Confederate commander Robert E. Lee, however, completely understood and appreciated the value of having such commanders were responsible for doing so. Lincoln and his generals intelligence was enhanced by such new technologies as the intelligence even greater. In addition, the ability to gather this included the position of the enemy, the number of hostile troops, those commanders’ headquarters, all of which made the need for new tactics, for which they needed new types of information. These war technologically but also one in which armies had to develop Lincoln’s Spies: Their Secret War to Save a Nation

Newsweek and Time, and author of numerous books, including speaker, Douglas Waller, a veteran correspondent for both private detective agency and later became a spymaster for George which was Allen Pinkerton, a Scottish immigrant who founded a which dinner was served.

In telling his story, Mr. Waller focused on four spies, the first of which was Elizabeth Van Lew, a wealthy young woman from Richmond who was educated in Philadelphia and, being rabidly anti-slavery, used much of her wealth before the war to help slaves escape. Once the war began he worked with George Sharpe and developed a sophisticated ring of several dozen agents in Richmond, including operatives within the Confederate government.

The fourth and final spy was George Sharpe, an attorney who commanded a company of local militia when the war began and, although he had no previous experience in espionage, subsequently developed successful spy networks for generals Joseph Hooker, George Meade, and U.S. Grant. His most important achievement was using the newly created Bureau of Military Information as a clearing house of information from a variety of sources, which enabled him to provide the Union army with better intelligence.

The second spy was Lafayette Baker, a drifter who was involved in a variety of unscrupulous schemes before the war, but when the war began convinced head of the army Winfield Scott to take him on as an agent. He subsequently worked for Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, but tended to focus more on counter-espionage than intelligence gathering, and accordingly made a less substantial contribution than he might have.

The third operative was George Sharpe, an attorney who commanded a company of local militia when the war began and, although he had no previous experience in espionage, subsequently developed successful spy networks for generals Joseph Hooker, George Meade, and U.S. Grant. His most important achievement was using the newly created Bureau of Military Information as a clearing house of information from a variety of sources, which enabled him to provide the Union army with better intelligence.

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Brian Dirck, author of *The Black Heavens: Abraham Lincoln and Death*, has been chosen as the recipient of the Lincoln Group of New York’s 2019 Award of Achievement. The award, presented to the individual or organization that has done the most to encourage the study and appreciation of Abraham Lincoln during the year, has been conferred annually since 1988. Professor Dirck, who teaches history at Anderson University in Indiana, is also the author of numerous articles and several other books about our 16th president, including Lincoln and Davis: Imagining America, 1809-1865; Lincoln the Lawyer, Abraham Lincoln and White America; Lincoln and the Constitution; and Lincoln in Indiana.

The first in-depth analysis of Abraham Lincoln’s encounters with death, *The Black Heavens* begins with the familiar stories of the deaths of those closest to him—his mother, sister, Ann Rutledge, and sons Edward and William, placing them in the context of his overall experience, the prevalence and progression of disease during the 19th century, and contemporary conventions regarding death. Turning then to the almost inconceivable carnage of the Civil War, Professor Dirck extrapolates from Lincoln’s words and actions the evolution of his understanding of the meaning of death, in political, personal, and, most importantly, spiritual terms, particularly in light of his growing belief in God’s involvement in the affairs of men. As a result, as Gerald J. Prokopowicz, professor of history at East Carolina University and member of the advisory boards of the Lincoln Studies Center and the Lincoln Journal, has said, “Reading this book is like looking at a familiar Lincoln portrait hung at a new angle on a different wall, letting fresh sunbeams reveal more of what was always there.”

The award committee members for 2019 were Bob Kaplan, Tom Dames, and Steve Aronson. The award will be presented to Professor Dirck at our February 2020 dinner meeting, when he will speak on the subject of the book.

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A British Perspective on Abraham Lincoln, c. 1862

by Rob Kaplan

In 1820, under the Act to Provide the Congress of the United States and Punish the Crime of Piracy, slave-trading was made a capital offense in the United States. Between then and 1960, 14 individuals were charged with the crime. The vast majority of these weren’t even tried, much less convicted, and none were executed. So in 1862, when Nathaniel Gordon, captain of the Eric, was convicted as a slave trader, everyone assumed he would be spared the rope. Abraham Lincoln, however, took a different view. Although he was famous for pardoning soldiers during the Civil War, this was a crime Lincoln could not pardon, and Gordon was hanged on February 21, 1862.

