



Lincoln Lore

July, 1983

Bulletin of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor.
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Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.

Number 1745

GEORGE TICE'S *LINCOLN*

Lincoln by George Tice (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1984) is without doubt the most original of the many Lincoln books published around the 175th anniversary of his birth. We have seen collections of essays, a novel, monographs, and at least one other art book in this recent outpouring of Lincoln literature, but we have seen nothing quite like this. Inspired in part by reading Carl Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln* one summer and in part by running across the Lincoln Motel and Abe's Disco in downtown Newark, New Jersey, one night, Tice, a photog-

rapher with nine books to his credit, decided to "travel America looking for Lincoln."

What he found, mostly, was old statues of the sixteenth president — in places like Odon, Indiana, and Jersey City, New Jersey, and Webster City, Iowa, and Kenosha, Wisconsin. He also found the pedestal of a stolen statue and the Lincoln liquor store in Washington, D.C., and the Lincoln Funeral Home in Lincoln, Rhode Island. He photographed what he saw, and the photographs along with a short, humorous introduction are the book *Lincoln*.



Photograph by George Tice. Used courtesy of Rutgers University Press.

FIGURE 1. Boston, Massachusetts, 1982.



Photograph by George Tice. Used
courtesy of Rutgers University Press.

FIGURE 2. Newark, New Jersey, 1981.

Tice's book is original but not unprecedented. If asked to name its literary forebears, one might say F. Lauriston Bullard's *Lincoln in Marble and Bronze* or Franklin B. Mead's *Heroic Statues in Bronze of Abraham Lincoln* (probably ghostwritten by Louis A. Warren) or — and this is the most like Tice's book — Mabel Kunkel's *Abraham Lincoln: Unforgettable American*. All of these books share some common subject matter (none could have been published without the existence of numerous public statues of Lincoln). What sets Tice's book apart is its tone, or, since it is an art book, perhaps it would be more accurate to say its perspective. The predecessors of *Lincoln* are decidedly reverential in tone. Tice's book is not. The introduction is written in what might be called a "hip-reverential" style, containing references to Sandburg as well as to go-go dancers and bikers (motorcycle gang members, that is, and not people on bicycles). A few of Tice's photographs are decidedly irreverent (the one of the Lincoln statue in Cleveland, Ohio, makes a tasteless joke), but for the most part the photographs are honest.

Tice's honesty points up a major difference between his book and those which came before it. His book has no subtitle. Its subtitle could not be "Unforgettable American," because, sadly enough, one of the things which Tice's *Lincoln* documents is that some Americans have indeed forgotten Lincoln. That is why some of the statues featured in the book are in such deplorable condition, covered with graffiti and disfigured by pollution-induced corrosion. Perhaps that is why the Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania, pedestal still lacks its stolen statue.

A recent change in artistic taste, completely unrelated to

George Tice's own medium of photography, has something to do with the power of many of his pictures. Public statuary executed in a realistic style endured a period of low repute for much of this century, but new scholarship and the celebration of this nation's bicentennial led to a fresh appreciation for the heroic bronze statuary which populates our public squares and parks and historic sites. Technical knowledge of the proper conservation of museum materials also began to tell a new story about the drizzly green patination on our country's bronzes. There is nothing "natural" about that process. It is caused mostly by the most unnatural or anti-natural of forces: industrial and automobile pollution. The green does not form a protection from further corrosion. It keeps eating away at the surface of the bronze. And surely most of the artists did not intend for their works to depict America's heroes with a macabre green bleeding into their eye sockets or with their faces retinted into horrifying looks and unrecognizable likenesses.

Therefore our modern feeling that the way our old statues look is not right helps give to Tice's photographs a melancholy "feel" that is bound to make us wonder whether the heritage Lincoln gave this country is still alive. When the photographer captures such statues against a background of older neighborhoods, as in his picture from Racine, Wisconsin, the effect is to recall older values that may be in decline.

