

# Introduction

by John Dean and Olivier Frayssé

European universities host only a handful of Lincoln scholars. Steven Spielberg's movie *Lincoln* had only a modest success in European theaters. The Lincoln theme presents challenges to teachers in EFL classrooms. Why is there such a limited place in Europe for one of the greatest American icons? In this special issue of the *American Studies Journal* we explore this paradox through the contributions of seasoned Lincoln scholars, historians of Europe and transatlantic relations, and specialists of cultural history and popular culture. The international and interdisciplinary perspectives of our contributors offer new insights into Lincoln and the Lincoln theme by showing how the image of the 16<sup>th</sup> president has been determined by U.S.-European relations at various moments in history.

*The editors of this issue are grateful to the ASJ editorial board for their continuous support, patience, and magnificent copy-editing.*

## Assessing the Lincoln Presence in Europe

- 1 In our quest for "Lincoln in Europe," three major questions emerged. What was the importance of the Lincoln theme in shaping the image of the United States abroad, and specifically in Europe? What has been the popular reception of Lincoln in Europe? How can the views of European scholars improve our understanding of the 16<sup>th</sup> president?
- 2 First, what was the importance of the Lincoln theme in shaping the image of the United States abroad, and specifically in Europe? This breaks down to a few distinct but related issues: in terms of organized dissemination, the answer given here by Jared Peatman grew into a book, *The Long Shadow of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2013). In terms of both dissemination and reception, the answers offered by Richard Cawardine and Jay Sexton in this issue resulted in their essay collection *The Global Lincoln* (Oxford: OUP, 2011).
- 3 Second, and at the heart of this issue, lies the debate about common reception and public opinion. What image of Lincoln did Europeans have in his lifetime, and how was it shaped? What happened to this image over time and why? What uses of Lincoln are relevant to contemporary Europeans? How and where, indeed, is Abraham Lincoln still viable and visible in contemporary Europe?
- 4 'Europe,' of course, is itself a contested term: It is a socio-historical construct that has evolved over time. Europe has not meant the same thing to Americans and Europeans. Indeed, the very concept and practice of 'Europe' and 'European' has been shaped by the New World / Old World paradigm; U.S. involvement in Europe in the Cold War era; the creation and on-going foment of the European Union; the importance of separate European nationalisms, languages, histories and cultures; and the nonexistence of a distinct European nationalism. 'Europe' is a deliciously huge challenge of complications. Thus, a humbler title for our ambitious collection would have been: "Lincoln in Some Western European Countries."
- 5 Third, what do European scholarly views, as opposed to popular images, bring to our understanding of Lincoln, U.S. history, and U.S.-European relations? What "foreign" observers lack in intimacy, they often gain in perspective. What seems banal from a domestic perspective can serve as a source of puzzlement for outsiders, thus leading to novel research questions. Foreign researchers import their own national preoccupations into another country's debates. [Alexis de Tocqueville's](#), [Alexander von Humboldt's](#), and Charles Dickens' perceptions of the United States are cases in point. We believe that

the non-U.S. researchers who have contributed to this collection—sometimes jointly with U.S. researchers—have shed new light on old debates.

