



Lincoln Lore

Number 1803

Bulletin of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor.
Ruth E. Cook, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the
Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.
Copyright © 1989 Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

May, 1989

STEPHEN W. SEARS' *GEORGE B. McCLELLAN: THE YOUNG NAPOLEON*

by Sarah McNair Vosmeier

In the opening paragraph of Stephen W. Sears' *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, Sears describes McClellan's admirers proudly dubbing him "the Young Napoleon" while his detractors mockingly referred to him as "the Young McNapoleon." Perhaps, Sears should have used the latter nickname for his subtitle: the McClellan he describes is not likely to inspire much admiration. In fact, he is cowardly, egotistical, deceitful (or deluded, at best), and rude. Readers may find little to admire in George McClellan, but they should admire Sears' story of his life, which is a well written and well researched portrait of McClellan, focusing mainly on his generalship.

McClellan's apparent cowardice stemmed in part from his strongly-held but mistaken belief that the Confederates were more numerous and better trained than his own men. Sears shows, however, that McClellan frequently refused to take advantage of opportunities which might have allowed him to succeed even if outnumbered. For example, in the summer of 1862 McClellan had planned to attack Richmond from the southeast, but he missed a string of opportunities during the Seven Days' Battle (June 25-July 1) and allowed himself to be pushed back toward the Chesapeake. Commenting on this peninsular campaign, Sears judges that whatever the merits of the strategy that had carried



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. "Battle of Antietam," hand colored lithograph by Max Rosenthal. McClellan is the central figure here (on horseback and pointing to his right). Sears judges that he lost "the courage to command," suffered from a "near paralysis of will," and was "simply irrational" during this battle.

[McClellan] to the gates of Richmond, he failed—and failed repeatedly—the test of battle. Crisis on the battlefield left him incapable of initiative and virtually deranged, desperately attempting to shift the responsibility and consequences of his failure. George McClellan was beaten in the battle for Richmond by an army that existed only in his mind's eye, its overwhelming numbers real enough to him so that he was able, in a final act of evasion, to make a plausible case...that nothing of what had happened was actually his fault (pp. 225-226).

Similarly, when Sears analyzes the battle of Antietam (September 17, 1862), in which McClellan forced Robert E. Lee's army to retreat but missed an opportunity to beat the Confederates decisively, Sears judges that

the only explanation for [McClellan's] failing on so many counts is that once again, in common with his failings in the Seven Days' battles, he lost his inner composure and with it the courage to command under the press of combat. . . . [McClellan suffered from] a near paralysis of will. The phantom army McClellan attributed to his opponent perhaps accounted for his overall obsessive caution, but many of his battlefied decisions were, for a trained soldier, simply irrational (p. 323).

This sort of paralysis certainly detracts from a "young Napoleon" image, but McClellan's egoism seems to have covered up for some of his battlefield failings. His dramatic flamboyance seems to have made him enormously popular with his soldiers, and his focusing their attention on his personality seems to have improved their morale.

On the other hand, his egoism also meant that he believed he was more competent than either his superiors or his subordinates. Throughout his career McClellan had clashed with his superiors, but he was especially impatient with civilian leaders—like Lincoln—who "meddled" in the war. Stationed in Washington early in the war, McClellan resented Lincoln's unexpected arrivals to discuss strategy with him; he once hid himself at Edwin M. Stanton's house to "dodge all enemies in shape of 'browsing' Presdt etc." On another occasion, he tolerantly listened to some of the president's military suggestions, pretending to be "much edified," but after he was sure Lincoln was out of ear shot he turned to one of his friends and said derisively, "Isn't he a rare bird?" (p. 132).

Because McClellan could not believe that any of his subordinates were capable of doing anything as well as he could, he wasted time with routine administrative duties rather than planning or leading successful battles. Also, his belief in his own indispensability contributed to his apparent cowardice, as is illustrated by this letter to his wife, written just before the Seven Days' Battle.

