excess is cut away, leaving a clean narrative that is bracing in its directness.

The facts of Lincoln's pre-Civil War years—his rise from a Kentucky log cabin to the presidency, his years as an Illinois politician and lawyer, and his experiences as a husband and father—come newly alive, not least thanks to Mr. Freehling's accessible, sometimes tart, style. Take his description of Lincoln's clumsiness at social functions. "Demonstrations of his physical prowess, famed in the open air, were unwelcome in refined drawing rooms . . ." Mr. Freehling writes. "He could not anchor his feet, swing his arms, and rotate his hips, as when axing or wrestling. He had to clump, clump, clump as he spun around the dance floor, with his female partner's toes at his mercy."

Mr. Freehling puts great emphasis on the idea that Abraham defined himself against his illiterate, demanding father, Thomas Lincoln. With adroit brevity, he writes that "the cavern between father and son during their long, frigid, undeclared war" led to Abraham's becoming "a visible tower of non-Tom Lincolns: Nonhunter, nonfisherman, nonlitigating, nonfarmer, noncarpenter, nonmanual laborer, non-husband of an uneducated, penniless bride, non-demanding parent, non-Democrat, non-church member, and especially non-nondwanderer."

This description does tell us a lot about Lincoln. But does it accurately represent his feelings about his father? Although Thomas Lincoln, like other frontier fathers, was a taskmaster and a disciplinarian, Lincoln told one of his closest friends, the lawyer Leonard Swett, that he had "a joyous, happy boyhood" in which there was "nothing sad, nor pinched, and nothing of want." Mr. Freehling cites neither this glowing recollection nor the assessments of people close to Thomas, who described him as "exceedingly good humored," "unpretentious" and "kind," someone who "never appeared to be offended"—all words that could be applied to Lincoln himself. Although evidence suggests a growing distance between the father and the son, the jury is still out on how deep the hostility between them was.

Whatever simplifications there may be in Mr. Freehling's condensed version of Lincoln's personal life, they are more than compensated for by his illuminating portrait of Lincoln's political development. Given Mr. Freehling's illustrious record as a historian—his books include a two-volume history of the Civil War, South and a prize-winning study of the South Carolina nullification crisis of the 1830s—it is hardly surprising that his most original contributions to the Lincoln story come from his accounts of its historical context.

Mr. Freehling untangles the complexities of Lincoln's four terms in the Illinois General Assembly from 1834 to 1842, when Lincoln was devoted to promoting government funding for canals and railroads in an effort to boost the state's economy. His interest in such projects went too far and helped push the state into financial default. As Mr. Freehling notes, Lincoln learned from this early mistake and waited for the right moment to indulge his yen for activist government. That moment came during his presidency, when he oversaw the creation of a national banking system, the nation's first income tax, and federal spending on land-grant colleges and Western homesteads.

Lincoln learned from blunders on the slavery question as well, as Mr. Freehling shows. Although he hated slavery, in his own words, "as much as any abolitionist," he came to restrain his rhetoric in order to reach as many voters as possible. Only rarely did he let his guard slip, Mr. Freehling says, when he displayed "his secret wish for more racial equality than a moderate dared espouse." Unlike many other antislavery advocates, Lincoln avoided emphasizing controversial topics, like the suffering of slaves, the cruelty of slaveholders and the need for blacks to be awarded citizenship rights. Had he harped on such matters in his moderate region of central Illinois, Mr. Freehling notes, he would have been unelectable.

Lincoln rose to leadership in the Republican Party by staying close to the political center. He retreated from any proposal to interfere with slavery where it already existed, insisting only on preventing its spread into the Western territories or to Cuba and Latin America, places that proslavery leaders hoped to take over.

Mr. Freehling describes in instructive detail Lincoln's efforts to navigate between radicals and conservatives in Illinois's political conventions. The lessons learned from such efforts helped guide the formation of the Republican Party in 1854, when a way was sought to avoid the bitter internal cleavage within the Whig Party as well as the extremes of radical abolitionism and complacency on slavery.

Mr. Freehling also presents a succinct record of the outbreak of the Civil War, when Lincoln jockeyed with Confederate leaders over U.S. forts in the South. Lincoln's canny manipulation of the tense standoff over Fort Sumter in Charleston, S.C., in the spring of 1861—he pointedly avoided mention of war, announcing that he was resupplying the fort—led to the Confederacy opening fire on the fort, showing itself to be the aggressor.

How did Lincoln respond to the bitter social discord of his day? He avoided insults, name-calling or self-promotion. While pushing for justice, he positioned himself as a pragmatic centrist. Deep social division, Lincoln said, can lead to either despotism or anarchy. It is fortunate that at the most divisive time in American history, the nation was held together by a president who valued the Union above all else—above party, above interest groups, above himself.