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Panel: Eckley's Book Important Contribution to Lincoln Scholarship

March 27, 2013

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – A panel of Abraham Lincoln scholars praised *Lincoln's Forgotten Friend, Leonard Swett* (Southern Illinois University, 2012), the final book written by the late Illinois Wesleyan University President Robert S. Eckley, at a panel discussion on Tuesday. The event drew more than 200 people to the University's Hansen Student Center, including Mrs. Nell Eckley, her children and grandchildren who traveled to Bloomington for this event and Wednesday's inaugural Eckley Lecture in Economics.

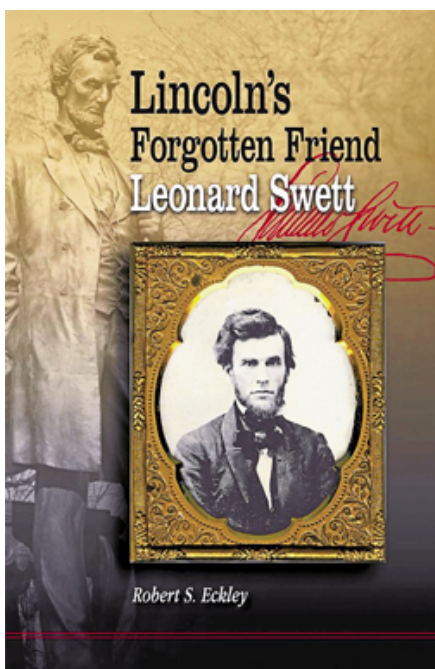
Tuesday's discussion featured panelists Guy Fraker, author of *Lincoln's Ladder to the Presidency: The Eighth Judicial Circuit*; William G. Shepherd, attorney and member of the Board of Directors of the Abraham Lincoln Association; and Illinois Wesleyan's R. Forrest Colwell Professor of American Literature Robert Bray, who is the author of *Reading with Lincoln*. Robert Lenz, president of the Abraham Lincoln Association, moderated the event, which featured Lincoln impersonator George Buss.



Professor Robert Bray discusses Abraham Lincoln's friend Leonard Swett at the Hansen Student Center.

Eckley's book is the first biography of Swett, a contemporary of Lincoln's and fellow attorney on the eighth judicial district in Illinois. The book chronicles Swett's early life, his friendship with Lincoln, and Swett's significant contributions to Lincoln's two nominations and elections for the presidency.

Swett had previously been reduced to the shadows of history, likely because he never achieved any significant appointment in Lincoln's administrations or through political election, Eckley writes. Yet no other confidant "did more for Lincoln and expected less in terms of asking for favors than Swett," said Fraker.



In *Lincoln's Forgotten Friend*, Eckley recounts Swett and Lincoln's travels together throughout the spring and fall tours on the Eighth Judicial Circuit, spending weeks together in primitive accommodations and often sharing meals. Despite Swett being 16 years younger, the two men shared an enduring friendship, Eckley writes. Bray said Tuesday he believed their relationship was one of mutual understanding of the mental depth of the other.

"Swett had a mental affinity in which Lincoln understood he was up against someone in his legal career who had the same mental acuity and deep methodical thinking habits," said Bray. He recounted a time when Swett bested Lincoln in the murder trial of Isaac Wyant in March 1857. Lincoln had been handpicked by the state's attorney to lead the prosecution in a case in which Wyant shot Anson Rusk in cold blood in front of several witnesses, Eckley writes. Swett would attempt to defend a man in what appeared to be an open-and-shut case.

Swett spent a year studying the human mind and mental illness, reviewing the available medical literature in a daring strategy to claim Wyant's mind was unbalanced at the time of the shooting and he could not be held morally or criminally

responsible for what he did, Bray said. The insanity defense was still experimental in the 1850s, Eckley writes, and Lincoln the prosecutor was unaware of Swett's study of the human mind and mental illness before the trial.

"In the opening day of the trial, Swett called a total of 18 witnesses before resting his case," said Bray, noting these witnesses included numerous doctors, Wyant family members and even an Indiana minister who was well acquainted with Wyant. "I think Lincoln was flabbergasted. He recovered fairly well, but he had nothing to meet this kind of artillery in its forcefulness, its caliber and its amount."

Lincoln lost the case when Isaac Wyant was found not guilty of murder by reason of insanity, resulting in Swett becoming one of the early attorneys to use the insanity defense successfully in the West, Eckley writes.

Swett's law career suffered because of his devotion and service to Lincoln, said Fraker, noting that Swett made six trips to Washington during Lincoln's presidency. "For months at a time Swett abandoned his law practice to help Lincoln," said Fraker, noting Lincoln sent Swett to make one of the most crucial hires of his cabinet with William Seward as Secretary of State.

"The most delicate situation in the Cabinet was Simon Cameron, the sleazy governor of Pennsylvania who was promised a Cabinet post in return for getting Pennsylvania's votes for Lincoln," said Fraker. "Who does Lincoln send to deal with Cameron? He sends Swett."

Fraker noted the trusted Swett and his son were on the platform when Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, and that Swett was instrumental in assuring Lincoln's nomination for a second term in 1864.

"There was no reciprocity coming back from Lincoln for Swett's loyalty," said Fraker. "You have to ask yourself, why would Swett do this? Can you imagine being an intimate of the greatest president this nation ever had? To watch this man operate and to see how he was taking the country through the war? Swett had the front row seat and admired Lincoln so much, I think that alone was enough."

Eckley, a noted Lincoln scholar, served as president of the Abraham Lincoln Association from 2002-2004 and received the organization's Logan Hay Medal in 2007. Shepherd, a current member of the organization's board of directors, said an important contribution of Eckley's book is the collection of Swett's own writings in the appendix.

Lincoln's Forgotten Friend is a "lasting record of Lincoln's formerly forgotten friend Leonard Swett," said Shepherd. "It's also a lasting and important contribution to the body of scholarship regarding Mr. Lincoln."

Eckley completed the book before his death in April of 2012, and the book was published last October. The longest serving president of Illinois Wesleyan, President Emeritus Eckley retired in 1986. After earning a doctorate in economics from Harvard University, Eckley served as Caterpillar Tractor Co.'s first professional economist and oversaw economic research, pricing, production scheduling and product control before becoming president of Illinois Wesleyan in 1968.

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