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Burton's latest book a textured, insightful account of Civil War era

BILL WEIGAND



Distinguished historian Orville Vernon Burton, a 1969 Furman graduate, has scored again with his latest book.

*The Age of Lincoln*, published by Hill and Wang, is a re-examination of the Civil War era and has been praised for its fresh approach and insights into Lincoln's character and influence. The book earned Burton, professor of history and sociology at the University of Illinois, the 2007 Heartland Prize for Non-Fiction from the Chicago Tribune. The prize is given annually to a novel and a non-fiction work that reinforce and perpetuate the values of heartland America.

Burton is author or editor of 14 books, including *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. He was named the 1999 U.S. Research and Doctoral University Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). In 2004 he received the American Historical Association's Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching Prize.

At the close of this academic year Burton will leave Illinois, where he also directs the Center for Computing in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, to become the Burroughs Distinguished Professor of Southern History and Culture at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, S.C.

Lloyd Benson, Walter Kenneth Mattison Professor of History at Furman, provides this review of *The Age of Lincoln*.

The Civil War transformed America in ways its initiators never anticipated. In their contests over the meaning of the nation, Americans revolutionized the definitions of both freedom and order. In his majestic new book *The Age of Lincoln*, Vernon Burton provides a rich portrayal of the era's promise and tragedy, recasting the familiar narrative of antebellum sectional conflict, war-making and political reconstruction into a deeper meditation on American democracy, power, faith and values.

Burton tells this history at a human scale. Beginning *The Age of Lincoln* with the Age of Jackson, he outlines the broader tensions and connections of mid-19th century society across cultural, regional and racial lines. He follows with a lively discussion of the era's key reform movements, the challenges of

industrial development and the political crises of the 1850s.

Burton's accounts of the secession crisis and the conduct of military operations outline the full complexity of the competing imperatives the participants faced, and he compellingly describes how the home front, the political sphere and the soldiers' front-line experiences impacted each other. His concluding chapters offer a rich reinterpretation of how the ambiguities and opportunities of community-level reconstruction intersected with emerging corporate capital.

Burton emphasizes Lincoln as a central figure of the age. This is not a biography of Lincoln, per se, but Burton vividly illustrates how the president's career and death embodied the tragedy-infused metamorphoses of the larger society.

Like Lincoln himself, the nation was sprawling and energetic but sometimes uncoordinated in movement. Like Lincoln himself, the nation brooded, suffered, celebrated and evolved. Like Lincoln himself, the nation proved willing to subordinate specific freedoms and to permit illiberal concentrations of power at the expense of individuals and communities, even while enabling very tangible improvements in American liberty. The book shows how Lincoln's vision of national redemption ("a new birth of freedom") suffused far beyond the presidency.

During his career Burton has pioneered the integration of grassroots community-level history with traditional narratives of high politics and military strategy. *Lincoln* deftly connects issues of social class, race relations, family dynamics and political culture to more surprising insights from agricultural history, labor history and the scholarship of regional distinctiveness.

Uniquely among Civil War histories the book incorporates religion into the core narrative, emphasizing the spiritual ordeal of Americans as they sought to regenerate the national promise. Burton illustrates what could have been possible, notably in such movements as the bi-racial, rural-urban and multi-class political alliance of the Readjusters of reconstruction Virginia, and provides a clear-eyed analysis of the people and movements that resisted or reversed such efforts. No region, class, party or section escapes his humane but critical gaze, and he finds his heroes in places both predictable and unpredictable.

That Burton shows the flaws and foibles of the more heroic characters while dignifying and humanizing the more unregenerate souls only adds to the richness of the account. His depiction of how some found transcendence while others dwelt in bitter vengeance makes *The Age of Lincoln* a truly innovative contribution to Civil War-era scholarship.