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Bray's Lincoln studies reveal the literary background of a legend



Bloomingtonians paid their respects as Lincoln's funeral train stopped on its way to Springfield in 1865.

Robert Bray sums up Abraham Lincoln's legacy in one word — "Obama."

"Lincoln and his Congress started the road to civil rights, which culminated in the election last November of Barack Obama," says Bray, the R. Forrest Colwell Professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan.

Bray has studied Lincoln for years. His 2005 book, *Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher*, explored the dynamic relationship between Illinois

Wesleyan founder Cartwright and Lincoln, who were political rivals for the House of Representatives in 1846. He is now completing his work *Reading with Lincoln*, analyzing what kinds of books he enjoyed and how these tastes changed throughout his life.

There is truth to the tale of the boy-Lincoln who read voraciously by firelight, Bray says, but the young man who read indiscriminately grew more choosy as the years passed.

"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 could never get enough Shakespeare, but chose to use the Bible in his public writings, which I think was an astute choice," he says. "He could count on his audience connecting with him."

Lincoln carefully combined eloquence with accessibility in his speeches, something that Bray sought to replicate in his version of The Lost Speech that he wrote for the play Lincoln's in Town! Lincoln gave the speech — "lost" because no transcript of it exists — in 1856 in downtown Bloomington to announce his candidacy for President. Lincoln lore says that the speech was so powerful it transfixed the audience in a way that made it impossible for anyone to take notes, though many scholars actually believe that the campaign suppressed its record because it was too divisive an indictment of slavery.

During his studies, Bray realized that Lincoln and his impact could be understood not only by reading his speeches but by remembering who were his listeners. “The last speech that Lincoln gave had two important people in the audience — one was John Wilkes Booth and the other was Frederick Douglass,” says Bray. “Booth could be said to embody all that Lincoln fought against, while Douglass was the inspiration of all he hoped.” Booth would assassinate Lincoln soon after the speech, while Douglass would continue his work for equality for decades.

Evaluating Lincoln’s legacy has become a national pastime during this bicentennial year of his birth. For Bray, it’s essential that such assessments take both Lincoln’s triumphs and his failings into account.

“It won’t do to make a demigod of him,” says Bray. “He was a man, a greater man, but a man. I think the only way to keep him alive as an instrument of freedom is to accept him as a person, a human being.”