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# Presidential Studies Quarterly

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE PRESIDENCY



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English language. They were the toast of William Pitt after Trafalgar, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. Modern critics think Lincoln was not a great orator but he was a great writer. Lincoln influenced men's minds more by what he said than by his delivery. T. Harry Williams, in editing a 1953 edition of Lincoln's writings and speeches concluded, "Lincoln the writer stands in the front rank of those few masters of the language who have stirred men's emotions and moved them to action with the magic of words." David B. Anderson of Michigan State University in his reprinted literary biography agrees that Lincoln was no orator, but "at his best he evoked, in simple, dignified poetic prose, the essence of the American experience."

Lincoln scholars and literary critics such as Roy P. Basler and Edmund Wilson have written perceptive studies of Lincoln's development as a writer. Anderson states that while "numerous attempts have been made to isolate the nature and substance of Lincoln's literary accomplishment from the complexity of the man, the President, and the legend, ultimately none has been satisfactory." His work is part of the continuing "search of definition."

In his preface, Anderson states that the key to Lincoln's literary accomplishment was found by one of his contemporaries, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who called Lincoln the Representative Man, the man who "epitomized" his own time. Anderson's main interest lies in explaining the literary development of Lincoln from his humble frontier origins to his superb Civil War addresses, letters and state papers.

Anderson is faced with the problem of explaining how a frontier Whig politician became such a noble spokesman for his age and the American people. Agreeing with Edmund Wilson that the pre-Civil War Lincoln was essentially cold and aloof, not really caring much about anyone except for his wife and children, Anderson shows how the experiences of the 1850's changed Lincoln's rational and logical writings to include a new "air of moral earnestness and conviction."

William H. Herndon has described Lincoln's political ambitions as a "little engine that knew no rest" but Anderson states that from the 1850's on: ". . . Lincoln's only interest was to destroy evil and to save men." The author explains how this interest and the terrible Civil War developed Lincoln's ability to express his personal feelings in great public utterances. In Anderson's judgment, Lincoln's literary reputation must be based on three Civil War writings: the Gettysburg Address, the letter to Mrs. Bixby and the Second Inaugural Address. Without these three statements of the war and its personal impact on the people, democracy and the Union, Anderson feels Lincoln's literary reputation would be minor.

Although published in 1970, Anderson's short work is a fine starting point for anyone interested in studying Lincoln's intellectual growth and continued improvement as a writer. Any book containing excerpts from Lincoln's literary works is worth reading and Anderson adds an interesting analysis of Lincoln's place in nineteenth century American political philosophy.

This literary biography has a chronology, notes and references, an annotated bibliography, and index. Anderson's book is not the first volume a college student should read about Lincoln, but it does help explain to any acute reader the "proof of Lincoln's greatness as man and writer."

FRED SCHULD

*Independence High School  
Independence, Ohio*

Weinstein, Edwin A., *Woodrow Wilson: A Medical and Psychological Biography* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), xi, 399 pp., cloth, \$18.50.

The application of psychoanalytic insights to the writing of biography has become an integral tool in the study of an individual's life. One can scarcely imagine a modern biography which ignores such

topics as childhood development, parent-child relations, and sexuality; these concerns are justly seen as fundamental to any in depth understanding of the subject's personality. At its best, such psychological investigation has yielded significant insights into the lives of such prominent figures as Luther, Ghandi, and Lenin. At its worst, the psychobiography obscures the true greatness of the individual behind a veil of psychological jargon. Ironically, one of the very best examples of such an ill-conceived psychological study is Freud's own nasty little book, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson: A Psychological Study*. Good sense kept this book unpublished for several decades; its self-acknowledged biases and unfortunate triviality make it the classic example of what the biographer should avoid when analyzing an important historical figure.

Fortunately, Edwin A. Weinstein's "medical and psychological" biography of Woodrow Wilson is a significant improvement over Freud's attempt. There is some genuine contribution to the scholarly knowledge of Wilson in this book. As the title implies, the emphasis here is upon the medical and psychological problems which Wilson suffered throughout his life. Weinstein's own medical background enables him to diagnose Wilson's health difficulties. Wilson experienced a long series of strokes beginning at the age of thirty-nine, while still a professor at Princeton. The author speculates upon the precise nature of Wilson's afflictions over the next quarter of a century, and presents a convincing medical evaluation based upon the known symptoms. The problems with Weinstein's analysis derive from his intent to show the "impact of his illnesses on affairs at Princeton and later national and international events" (p. ix). Indeed, this is the whole problem of psycho-biography/history. Medical and psychological insights can help "explain" an individual's personality (although Freud's own personal hostility for Wilson's politics clouded his observations) but they just will not adequately explain political judgment or decision-making. If we cannot accept on face value the content of the thought of a figure of Wilson's stature

(political scientist, professor, and president of Princeton) then there simply can be no independent discipline of political ideas. Every study would be, as Freud arrogantly claimed, merely applied psychology.