This story is the subject of the 2006 book by Ron Soodalter titled *Hanging Captain Gordon*. As the author points out, one of the important aspects of the story is that it all took place while Lincoln was striving to keep the British government, which had not since banned the slave trade, from recognizing the Confederacy, a move which might have doomed his efforts to maintain the Union. After the hanging, Soodalter notes, “As Lincoln had anticipated, London had been following the case with interest. On Monday, May 8, the London Daily News published an article indicating British response to the execution.” And, as Soodalter rightly points out, “It is exceptional in its concise evaluation of the significance of the event, and of Lincoln’s role in it.”

“Our American telegram yesterday,” the newspaper reported, “contained the short and simple statement that ‘Captain Gordon has been executed for the murder of a British subject.’ A simple explanation, some who read this said to themselves, that was the Captain’s affair. Yet Captain Gordon’s execution was by no means an event of merely personal interest. On the contrary, throughout America, it was felt to be full of significance. It is an index of the quality of Mr. Lincoln’s government, of its strength of principle, and the consistency of its policy, and it marks the end of a system. Gordon was tried and convicted as the Captain of a slave and was sentenced to death. Under Pierce, Buchanan and Presidents of their stamp, his condemnation would not have caused his friends any serious alarm. It was well understood on all sides that there were legal forms, decretal, proper in a Christian and civilized nation; and solemn sentences passed on persons proved to have participated in the African slave trade were not at all objected to as long as they were not carried out. The present changed, however, when Mr. Lincoln was made President... Still when a slave captain was actually convicted and sentenced to death, it was very generally doubted whether the government would hold firm. Presidents who [were] quite prepared to condemn the African slave trade... receded from the thought of strangling a white man who had removed some black men from a state of barbarism to a Christian country. Mr. Lincoln, they said, although a free soiler, was not a fanatical abolitionist and would think twice before he sacrificed the life of a man of Anglo-Saxon blood to a sentiment in favor of the negro. These people, however, forgot the difference between principle and sentiment...”

“In this country, and the world over, there is a man who understands how cruel may be this indulgence of food sentiment at the expense of duty. Captain Gordon would have been better employed in deciding on the question of some impulsive negro-phile, instead of being at the disposal of the severe, deliberate, but inflexible tenant of the White House, a man who, amidst the severest trials has never swerved a hair’s breadth from the policy which he professed when he was a candidate for office. Those who, in consequence, said that he would not lose the precious opportunity to strike a blow at a system which costs hundreds of lives yearly... They said Gordon would certainly be hanged. They were right, and from the Bight of Benin to the Coast of Cuba the man-stealer will tremble.”

“The Soodalter concludes,” was the response that Lincoln had sought, and it paved the way for the Seward–Lyman agreement, known officially as the Treaty Between the United States and Great Britain for the Suppression of the Slave Trade. Afterward, there was no further thought of the Coercive being recognized by Great Britain, or any other country, and Lincoln was free to pursue the war without fear of outside interference.”

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4962 2 THE WIDE AWAKE FEBRUARY 2020

Brian Dirck Wins Award of Achievement for 2019

Paula Hopewell

After the auction, President Ellis-Graham introduced Ms. Hopewell, who presented this year’s Award of Achievement to Professor William W. Freeling, author of *Lincoln*. Singletary Professor of the Humanities Emeritus at the University of Kentucky, Freeling is also the author of the two-volume *Road to Disunion* and the Bancroft Award–winning *Prelude to Civil War*. The *Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1830*. After expressing his thanks for receiving the award, Professor Freeling proceeded to explain that during the week he was in New York, between giving talks and conducting research, he had focused more on the Civil War than on Lincoln. He had, however, always been personally interested in Lincoln. Having grown up near Lincoln Park in Chicago, he’d been fascinated by Augustus Saint-Gaudens’ famous statue, and had wondered why Lincoln’s face always appeared portrait hung at a new angle on a different wall, letting fresh sunbeams reveal more of what was always there.”