I feel that the final salvation of the country demands the utmost prudence on my part & that I must not run the slightest risk of disaster, for if anything happened to this army our cause would be lost. I feel too that I must not unnecessarily risk my life—for the fate of my army depends upon me & they all know it (pp. 200-201).

McClellan may have been deluded about his own value as a commander, and he was certainly deluded about the actual strength of the Confederate forces, but Sears shows how he sometimes purposely deceived the administration more than himself. For example, in late July 1862 as he was preparing for another attack on Richmond, McClellan explained to the administration that he could not possibly attack without more reinforcements, insisting that he was facing a force of 200,000 Confederates. As he described the Confederates to his wife, however, he figured they were a much smaller number, only about 150,000 to 170,000 (p. 240).

In addition to being cowardly, egotistical, and deceitful, Sears' "Young Napoleon" is also rude. Perhaps the most famous example of his rudeness is the story John Hay told about McClellan's "unparalleled insolence" to the president on November 13, 1861. Lincoln, Hay, and William H. Seward had gone to McClellan's house that evening to discuss the military situation. Finding McClellan to be out, they decided to wait. An hour later they saw him enter the house and go upstairs, ignoring an orderly's announcement that the president was waiting for him. After another thirty minutes, they sent the orderly upstairs to remind McClellan that they were still waiting; when the orderly returned, they were informed that McClellan had gone to bed (pp. 132-133).

Hay thought Lincoln took no offense, but he must have been a little surprised, at least, by this kind of personal insult. Perhaps Lincoln would have been less surprised by the insults McClellan and his Democratic friends paid him behind his back. Partisanship was a way of life in the nineteenth century, and as a Democrat, McClellan was not likely to support Lincoln's administration wholeheartedly, no matter how polite he might be to Lincoln personally. Some of McClellan's supporters have tried to downplay his publicized criticisms of the administration, attributing them to political inexperience. Sears, however, insists that McClellan "was a partisan Democrat in knowing and deliberate opposition to the Republican administration that employed him" (p. xii).

Damning as this portrait of "the Young Napoleon" is, Sears' careful research makes it convincing. Sears pays especially close attention to primary sources on McClellan. (He claims in his introduction that "an understanding of the man is best found in original, primary sources, and this biography is drawn entirely from such sources" [p. xii].) Sears demonstrates his command of the primary material with details on how McClellan changed his mind about issues as he rewrote the original drafts of some of his letters and public statements. Sears also paid close attention to other primary documents. In one case, he found the copy of McClellan's memoirs which had been owned by Jacob Cox, an observer to an incident McClellan describes in the book. With Cox's copy of the book in hand, Sears could report on Cox's marginal notes on the page describing the event he witnessed—"Certainly not true" (p. 262).

Sears does an excellent job with the primary sources, but his book lacks any historiographical context. Knowing how interpretations of McClellan have



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 2. "Maj. Gen. Geo. B. McClellan on the Battlefield of Antietam," engraving by A.B. Walter. This print was based on a painting by Christian Schussele, which Sears has used for his dust jacket.

changed over time (and why we need a new biography of him now) would have been helpful. Joseph L. Harsh's "On the McClellan-Go-Round" makes a good supplement to Sears book for those who are interested in McClellan historiography. (The article can be found in *Civil War History*, vol. 19, no. 2, [June 1973], pp. 101-118 or in *Battles Lost and Won*, edited by John T. Hubbell, [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975], pp. 55-73). Harsh explains that (at the time of his writing) McClellan biographies had generally been of poor quality and that the most influential treatments of McClellan had appeared in general histories of the Civil War. Harsh begins with the earliest biographies of McClellan, and he points out that the professional Civil War-era soldiers did not criticize McClellan's cautiousness nearly as much as their civilian contemporaries did and later historians have. Also, Harsh notes, because twentieth century historians have seen the Civil War as the first "total war," they are impatient with McClellan's nineteenth-century style of fighting, preferring Ulysses S. Grant's more modern techniques. McClellan's slowness and his scrupulous respect for Southern property and civilians seem archaic to modern scholars, but for McClellan and many of his colleagues, they were entirely appropriate. Ideally, McClellan hoped the North could raise and train an army that was so enormous that the South would give up without fighting. If both Northerners and Southerners had been careful not to allow passions to become inflamed, the chastened (but not humiliated) South would be able to rejoin the Union without any painful period of Reconstruction. Understanding how interpretations of McClellan have changed over time might help us avoid simplistic "Monday morning quarterback"-style criticisms.