## Five angles on Lincoln in Europe

- 6 This issue of the *ASJ* consists of thirteen articles addressing five themes. The first section assesses the importance of Lincoln in and to Europe. Richard Cawardine's and Jay Sexton's "The Global Lincoln: European Dimensions" and Jared Peatman's "The Gettysburg Address as Foreign Policy" both address the Lincoln impact factor in European history from broad perspectives.
- 7 The second section takes stock of Lincoln's place in European culture, especially from the viewpoint of visual culture. Catherine Clinton's "Statues and Status: Lincoln in Europe" and Caroline Hurley's "Lincoln in Scotland: A Gift of the Gilded Age" chart the destiny of the most important Lincoln statues in Europe, contextualizing and historicizing their significance in terms of U.S. foreign policy, immigration history, and the legacy of the Civil War. John Dean's "Abraham Lincoln in European Popular Culture" explores some of the differences between popular representations of Lincoln in American and European culture. Marie Cordié-Levy's "Matthew Brady's Lincoln" reflects on the visual messages conveyed to Europe and Europeans by Lincoln's official photographer.
- 8 The third section addresses how local conditions shaped Lincoln's European reception. The contribution of Jörg Nagler, "The Lincoln Image in Germany," scans German history to illustrate the importance of national politics and geostrategic stakes in German representations of America's 16<sup>th</sup> president. The chapter by Jacques Portes, "The Hidden Lincoln in French Opinion," covers similar issues in France while explaining the disappearance of Lincoln from French political discourse shortly after the American Civil War. Olivier Frayssé's and Laurence Grégoire's "The French Masonic Tributes to Abraham Lincoln" shows the conflicting influences brought to bear on the formation of Lincoln's image in the wake of his assassination. Debates over the issue of the "Lincoln Medal of Liberty" point to the strong French attachment to a U.S. democratic model that was to culminate in the donation of the Statue of Liberty by the Grand Orient de France (the main French Masonic organization).
- 9 The fourth section features original research as a testimony to the enduring, if limited, interest of European academics in Lincoln. Olivier Frayssé's "Abraham Lincoln and the Homespun Spin" proposes a new approach to Lincoln's leadership qualities, emphasizing the quest for authorship that informed Lincoln's writings and action. Nathalie Caron's "Lincoln, Paine and the American Freethought Tradition" explores the vexed question of Lincoln's religion from a perspective that combines extensive knowledge of the Lincoln and Paine historiographies with the transatlantic history of Freethought.
- 10 The last section contrasts the Lincolns taught in Europe and the United States. U.S. historian Jason Hansen's "Land of Lincoln: The Teaching of an Historical Icon at the University of Illinois, 2009" explores the challenges of teaching Lincoln in his home state. His recommendation that scholars engage with popular myths has implications that reach far beyond the Illinois state-line. Martina Kohl, Cultural Affairs Specialist with the United States Embassy in Berlin responsible for programs in Germany and Europe, uses her own extensive fieldwork to explore whether Abraham Lincoln should be a school topic 150 years after his death, and in what context he might be taught, in her "Teaching Abraham Lincoln in the EFL Classroom: A German Case Study."

## Exploring the Paradoxes

- 11 The insights developed by this collection point to a series of paradoxes. Why does one of the greatest American icons have such a minor place in Europe? This is a particularly intriguing question given the conspicuous presence of American cultural products in Europe, sometimes supported by diplomatic efforts to export American culture for political ends. One can understand the minor place of the Latin American icon [Simón Bolívar](#), given the lack of Venezuelan soft power. But Lincoln? Why does he get less attention than other famous Americans?

- 12 Several of the papers featured in this issue provide richly contextualized answers to these questions, drawing attention to the material, political, cultural conditions under which the figure of Lincoln has been presented to and perceived by Europeans. Thus, we might venture a few general explanations.
- 13 First, some of the challenges faced by Lincoln during his political career were unique to the United States. Outstanding here: developing an economic policy for a nation infused with immigrants and able to populate its largely unused territory at amazing speed; managing the coexistence of four distinct ethnic groups on the same territory (Native American, European, African, Hispanic); and adapting the political system of the Federal Republic to these tasks.
- 14 The choices that Lincoln made or that were made for him shaped U.S. history in his lifetime. These choices also shaped much of the U.S. public discourse since his assassination on Good Friday 1865, creating various and often conflicting narratives that are still omnipresent in U.S. political culture. President [Ronald Reagan](#), for instance, eagerly embraced a quote falsely attributed to Lincoln to justify his neoliberal economic policies: “You cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong. You cannot help the wage-earner by pulling down the wage-payer. You cannot help the poor by destroying the rich. You cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves” (Schlesinger).<sup>[1]</sup> [Barack Obama](#) declared his candidacy in Springfield to forge a connection between Lincoln and himself.
- 15 The challenges that Lincoln faced did not exist in Europe until much later, and then in a different form. European leaders did not draw on his example or his rhetoric, whether wrongly or rightly attributed. Thus they did not popularize his image. Exceptions exist, notably [Willy Brandt](#)’s use of the “house divided” phrase to describe the separation of East and West Germany during the Cold War. But this is such an isolated exception that it seems to prove the rule. While European nations now hesitantly move toward a ‘multicultural’ setting and a half-hearted experiment at a federal union, the United States of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cannot easily be understood as providing clues for Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 16 Second, Lincoln is an archetypal American character, richly vernacular, and central to U.S. history and culture. His iconic value is heartwood to the American grain, exportable only to the extent that it resonates with European stereotypes of Americans, for instance the stereotype of the self-made man.
- 17 Finally, diplomatic uses made of Lincoln may have backfired. For instance, [George W. Bush](#)’s establishment of “Lincoln corners” in South-East Asia contributed little to the aura of the United States in the region or to a better knowledge of Lincoln. Perhaps the “real Lincoln” has come to stand for policies and developments that critics of the United States reject, in much the way [Max Weber](#) turned [Benjamin Franklin](#) into an archetype of American capitalism (Weber 137).
- 18 All of this may explain why Lincoln has never been properly evaluated by Europeans, why he has become neither a truly lasting symbol of America in Europe nor a truly universal model. Thus, while the exotic value of Lincoln the rail-splitter and self-made man has remained a low-key element in the European cultural lexicon, only selected parts of the Lincoln legacy have been incorporated into European public discourses at given moments: Lincoln the Emancipator, Lincoln the Commander-in-Chief, Lincoln the Keeper of Democracy during a Civil War, Lincoln the Savior of Union, Lincoln the Martyr of a moral cause. But other, later historical figures, both inside and outside the United States, have also incarnated many of these values. The exception here may be Keeper of Democracy during a Civil War, since Russia and Spain have undergone a protracted civil war since Lincoln’s demise. While U.S. troops did fight against the Bolsheviks in 1918–1919, Lincoln’s name was not invoked, and only during the Spanish civil war did the [Abraham Lincoln Battalion](#) of the Fifteenth International Brigade, composed of North Americans defending the republic against the fascist rebellion, testify to the endurance of that particular legacy.
- 19 The more we know about Lincoln and his reception worldwide, the more we can answer negatively James G. Randall’s famous question in the 1936 issue of the *American Historical Review*: “Has the Lincoln theme been exhausted?” (Randall) Our answer is no. With this issue we hope to open new

