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## Bray 'Looks Over Lincoln's Shoulder' With New Book

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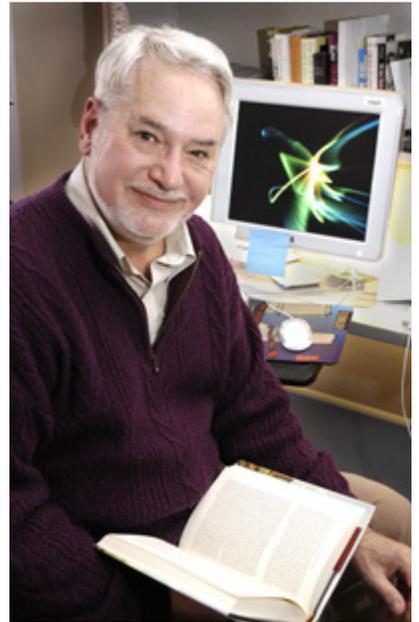
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## Bray 'Looks Over Lincoln's Shoulder' With New Book

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Historians often recount President Abraham Lincoln's avid love of learning. The image of a young Lincoln reading late into the night by the dying embers of the fireplace has become an iconic part of Lincoln lore.

Illinois Wesleyan University faculty member Robert Bray is shedding new light on that firelight image of Lincoln. Bray, who is the R. Forrest Colwell Professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan, examines the books Lincoln read, and how those books reflect his thoughts and influences in *Reading with Lincoln* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2010).



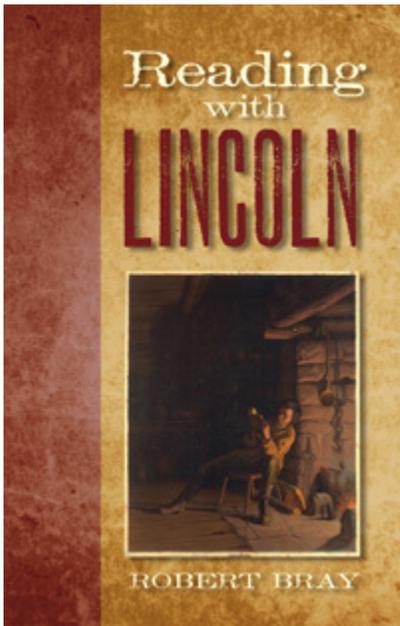
R. Forrest Colwell Professor of English  
Robert Bray

"I like to think of it as looking over Lincoln's shoulder while he's reading," said Bray, who tied the materials Lincoln read to his speeches, writing and political policies.

Bray delved into the world of Lincoln to research the book, reviewing everything from letters he composed for illiterate friends, to books, pamphlets, poetry, plays and essays to which Lincoln was exposed. He spent a year compiling and reviewing materials in places such as the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and Huntington Library in Pasadena, Calif. "I tried to find the editions that would have been available to him," said Bray. "Not all editions are the same. You find some very interesting things in older editions that are not reflected in contemporary ones."

Lincoln scholars are praising Bray's book. According to William Lee Miller, author of *President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman*, "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 book, Bray first compiled a bibliography of the books people claimed Lincoln read. A professor at Illinois Wesleyan for 30 years, 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," said Bray.



Most surprising to Bray was that Lincoln did not read a vast array of books. “Lincoln did not read widely, as he did deeply,” he said. “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 William Shakespeare’s plays, “but the ones he knew, he knew backwards and forwards. He even said of several plays, ‘They are part of me.’”

Bray examines how Lincoln’s instincts led him to quote Shakespeare to friends, but the Bible to his constituency of predominantly Christians. “You can see the connections to the King James version of the Bible in his famous ‘House Divided’ speech,” said Bray, who studied the edition of the Bible available to Lincoln at the time. According to Bray, Lincoln

had an almost photographic memory, and was able to pull Biblical references into debates and speeches, though he rarely read the book at home. “This is one of the ways Lincoln was a political artists,’ said Bray, “knowing when these books could best serve him.”

When writing the book, Bray intended the book to be enjoyed by both the general public and Lincoln scholars. “I believe the deeper our understanding of Lincoln, the deeper our admiration of perhaps one of the greatest men, and arguable the greatest President our country has ever known,” said Bray.

A noted scholar, Bray is also the author of the 2005 book, *Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher* (University of Illinois Press), which explored the dynamic relationship between Illinois Wesleyan founder Cartwright and Lincoln, who were political rivals for the House of Representative in 1846. He also helped celebrate the 200th birthday of Lincoln in 2009 by co-writing a play about the future President’s time on Bloomington titled *Lincoln’s in Town!* He is also the author of *Rediscoveries* (University of Illinois Press, 1982), and editor-in-chief of the 1985 *A Reader’s Guide to Illinois Literature* (Illinois State Library).

A graduate of Pittsburg State University in Kansas in 1966, Bray earned his master’s degree and doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1967 and 1971, respectively. He has been a member of the Illinois Wesleyan faculty since 1970, and was honored with the University’s teaching excellence award in 1990. Bray has been active in state organizations promoting education and chaired the Secretary of State’s Read Illinois program. He has been honored with many fellowships and grants, including those from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Illinois Humanities Council.

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