Sears is scrupulously fair in his treatment of McClellan: although he emphasizes the more unsavory aspects of McClellan's character, he does not neglect to describe how his men adored him. Still, the structure of Sears' book controls the conclusions his readers are likely to draw about McClellan. Because Sears' analysis is mostly of McClellan as a general, he judges him on his successes and failures in that capacity rather than as a politician or businessman or husband and father. (This is due, in part, to the sources Sears used. McClellan wrote a letter to his wife, Mary Ellen [Marcy] McClellan, nearly every day when they were separated. Thus there is much more material on his life as a general than on other periods of his life when he was not separated from her.) Sears' two chapters on McClellan as a politician and presidential candidate are adequate but shorter and weaker than his treatment of his military campaigns. For example, Sears notes that McClellan was determined not to campaign actively for the presidency, but he does not explain that to have done so would have seemed improperly power hungry to nineteenth century voters. Similarly, Sears' treat-

ment of McClellan's relationship with his wife is only cursory. In comparison, Bruce Catton, in *Mister Lincoln's Army*, uses primary documents to suggest that Mary Ellen McClellan was more influential in McClellan's life than Sears describes her to be.

Sears' careful research is showcased by good writing. (There are a few passages which may confuse general readers, especially battle scenes where it is not always clear who is fighting on which side or how various units relate to each other, but these passages are not central to the book.) Fortunately for Sears, his subject lends itself to good writing: McClellan wrote extensive and amazingly candid letters, which are eminently quotable. Sears was also fortunate in having Lincoln's wit and masterful prose to draw on, as well as the diaries and letters of Lincoln observers. Thus Sears, describing McClellan's stubborn refusal to move, his great attachment to his men, and his cowardice, could tell the story of how

the president, standing on a hilltop with his friend Ozias M. Hatch and observing the vast encampment of the army, abruptly asked Hatch whether he knew what they were looking at. It was the Army of the Potomac, of course, Hatch replied. "So it is called, but that is a mistake,"

Lincoln said; "it is only McClellan's bodyguard," (p. 331). Sears could also quote Lincoln's exasperated telegram to McClellan on October 24, 1862. Ever since the battle of Antietam in September, Lincoln had been trying to get McClellan to move against the Confederates, but McClellan complained that he could not move until his army was properly supplied and rested. The Confederate cavalry had made a successful and embarrassing raid against McClellan's army, and yet he still would not move, because, he explained to Lincoln, the Union cavalry was exhausted. Lincoln responded with "Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigue anything?" (p. 334).

Similarly, Sears could rely on Lincoln for perceptive evaluations of McClellan's character, as when Lincoln told Senator Orville Browning that McClellan "had the capacity to make arrangements properly for a great conflict" but that when the moment actually came for battle, "he became nervous and oppressed with the responsibility and hesitated to meet the crisis" (p. 169).

In conclusion, Sears' *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* is a valuable biography, especially for those who are interested in knowing more about McClellan as a general. It is well written and well grounded in McClellan's own writings. Although "the Young Napoleon" would not have appreciated this portrayal of him as cowardly and deceitful, he would have to admit that Sears constructed that portrait out of McClellan's own words.