## The History of This Collection

- 20 Some of these essays were presented at the Paris conference “European Readings of Abraham Lincoln, His Times & Legacy,” generously hosted October 17–18, 2009 by the American University of Paris (AUP) and beneficently supported by the SUDS research lab at the University of Versailles, the United States Embassy in Paris, the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, the USA’s Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, the French Network for Early American Studies (REDEHJA), and the Observatoire de la Politique Américaine (OPA/CREW). Thanks for that occasion and ongoing support are also due to Professors Steven Ekovitch of AUP, Jacques Pothier of Université de Versailles, David Blight of Yale University, AUP President Celeste Schenck, President of Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Marie-Christine Lemardeley, Professeur émérite Bernard Vincent, and Professor Richard Carwardine, then of St. Catherine’s College, Oxford, and now president of Corpus Christi College.
- 21 This 2009 event was the first time ever that a conference on the 16<sup>th</sup> American president had been held in France. A number of well-known European and American scholars participated. We have had to wait until 2016 to publish some of the results of this conference. Some original participants have published their work elsewhere, though we have been fortunate to retain choice gems which have been further developed since then and supplemented with articles commissioned for this issue.
- 22 An especially noteworthy member of the organizing team for “European Readings of Abraham Lincoln” who also conceived of this publication was the Franco-American historian Professor Naomi Wulf of the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle. Her premature death was a great loss for many people and for the world community of Transnational American Studies. It is to Naomi’s memory that we dedicate this collection.

## Note

[1] The real author was an ex- clergyman from Erie, Pa., named William J. H. Boetcker. Having abandoned the pulpit for a more lucrative career as a labor relations adviser for employers, Boetcker in 1916 produced a booklet under the title of *Inside Maxims: Gold Nuggets Taken from the Boetcker Lectures*.

## Works Cited

- Randall, James G. “Has the Lincoln Theme Been Exhausted?” *American Historical Review* 41.2 (1936): 270–94. Print.
- Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr. “Great Hoax of History: Words Lincoln Never Said.” *Washington Post*. 6 Sept. 1992. [Articles.sun-sentinel.com](http://Articles.sun-sentinel.com). Web. 14 May 2016.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. with Commentary by Stephen Kalberg. Oxford: OUP. 2010. Print.

## Authors

As *Maître de Conférences* 9° of Cultural History and American Studies at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin en Yvelines (France), **John Dean** has authored numerous books and articles on these subjects. His work area includes Heroism Studies, Sociology of Mass Media, Youth Culture, and Cross-cultural Euro-US relations. His latest publications is: “‘He’s the Artist in the Family’: The Life, Times, and Character of Edsel Ford,” Mark Rosenthal, *Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo in Detroit*, New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2015.

**Olivier Frayssé** is Professor of Language, Literature and Civilization of Anglophone countries at Paris Sorbonne University. He has published extensively on U.S. history and culture, notably on Lincoln: *Abraham Lincoln, Land and Labor, 1809-1860*, transl. Sylvia Neeley, Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1994.

### **Suggested Citation**

Dean, John, and Olivier Frayssé. "Introduction." *American Studies Journal* 60 (2016). Web. 29 May 2016. DOI 10.18422/60-01.