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February 4, 2019:

Our first meeting of the new year, celebrating Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, was held at a new venue—Villa Moscon in MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. After welcoming everyone, Acting President Paul Ellis-Graham provided a report on the annual Executive Committee’s meeting held earlier in the evening. Although not an IGNY election year, Mr. Ellis-Graham explained, due to the resignation of former president John Bodnar, it was necessary for the committee to make changes in the officers. The committee had accordingly re-elected Mr. Ellis-Graham as president, and Rob Kaplan, editor of “The Wide Awake Bulletin,” as vice president. In addition, as co-treasurers Rob Langford and Lorraine Figariello had expressed their wish to retire from their positions, Mr. Ellis-Graham asked any of the members who might be interested in becoming co-treasurer to contact him. Finally, since committee member Joe Carrera had also tendered his resignation, it was announced that he would be replaced by Paula Hopewell, chair of the Award of Achievement Committee. The president’s remarks were followed by dinner—a family-style meal consisting of a variety of particularly delicious Italian dishes—and our regular book raffle.
Much more recent, and also related to a plot in The Conspirator (2010). Directed by Robert Redford, the film stars Robin Wright as Mary Surratt, whose guilt, unlike that of Samuel Mudd in The Phantom of Shark Island, is presented as ambiguous. The story is seen through the eyes of Frederick Aiken, played by James McAvoy, the attorney who defended Surratt during the conspiracy trial, and is as much if not more about him than about his client. (In fact, the film focuses such an extent on Aiken and Surratt that the other conspirators are barely mentioned.) Aiken at first takes his client’s guilt for granted, but later apparently comes to believe that she might be innocent. Of course, despite the young attorney’s best efforts to have her acquitted, and pardoned after she is found guilty and condemned. Surratt is executed along with co-conspirators Lewis, Payne, George Atzerodt, and David Herold.

Two years later, shortly before the release of Spielberg’s Lincoln in 2012, there were two other films that treated the Great Emancipator with considerably less reverence than any of the earlier features. The better known of the two is Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter. Directed by Timur Bekmambetov and written by Seth Grahame-Smith from his best-selling book, it stars Benjamin Walker as Lincoln and, surprisingly, includes a number of real events in Lincoln’s life. It also, however, purports to tell the story of a vampire and then spend a good deal of the rest of his life hunting and killing vampires to avenge her. Fictional though it may be, it’s also rather imaginative, and if one can sufficiently suspend disbelief to get into the spirit of the movie, it can be quite enjoyable. Curiously, a reviewer pointed out that the release of this film there was a similar movie—a not-particularly-well-made television docudrama than a feature film.

The most recent feature specifically about Abraham Lincoln is Lincoln: Better Angels. Unlike any of the earlier movies, it’s a dreamlike film that focuses on Lincoln as a child growing up in Indiana between 1807 and 1820. Written and directed by A.J. Edwards and filmed in black-and-white, it stars Braydon Denney as young Abraham. Interestingly, although the film opens with Lincoln’s famous quote about his “angel mother” and glimpses of the columns of the Lincoln Memorial, there are no further direct references to who the boy or his family are. As a result, it could be seen more as a meditative look at childhood in the American wilderness of the early 19th century than as a biographical film. It is, however, as entertaining and potentially useful as a teaching aid, and perhaps even as a tool to introduce Lincoln to children.

As noted, these films and television series vary in dramatic quality and, as the missions of these movies may be to entertain, inform, and educate, their values are subjective. The next classic, that Lincoln was, as he put it, “one of the biggest losers in American history.” He failed in his first effort to be elected to the Illinois House of Representatives in 1832, and later that year saw the New Salem store he owned with William F. Berry fail. He was subsequently elected to the legislature in 1834, and re-elected in 1836 and 1838, but he lost his bid to be Speaker of the House later that year. He was subsequently re-elected to the legislature in 1840 and elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1846. However, he went on to lose two elections to the United States Senate—in 1855 and in 1858.

And yet, as Freeling pointed out, despite his failures, or perhaps because of them, Lincoln learned how to succeed. He did, translating, as expected, beginning with taking on all the debt from his business failure. And, second, by not only accepting but also actively seeking assistance from many others, including Bowling Greene, John Todd Stuart, Joshua Speed, and Norman Judd, all of whose help enabled him, ultimately, to become Abraham Lincoln.