From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

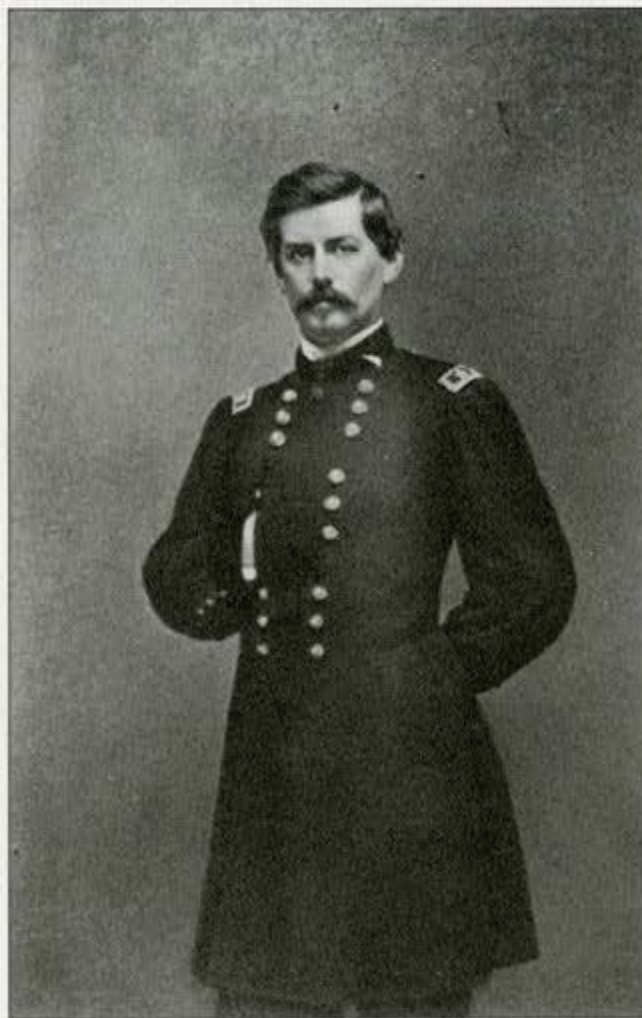


FIGURE 3. Carte-de-viste photo of McClellan (c. 1861) owned by the Lincolns and part of the "Lincoln Family Album."

CUMULATIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY 1987, 1988, 1989

by Ruth E. Cook

Selections approved by a Bibliography Committee consisting of the following members: Dr. Kenneth A. Bernard, 50 Chatham Road, Harwich Center, Mass. 02645; Arnold Gates, 168 Weyford Terrace, Garden City, N.Y. 11530; James T. Hickey, Box 55, Elkhart, Illinois 62634; Ralph G. Newman, 175 E. Delaware Place, 5112, Chicago, Illinois 60611; Lloyd Ostendorf, 225 Lookout Drive, Dayton, Ohio 45419; Hon. Fred Schuengel, 200 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20515; Dr. Wayne C. Temple, 1121 S. 4th Street Court, Springfield, Illinois 62703; Frank J. Williams, 300 Switch Road, Hope Valley, R.I. 02832. New items available for consideration may be sent to the above persons or the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum.

1987

FREEDMAN, RUSSELL

1987-35

Russell Freedman/Lincoln/A Photobiography/Illustrated With Photographs And Prints/Clarion Books/Ticknor & Fields: A Houghton Mifflin Company/New York/ [Copyright 1987 by Russell Freedman]

Book, cloth and hardboard, 9 1/4" x 7 1/2", fr., 150 (14) pp., illus., price, \$15.95.

METZGER, LARRY 1987-36

Larry Metzger / Abraham / Lincoln / (Device) / Franklin Watts / New York / London / Toronto / Sydney/A First Book/1987/

Book, cloth, 8 1/2" x 7 1/2", 87 (30) pp., illus., price, \$10.50. Juvenile literature.