Weinstein seems incapable of believing that Wilson held any genuine political positions. There is a constant attempt to explain away the views of the "subject" as related to his medical or psychological disabilities. This is plausible in explaining some of Wilson's actions, but Weinstein often pushes the point too far. After arguing that Wilson was dyslexic, and that this accounted for his slow learning as a young man, Weinstein tries to explain too much other behavior as related to this condition: "As a professor at Princeton, he found the correction of examination papers an extremely tedious task" (p. 17). One hardly need suffer dyslexia to find such activity tedious.

If this appears a minor complaint, Weinstein provides more substantial abuse of his interpretive method. He argues that after Wilson's strokes left him stricken and weakened (especially in his right hand), he interposed medical metaphors into his public speeches. Unfortunately, Weinstein's chosen examples are simply not convincing. He claims that Wilson was "carried away on the wings of cardiovascular and hematological metaphor" when he spoke of political leaders who had "thrust their cruel hands into the very heartstrings of the many, on whose blood and energy they are subsisting . . . If she loses her self-possession America will stagger like France through folds of blood before she again finds peace and prosperity under the leadership of men who understand her needs" (quoted on p. 213). This organic metaphor of blood and guts is peculiar; but it is hard to show that it is an outgrowth of Wilson's own heart ailments (especially since he never seemed to have understood the exact nature of his medical problems).

Weinstein further stresses this analysis of medical metaphors when he considers Wilson's attitude toward political parties: "The political parties, he stated, were going to pieces and needed moral regenera-

tion" (p. 213). A political scientist hardly needs to suffer a stroke in order to employ such a metaphor of decline and rebirth. A final example: Weinstein points to a speech regarding government regulation of business in which Wilson refers to a constitutional "protection for life, limb, and property. . . ." Weinstein draws the dubious conclusion: "Nowhere does the Constitution require protection of 'limb'; Wilson was perhaps unconsciously and symbolically representing the weakness of his arm" (p. 218). And perhaps he was not; how is one to verify such a claim?

Weinstein's other major indulgence in psychological reductionism is his annoying insistence upon explaining several of Wilson's political positions as the product of psychological "distress." As Weinstein puts it: "His distress . . . seems to have been a factor in some inconsistent political actions" (p. 252). The political action that is unexplainable except in terms of "distress" appears to be Wilson's signing of the Clayton Act. In addition, "distress over his wife's illness" led Wilson to "bellicose action" against Mexico in 1914. His more restrained posture against the Mexican government in 1916-1917 can be explained by the *absence* of distress: "Wilson was in far better emotional shape than he had been in 1914" (p. 305). Presumably, Wilson's attitude toward a European war was also a product of his medical condition: "Wilson made the decision for war during this period of illness" (p. 313). The lack of any true reasoning behind Wilson's foreign policy is implied by this whole mode of analysis.

The weaknesses of Weinstein's book have been stressed here. However, this study is interesting and informative when it examines Wilson's medical and psychological problems. Yet in the end, one wonders who is the audience for such a work. There obviously is no intrinsic significance in terms of any contribution to the medical sciences. There is also a limit to how much can be attached to Wilson's medical problems in understanding the policies and even personality of Wilson himself. Other biographies reveal much more of the complex person of Woodrow Wilson (such as Arthur Walworth's re-

cently revised biography or Alexander and Juliette George's "personality study"). For a broader perspective, Arthur S. Link's multi-volume history offers the most comprehensive understanding of the political events of the Wilson era. Perhaps for those solely interested in Wilson's medical history, Weinstein's work will be of particular interest.

SHELDON D. POLLACK

*Department of Political Science  
University of Pennsylvania*

John S. D. Eisenhower, *Allies: Pearl Harbor to D-Day*. (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1982), 500 pp., hardcover, \$24.95 (ISBN 0-385-11479-6).

Military history buffs will like this book. For readers who are especially interested in World War II it will be a "page-turner." Although there are few surprises or revelations, it fascinates because it presents a perspective on the war in Europe as seen from the highest levels of leadership. Interlaced between the expected accounts of major military actions are many human interest stories about well-known generals, admirals, and politicians. In this book they become more than names and a little more like human beings. A reader might suspect that at least some of the observations about these famous personalities originated with the author's famous father.

The theme of the book can be inferred from its title. It is about the "Allies" in World War II, and especially relationships between Allied leaders. Eisenhower once judiciously and pessimistically remarked that "the history of alliances (was) a history of failure." *Allies* is a history of exceptions to this rule. The military alliance turned out to be the most successful the world has ever seen.

Why was the alliance successful? There were a number of explanations, of course, but one important reason was the rapport that generally existed among Allied leaders. Military commanders, accustomed to giving orders and accustomed to being