April 22, 2019: President-Ellis Graham opened the meeting by welcoming everyone, including Executive Committee members in attendance and several first-time attendees, made some announcements, and then announced dinner would be at a single hour, from a monument to sectional reunion into a touchstone for racial reconciliation.” And since then, as he pointed out, it has served as a backdrop for numerous other historic events, most notably the March on Washington in 1963 and Martin Luther King, Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

November 4, 2019: Our last meeting of the year opened with President Paul Ellis Graham’s welcome, followed by introductions of the LNY officers and committee members in attendance, several first-time attendees, and Stan King, one of the foremost Lincoln photographers of the group. This being November, the next order of business was the publication of the Lincoln Memorial, discussing the successively later slower models he made for the statue, and his collaboration with the Piccirilli Brothers of the Bronx, New York, who, drawing on French’s models, carved the 21 marble blocks that make up the statue. Mr. Holzer also discussed how closely French worked with Henry Bacon, the Memorial’s architect, including French’s suggestion that the size of the statue be increased from the original 13 feet to 19 feet because it would have otherwise been dwarfed in the building. Mr. Holzer also noted that, ironically, when the Memorial’s dedication ceremony was held in 1922, African American attendees had to sit separately from whites.

In closing, Mr. Holzer related how, although the Memorial was initially seen as a symbol of reunification between the North and South after the Civil War, seventeen years after the dedication it took on a different meaning. On Easter Sunday in 1939, when African American attendants were barred from sitting on the monument’s steps, a monument to sectional reunion into a touchstone for racial reconciliation. And since then, as he pointed out, it has served as a backdrop for numerous other historic events, most notably the March on Washington in 1963 and Martin Luther King, Jr’s ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech. But he had been transfigured at last, in the course of a single hour, from a monument to sectional reunion into a touchstone for racial reconciliation.” And since then, as he pointed out, it has served as a backdrop for numerous other historic events, most notably the March on Washington in 1963 and Martin Luther King, Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

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The "Other" Lincoln Movies

by Rob Kaplan

The first motion picture ever made—Edward Muybridge’s 15-second film of a galloping horse—wasn’t created until 1878, thirteen years after Abraham Lincoln’s death. Even so, according to Mark S. Reinhardt in his Abraham Lincoln on Screen (Second Edition), with almost 300 dramas or documentaries about or including Lincoln through 2009, and numerous others since, our 16th president is the “most frequently portrayed American historical figure in the history of the film and television arts.” Most of these productions are short films or television shows, the vast majority of them featuring Lincoln but not specifically about him. These range from the sublime—The Birth of a Nation (1915), to the ridiculous—Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure (1989).

There have also, however, been several full-length feature films or dramatic television miniseries focusing on Lincoln, some of which have come to be considered classics. These include D.W. Griffith’s Abraham Lincoln (1918), with Walter Huston; John Ford’s Young Mr. Lincoln (1939), starring Henry Fonda; and John Cromwell’s Abe Lincoln in Illinois (1940), with Raymond Massey in the title role. More recently, between 1974 and 1976, NBC broadcast six-hour-long specials cumulatively titled Sandburg’s Lincoln, directed by George Schaefer with porcelain-and-wood Lincoln. Another NBC series, Gore Vidal’s Lincoln, directed by Lamont Johnson and starring Sam Waterston, aired in 1988. And, finally, there was Steven Spielberg’s multiple Academy Award- winning Lincoln (2012), starring Daniel Day-Lewis.

Some of these films were widely perceived, albeit to different extents, and are still generally well considered. History fans have, of course, pointed out inaccuracies in all of them, although much more so in the earlier films than in those of more recent vintage. There have also been, and will no doubt continue to be, arguments about whether the film is based on an original. These differences of opinion may be the result of a generation gap—older Lincoln devotees who first experienced Huston, Massey, or Fonda as Lincoln on late-night TV may continue to regard them as the definitive Lincolns, while younger fans may find Day-Lewis’ depiction of the 16th president is the “most frequently portrayed American historical figure in the history of the film and television arts.”