"While looking for Lincoln, I caught a glimpse of America," Tice says in his introduction. Such is often the case in more conventional Lincoln books, but in this book of photographs the glimpse of America that we see is not pretty. Tice is primarily a photographer of urban landscapes, and he



FIGURE 3. Wabash, Indiana, 1983.

honestly reports the chaos of poor taste which now surrounds many Lincoln statues. The bronzes endure, but the American urban landscape changes rapidly with the result that Lincoln statues now appear against a backdrop never dreamed of by the artists. Abraham Lincoln in Newark seems sadly to contemplate a Burger King sign. In Boston, Massachusetts, the Great Emancipator releases a slave from bondage, and

the kneeling black man, half nude, looks like a runner surveying the clutter of billboards and lamp posts and power lines through which he must now pass if he is to reach the finish line successfully. Lincoln walks, again a little sadly, in front of a Shell gasoline service station in Bunker Hill, Illinois, and he seems almost purposely to turn his back on the shoddy metal facades that hide the old brick buildings

*Photograph by George Tice. Used
courtesy of Rutgers University Press.*

around the public square in Clinton, Illinois.

Proof that Tice is fascinated by the inappropriate juxtaposition of art and the utilitarian physical environment lies in his photograph of the Lincoln statue in Bennington, Vermont. Lincoln stands there with one hand on a nude boy and the other on a half-nude kneeling woman. As Tice explains in his introduction, the statue was originally destined for Rockefeller Center in New York City, but John D. Rockefeller insisted that the artist add "a fig leaf for the young boy's genitals." The sculptor refused and therefore died with the statue still in his possession. The artist's heirs donated the piece to the Bennington Museum, where Tice photographed it. But the Bennington Museum is not Rockefeller Center, and the scale and style of the piece are not at all in keeping with the scale and style of the surrounding architecture.

Aside from the photograph of the Cleveland statue, only one picture seems controversial, and that is Tice's photograph of the Lincoln statue in Urbana, Illinois. Lincoln stands against a wall, looking upward and slightly to his right. The statue has been turned quite light in color by weathering, and it presents a sharp contrast to the handsome backdrop of trees. Tice chose to photograph the statue while a black man mowed the lawn in front of it. By snapping the picture just after the gardener has made a pass with his little power mower in front of the Lincoln statue, the effect achieved is to make Lincoln look as though he is supremely indifferent to the young black worker in jeans and a tee-shirt. No photograph ever symbolized a school of historiography more aptly, but it is a wrongheaded school

and one wishes the idea had not come so easily to Tice's mind.

Tice offers some photographs with a different message as well. One of the best is the photograph of the Lincoln tomb in Springfield. Before I first went to Springfield to view the tomb, I dreaded it — not because of the sad association but because it had always looked so dreadfully ugly to me in the photographs of it I had seen. I was very pleasantly surprised when I got to Springfield and saw the monument in person. Ever since, I have told people that the tomb is a fine monument but not at all photogenic. I will no longer say that. Tice's photograph of it is wonderful and shows the tomb to great advantage. This is a sign, I think, that he was willing to depict handsome and impressive sights — as long as the sites really were handsome and impressive.

I have neglected thus far to mention the most important factor which separates this book from those that I have called its predecessors. That factor is the artistic skill of George Tice. There are other books on Lincoln monuments and Lincoln sites, but the pictures in them could by no stretch of the imagination be termed art. They are illustrations, perhaps, but not art. Tice's photographs are art, and that fact, whatever his perspective may be, makes all the difference and makes this book worth having.

The gloomy will read the degradation of Lincoln's reputation into these photographs. The hopeful will see something else. Everyone will be moved and unsettled by these photographs in a way that earlier pictures of the same sites have not moved them, and that is the difference between real art and mere pictures.



Photograph by George Tice. Used courtesy of Rutgers University Press.

FIGURE 4. Urbana, Illinois, 1982.