SMILEY, H. D. 1987-37

Abraham Lincoln / and the / Washington Territory / By / H. D. Smiley/(Device)/[Copyright 1987 H.D. Smiley]

Pamphlet, paper, 9 1/2" x 7", fr., 38 (6) pp., illus., price, \$4.95. Requests should be sent to Ye Galleon Press, Box 287, Fairfield, WA 99012.

1988

LINCOLN LEGACY 1988-24

(Device) The Lincoln Legacy/A Quarterly Publication of The Lincoln Group of Illinois/Volume 2, Number 4 November, 1988/(Cover title)/

Folder, paper, 11" x 8 1/2", 6 (1) pp., illus. Requests should be sent to The Lincoln Legacy, Illinois Benedictine College, 5700 College Rd., Lisle, IL 60532-0900.

LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY 1988-25

Lincoln/Herald/(Device)/Summer 1988/Vol. 90, No. 2/[Harrogate, Tenn.]

Pamphlet, paper, 10 1/2" x 7 1/2", 37-80 pp., illus., price per issue, \$5.00

LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY 1988-26

Same as above, except this is Vol. 90, No. 3, Fall 1988.

LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY 1988-27

Same as above, except this is Vol. 90, No. 4, Winter 1988.

MILER, SCOTT D. AND JOSEPH E. SUPPIGER, EDITED BY 1988-28

The Seven Faces of Lincoln/Edited by/Scott D. Miller/Lincoln Memorial University/and/Joseph E. Suppiger/

Limestone College/Lincoln Memorial University/Harrogate, Tennessee 37752/[Copyright 1988, by The Lincoln Herald]

Book, paper, 8 1/2" x 5 1/2", vii p., 103 pp., illus., price, \$10.00. Requests should be sent to Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, TN 37752.

STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

1988-29

The State Journal-Register/The Lincoln Home/(Picture of the Springfield home)/Quotation and photograph) / (Cover title)/

Newspaper, 23" x 13 1/2", 28A (1) pp., illus.

TEMPLE, WAYNE C.

1988-30

Dr. Anson G. Henry/Personal Physician to the Lincolns/By Wayne C. Temple, Ph.D. / Springfield, Illinois/(Picture)/Bulletin of the 44th Annual Meeting/of/The Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin/held at Milwaukee, Wisconsin/April 12, 1987/Historical Bulletin No. 43/1988/

Pamphlet, paper, 10" x 7 1/2", 20 pp., illus., price, \$3.00. Copy autographed by the author. Requests should be sent to the Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin, Attn.: Steven Rogstad, 1920 Lathrop Ave., #201, Racine, WI 53405.

TIDWELL, WILLIAM A.

1988-31

Come Retribution/The Confederate Secret Service/and The Assassination of Lincoln/William A. Tidwell/with James O. Hall and David Winfred Gaddy / University Press of Mississippi/Jackson and London/(Double title page)/[Copyright 1988 by the University Press of Mississippi]

Book, cloth, 9 1/2" x 6 1/2", xv p., 510 (7) pp., illus., price, \$38.50.

TIDWELL, WILLIAM A.

1988-31v

Same as the above, except in paperback, price, \$17.95.

TREFOUSSE, HANS L.

1988-32

The Great/Emancipator/Hans L. Trefousse/Lincoln Memorial Shrine/Redland, California/February 12, 1988/

Pamphlet, paper, 9 1/2" x 5 1/2", 19 pp. Requests should be sent to the Lincoln Memorial Shrine, 125 W. Vine St., Redlands, CA 92373.

1989

CURRENT, RICHARD N.

1989-1

Lincoln, The Constitution,/and Presidential Leadership/(Portrait)/Bulletin of the 45th Annual Meeting/of/The Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin/held at Racine, Wisconsin/April 10, 1988/Historical Bulletin No. 44/1989/(Cover title)/

Pamphlet, paper, 9 1/2" x 7 1/2", 20 pp., illus., price, \$3.00. Requests should be sent to the Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin, Attn: Steven Rogstad, 1920 Lathrop Ave., #201, Racine, WI 53405.