In the January 1936 issue of The American Historical Review, James G. Randall, perhaps the preeminent Lincoln historian of his day, published a paper titled “Has the Lincoln Theme Been Exhausted?” His answer to the question—not surprisingly—was that “a confident negative may be returned.” He went on to say that “What further products the historical guild will produce and what advances in Lincoln scholarship will appear fifty years hence...can only be imagined.”

It seems that no one, young or old, ever seems to tire of the story of Abraham Lincoln. In 2019, Lincoln-related books included a novel with the title Abe’s Youth: Shaping the Future President, and a biography with the title Lincoln’s Informer: Charles A. Dana and the Inside Story of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural. But it was the release of the film Lincoln’s Greatcoat: The Unlikely Odyssey of a Presidential Relic that turned the spotlight back onto the figure of Abraham Lincoln. The film, directed by Wayne C. Temple (University of Illinois Press, 304 pages, hardcover, $39.95) The first full-length biography of the journalist and editor who was a close friend of Abraham Lincoln’s and author of Writing in Lincoln’s Time.

In this year’s recipient of the LGNY Award of Achievement—an examination of Lincoln’s experiences with death, from both personal and political perspectives, and how his thinking about it evolved, particularly in light of his belief in God’s involvement in the affairs of men—

John George Nicolay: The Man in Lincoln’s Shadow by Allen Garden & Thomas J. Ebert (University of Tennessee Press, 360 pages, hardcover, $52.00) The life of Lincoln’s principal secretary and biographer, who devoted much of his life to crafting Lincoln’s image for posterity.

The Black Heavens: Abraham Lincoln and Death by Brian R. Dirck (Southern Illinois University Press, 240 pages, hardcover, $29.95) This year’s recipient of the LGNY Award of Achievement—a study of how Lincoln’s experiences with death, from both personal and political perspectives, and how his thinking about it evolved, particularly in light of his belief in God’s involvement in the affairs of men, are illustrated in the life of John George Nicolay: The Man in Lincoln’s Shadow by Allen Garden & Thomas J. Ebert (University of Tennessee Press, 360 pages, hardcover, $52.00).

Lincoln’s Life in the Legislature by Ron J. Keller (Southern Illinois University Press, 176 pages, hardcover, $24.95) A concise survey of Lincoln’s legislative activities between 1834 and 1842, during which, despite his relatively lackluster performance, he established himself as a candidate who was willing to enable him to excel in politics and ultimately define his legacy.

Lincoln Road Trip: The Back-Roads Guide to America’s Favorite President by Jane Simon Ammeson (Red Lightning Books, 232 pages, hardcover/paperback, $60.00/$15.00) A guide to well- trod stomping grounds that will enable any fan to visit the sites where Lincoln lived, worked, or visited in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, and even Michigan.

Lincoln, Seward, and US Foreign Relations in the Civil War Era by Joseph A. Fry (University Press of Kentucky, 256 pages, hardcover, $60.00) An overview of the foreign policy decisions that resulted from Lincoln’s partnership with his secretary of state and the legacy of those decisions.

Lincoln’s Greatest Tactic: The Unlikely Odyssey of a Presidential Resilience by Reignette G. Chilton (McFarland, 208 pages, paperback, $39.95) The story of an unlikely hero, the LGNY, who was made for Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, its disappearance after his death, and its reappearance more than a century later.

Lincoln’s Conundrum: The Life of Noah Brooks by Wayne C. Temple (University of Illinois Press, 304 pages, hardcover, $39.45) The first full-length biography of the journalist and editor who was a close friend of Abraham Lincoln’s and author of Writing in Lincoln’s Time.

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by Rob Kaplan

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Much more recent, and also related to a plot, is The Conspirator (2010). Directed by Robert Redford, the film stars Robin Wright as Mary Surratt, whose guilt, unlike that of Samuel Mudd in The Prisoner of Shark Island, is presented as ambiguous. The story is seen through the eyes of Frederick Aiken, played by James McAvoy, the attorney who defended Surratt during the conspiracy trial, and is as much if not more about him than about his client. (In fact, the film focuses on such an extent on Aiken and Surratt that the other conspirators are barely mentioned.) Aiken at first takes his client’s guilt for granted, but later apparently comes to believe that she may be innocent. Of course, despite the young attorney’s best efforts to have her acquitted, and pardoned after she is found guilty and condemned, Surratt is executed along with co-conspirators Lewis Payne, George Atzerodt, and David Herold.

Salvador Litvak calls “CineCollage,” which employs contemporary photographs instead of sets to provide the background for each scene. The film stars Tom Amandes as Lincoln and Lea Coco as his friend Ward Hill Lamon, who came with him from Illinois, and who serves as the narrator of the story, which is based on his written recollections. Covering the period from their first meeting through Lincoln’s presidency, and including a surprising number of correct details, it’s still a less-than-successful movie that ultimately feels more like a not-particularly-well-made television docudrama than a feature film.

The most recent feature specifically about Abraham Lincoln is 2013’s The Bent Angel. Unlike any of the earlier movies, it’s a dreamlike film that focuses on Lincoln as a child growing up in Indiana between 1807 and 1820. Written and directed by A.J. Edwards and filmed in black-and-white, it stars Brayan Denney as young Abraham. Interestingly, although the film opens with Lincoln’s famous quote about his “angel mother” and glimpses of the columns of the Lincoln Memorial, there are no further direct references to who the boy or his family are. As a result, it could be seen more as a meditative look at childhood in the American wilderness of the early 19th century than as a biographical film. It also, however, proceeds to see Lincoln killed by a vampire and then spend a good deal of the rest of his life hunting and killing vampires to avenge her. Fictional though it may be, it’s also rather imaginative, and if one can sufficiently suspend disbelief to get into the spirit of the movie, it can be quite enjoyable. Curiously, one reviewer put it, “...just too silly to be taken seriously and wasn’t references to who the boy or his family are. As a result, it could be seen more as a meditative look at childhood in the American wilderness of the early 19th century than as a biographical film. It also, however, proceeds to see Lincoln killed by a vampire and then spend a good deal of the rest of his life hunting and killing vampires to avenge her. Fictional though it may be, it’s also rather imaginative, and if one can sufficiently suspend disbelief to get into the spirit of the movie, it can be quite enjoyable. Curiously, one reviewer put it, “...just too silly to be taken seriously and wasn’t the columns of the Lincoln Memorial, there are no further direct references to who the boy or his family are. As a result, it could be seen more as a meditative look at childhood in the American wilderness of the early 19th century than as a biographical film. It also, however, proceeds to see Lincoln killed by a vampire and then spend a good deal of the rest of his life hunting and killing vampires to avenge her. Fictional though it may be, it’s also rather imaginative, and if one can sufficiently suspend disbelief to get into the spirit of the movie, it can be quite enjoyable. Curiously, one reviewer put it, “...just too silly to be taken seriously and wasn’t references to who the boy or his family are. As a result, it could be seen more as a meditative look at childhood in the American wilderness of the early 19th century than as a biographical film. It also, however, proceeds to see Lincoln killed by a vampire and then spend a good deal of the rest of his life hunting and killing vampires to avenge her. Fictional though it may be, it’s also rather imaginative, and if one can sufficiently suspend disbelief to get into the spirit of the movie, it can be quite enjoyable. Curiously, one reviewer put it, “...just too silly to be taken seriously and wasn’t references to who the boy or his family are. As a result, it could be seen more as a meditative look at childhood in the American wilderness of the early 19th century than as a biographical film. It also, however, proceeds to see Lincoln killed by a vampire and then spend a good deal of the rest of his life hunting and killing vampires to avenge her. Fictional though it may be, it’s also rather imaginative, and if one can sufficiently suspend disbelief to get into the spirit of the movie, it can be quite enjoyable. Curiously, one reviewer put it, “...just too silly to be taken seriously and wasn’t references to who the boy or his family are. As a result, it could be seen more as a meditative look at childhood in the American wilderness of the early 19th century than as a biographical film. It also, however, proceeds to see Lincoln killed by a vampire and then spend a good deal of the rest of his life hunting and killing vampires to avenge her. Fictional though it may be, it’s also rather imaginative, and if one can sufficiently suspend disbelief to get into the spirit of the movie, it can be quite enjoyable. Curiously, one reviewer put it, “...just too silly to be taken seriously and wasn’t...
Brian Dirck Wins Award of Achievement for 2019

Brian Dirck, author of The Black Heavens: Abraham Lincoln and Death, has been chosen as the recipient of the Lincoln Group of New York’s 2019 Award of Achievement. The award, presented to the individual or organization that has done the most to encourage the study and appreciation of Abraham Lincoln, is also the author of numerous articles and several other books about our 16th president, including Lincoln and Davis: Imagining America, 1809-1865; Lincoln the Lawyer, Abraham Lincoln and White America; Lincoln and the Constitution; and Lincoln in Indiana.

The first in-depth analysis of Abraham Lincoln’s encounters with death, The Black Heavens begins with the familiar stories of the deaths of those closest to him—his mother, sister, Ann Rutledge, and sons Edward and William, placing them in the context of his overall experience, the prevalence and progression of disease during the 19th century, and contemporary conventions regarding death. Turning then to the almost inconceivable carnage of the Civil War, Professor Dirck extrapolates from Lincoln’s words and actions the evolution of his understanding of the meaning of death, in political, personal, and, most importantly, spiritual terms, particularly in light of his growing belief in God’s involvement in the affairs of men. As a result, as Gerald J. Prokopowicz, professor of history at East Carolina University and member of the advisory boards of the Lincoln Studies Center and the Lincoln Forum, has said, “Reading this book is like looking at a familiar Lincoln portrait hung at a new angle on a different wall, letting fresh sunbeams reveal more of what was always there.”

The award committee members for 2019 were Rob Kaplan, Tom Dames, and Steve Aronson. The award will be presented to Professor Dirck at our February 2020 dinner meeting, when he will speak on the subject of the book.

From a new and different perspective on Lincoln, to a famous sculptor and his greatest work, to tales of Union espionage, topics discussed at this year’s Lincoln Group of New York meetings were as varied, informative, and as ever.

February 4, 2019:

Our first meeting of the new year, celebrating Abraham Lincoln's birthday, was held at a new venue—Villa Mosconi on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. After welcoming everyone, Acting President Paul Ellis-Graham provided a report on the annual Executive Committee's meeting held earlier in the year. Although not an IGNY election year, Mr. Ellis-Graham explained, due to the resignation of former president John Bodnar, it was necessary for the committee to make changes in the officers. The committee had accordingly elected Mr. Ellis-Graham as president, and Rob Kaplan, editor of “The Wide Awake Bulletin,” as vice president. In addition, as co-trustees Bob Langford and Lorraine Figariello had expressed their wish to retire from their positions, Mr. Ellis-Graham asked any of the members who might be interested in becoming treasurer to contact him. Finally, since committee member Joe Garrera had also tendered his resignation, it was announced that he would be replaced by Paula Hopewell, chair of the Award of Achievement Committee. The president’s remarks were followed by dinner—a family-style meal consisting of a variety of particularly delicious Italian dishes—and our regular book raffle.

A British Perspective on Abraham Lincoln, c. 1862

Captain Nathaniel Gordon

Hanging Captain Gordon

This story is the subject of the 2006 book by Ron Soodalter titled Hanging Captain Gordon. As the author points out, one of the important aspects of the story is that it all took place while Lincoln was striving to keep the British government—whom he had since banned the slave trade—from recognizing the Confederacy, a move which might have doomed his efforts to maintain the Union. After the hanging, Soodalter notes, “As Lincoln had anticipated, London had been following the case with interest. On March 8, the London Daily News published an article attacking British response to the execution.” And, as Soodalter rightly points out, “It is exceptional in its concise evaluation of the significance of the event, and of Lincoln’s role in it.”

“Our American telegram yesterday,” the newspaper reported, “contained the short and simple statement that Captain Gordon has been hanged. This is an event of merely personal interest. On the contrary, throughout America there is expected to be full of significance. It is an index of the quality of Mr. Lincoln’s government, of its strength of principle, and of the consistency of its policy, and it marks the end of a system. Gordon was tried and convicted as the Captain of a slaver and was sentenced to death. Under Pierce, Buchanan and Presidents of their stamp, his condemnation would not have caused his friends any serious alarm. It was well understood on all sides that there were legal forms, decent, proper in a Christian and civilized nation; and solemn sentences passed on persons proved to have participated in the African slave trade were not at all objected to as long as they were not carried out. The present changed, however, when Mr. Lincoln was made President... Still when a slave captain was actually convicted and sentenced to death, it was very generally doubted whether the government would hold firm. Presidents who [were] quite prepared to condemn the African slave trade... recoiled from the thought of strangling a white man who had removed some black men from a state of barbarism to a Christian country. Mr. Lincoln, they said, although a free soiler, was not a fanatical abolitionist and would think twice before he sacrificed the life of a man of Anglo-Saxon blood to a sentiment in favor of the negro. People, however, forget the difference between principle and sentiment...”

“A British Perspective on Abraham Lincoln, c. 1862”

This, as Soodalter concludes, “was the response that Lincoln had sought, and it paved the way for the Seward-Lyons agreement, known officially as the Treaty Between the United States and Great Britain for the Suppression of the Slave Trade.” Afterward, there was no further thought of the Convention being recognized by Great Britain, or any other country, and Lincoln was free to pursue the war without fear of outside interference.

Lincoln Books continued

The Tyranny of Public Discourse: Abraham Lincoln’s Six-Element Antidote for Meaningful and Persuasive Writing by David Hirsch & Dan Van Haften (Savas Beatie, 192 pages, $32.95/$24.95) A guidebook to learning how to use logic and reason in writing, drawing on examples from Abraham Lincoln’s speeches and letters, and how doing so can raise the level of public discourse.

Award Committee: A special thanks to our dedicated members who served on the 2019 award committee: Rob Kaplan, Chair • Tom Dames, Steve Aronson, Paula Hopewell • Too much to list!...and thank you all!
considered using spies to be ungentlemanly and, as a result, the information. Confederate commander Robert E. Lee, however, completely understood and appreciated the value of having such commanders were responsible for doing so. Lincoln and his generals had any overall agency for gathering intelligence, and that individual explained that neither the Union nor the Confederate governments intelligence was enhanced by such new technologies as the intelligence even greater. In addition, the ability to gather this those commanders’ headquarters, all of which made the need for who was commanding the opposing armies, and the location of included the position of the enemy, the number of hostile troops, new tactics, for which they needed new types of information. These war technologically but also one in which armies had to develop new tactics, for which they needed new types of information. These

Douglas Waller

Mr. Waller also explained that neither the Union nor the Confederate governments had any overall agency for gathering intelligence, and that individual commanders were responsible for doing so. Lincoln and his generals completely understood and appreciated the value of having such information. Confederate commander Robert E. Lee, however, considered using spies to be ungentlemanly and, as a result, the Union developed a much better system of espionage. In telling his story, Mr. Waller focused on four spies, the first of which was Allen Pinkerton, a Scottish immigrant who founded a private detective agency and later became a spymaster for George McClellan, creating a network of spies that included women, slaves, and others. His failing, however, was that he was inclined to tell McClellan what he wanted to hear rather than the truth, which contributed to McClellan’s poor decisions. And when McClellan was finally relieved of command, Pinkerton went with him. The second spy was Lafayette Baker, a drifter who was involved in a variety of unscrupulous schemes before the war, but when the war began convinced head of the army Winfield Scott to take him on as an agent. He subsequently worked for Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, but tended to focus more on counter-espionage than intelligence gathering, and accordingly made a less substantial contribution than he might have. The third operative was George Sharpe, an attorney who commanded a company of local militia when the war began and, although he had no previous experience in espionage, subsequently developed successful spy networks for generals Joseph Hooker, George Meade, and U.S. Grant. His most important achievement was using the newly created Bureau of Military Information as a clearing house of information from a variety of sources, which enabled him to provide the Union army with better intelligence.

The fourth and final spy was Elizabeth Van Lew, a wealthy young woman from Richmond who was educated in Philadelphia and, being rabidly anti-slavery, used much of her wealth before the war to help slaves escape. Once the war began she worked with George Sharpe and developed a sophisticated ring of several dozen agents in Richmond, including operatives within the Confederate government.

The meeting closed with a few additional announcements from President Ellis-Graham, including that regular membership dues were being raised from $20 to $25 a year, although he also urged attendees to consider joining at the Sustaining Member rate of $50. He noted, too, that the price of our dinner meeting would remain at $60 for members but increase from $65 to $70 for guests.~