

# BookTalk

## A CONFECTION OF GENIUS

By Philip Langdon

*Ignatius Rising: The Life of John Kennedy Toole*

By René Pol Nevils and Deborah George Hardy

Louisiana State University Press,  
234 pages, \$24.95

At Christmas 13 years ago, I gave my wife *A Confederacy of Dunces*, John Kennedy Toole's hilarious novel of life in a New Orleans populated by hustlers, homosexuals, insular working-class whites, put-upon blacks, ineffectual cops, and hapless office hands, circa 1963. She tried 40 pages of it and gave it back, unimpressed.

But when I read *Confederacy* myself, I was so taken with its loopy dialogue, especially the utterances of its loftily supercilious main character, Ignatius J. Reilly, that I later added two spoken versions of the book to my collection. I'm not the only one who got hooked: The novel, which Louisiana State University Press had only modest hopes for when it was first published in 1980, has been reprinted many times and translated into 20 languages.

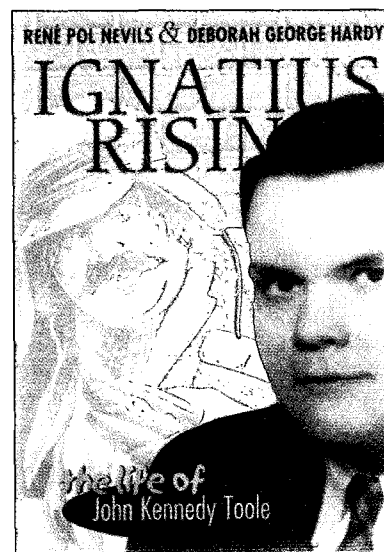
*Confederacy* is a testament to Americans' schizophrenic attitudes toward stereotypes. If all stereotypes are bad (as one of the reigning dogmas of our day insists), the fact remains that Toole's consummate skill in mining the humor in stereotypes is a large part of the reason why the book has sold more than 1.5 million copies worldwide. The book is very funny. Sad, too. Not because of the daily tribulations the characters bumble through, but because many readers are aware that the author took his own life at

32, 11 years before the novel was published and 12 years before it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

In Toole's novel, it's O.K. to have prancing gays cavorting in the French Quarter. It's O.K. to have an uneducated black character, Burma Jones, working as a janitor in the shabby Night of Joy bar, complaining constantly that his \$20-a-week pay "ain even startin to be a minimal wage." It's O.K. because the characters are funny, and because Toole was an equal-opportunity parodist (white Protestants are the group most strongly deplored by the Catholic Ignatius). These characters were created in the early 1960s when Americans still believed that "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me."

Toole's characters, stereotypes and all, were drawn from real acquaintances. The figure of Ignatius, as reported in this first published biography of Toole, was based on a professor at Southwestern Louisiana Institute, Bob Byrne, who dressed in unruly colors, wore a red deer-stalker cap (Ignatius's cap was green), had weight problems, played the lute, often discussed the medieval philosopher Boethius and the wheel of Fortuna, and "was forever talking about theology, geometry, and his rich inner life." There wasn't much that Toole made up. He simply captured the world's, and especially his native New Orleans', absurdly real sights and sounds.

*Confederacy* found its way into print thanks to Toole's mother, Thelma, who forced a smudged onionskin copy of her dead son's manuscript onto a reluctant Walker Percy. The courtly Percy was astonished to discover it was a gem, energized by the preposterous Ignatius, "slob

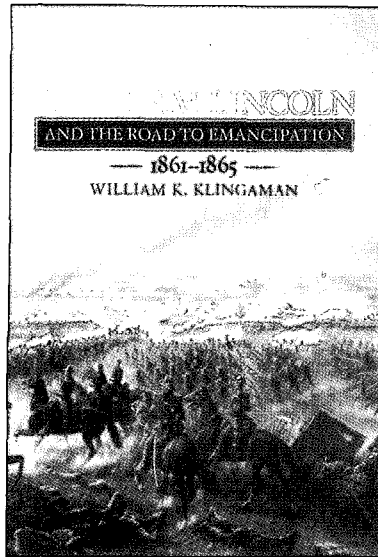


extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one—who is in violent revolt against the entire modern age."

*Ignatius Rising* answers the two questions every reader of *Confederacy* has asked himself: How much did Toole resemble Ignatius, and how did he end up a suicide? Toole himself was no slob. He taught literature at Southwestern Louisiana Institute, Hunter College for Women in New York, and Dominican College in New Orleans. He dressed in starched white shirts and dark neckties even in the late 1960s, when collegiate fashion was descending into the counter-cultural abyss.

Unlike Ignatius, Toole was a sought-out raconteur and a popular lecturer until he was overwhelmed by mental illness and alcohol in the last three years of his life. He had been a respected young officer during his stint in the Army in the early '60s, when he banged out the first version of the novel at Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico.

René Nevils and Deborah Hardy do a fine job of showing how Toole came to grief as he tried to get Robert Gottlieb at Simon & Schuster to publish his work. The letters that Gottlieb wrote to Toole are warm, intelligent, and well intended, but they overwhelmed the desperately insecure Toole. After Toole had done his best to revise the book as suggested, Gottlieb still wasn't satisfied (a common occurrence in the writing business). With his novel in limbo, Toole's unsatisfying



existence as a mama's boy in the home of the imperious Thelma made him more and more emotionally unstable. He became depressed, paranoid, and eventually unable to teach and incapable of supporting his parents.

Thelma, who proclaimed her dead son a "genius," was a flaming narcissist who abused nearly everyone she knew, Walker Percy included. Contact with Thelma no doubt sowed some of the vulnerabilities that culminated in John Toole's death in a car full of automobile exhaust in March 1969 along a country road near Biloxi, Mississippi. *Ignatius Rising* tells the story well. The story most worth reading, however, remains the lunatic tale that Toole gave us: *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

Philip Langdon is a TAE contributing writer.

## LINCOLN'S SUBTLE WAR ON SLAVERY

By Timothy Sandefur

*Abraham Lincoln And The Road to Emancipation, 1861-1865*

By William K. Klingaman  
Viking, 344 pages, \$25.95

Despite the claims of some Southern partisans, the legitimacy of Southern secession in 1860 cannot be separated from the question of slavery. If secession was a revolutionary act, it was not, like the American Revolution, premised on defending individual liberty against

tyranny. Rather, it was (like the Soviet Revolution) premised on subjecting individual rights to the "sovereignty of the state." Today, many still believe secession *can* be separated from slavery, and that though Lincoln may have detested human bondage, he had no right to prevent "Southern independence."

But Lincoln understood that slavery was at the heart of the war ten years before that war came. His debates with Stephen Douglas demonstrated that the notion of "popular sovereignty" (i.e., the "right" of the majority to enslave the minority) was self-contradictory, especially after *Dred Scott*. But the South was quite successful in disguising its fight for slavery as a fight for freedom, a ruse so clever that many still fall for it. H.L. Mencken, for instance, said Lincoln was "actually fighting *against* self-determination; it was the Confederates who fought for the right of the people to govern themselves."

But self-determination can only be based on the principle of equality, and its corollary, government by consent. Anything else is not self-determination, but the enslavement of some by others. Communist nations that insist "national self determination" requires silent acquiescence to tyranny, are attempting precisely the same ruse. As Lincoln put it, this view of self-determination means that if one man wishes to enslave another, no third man may be allowed to object. The "consent" of slave owners could no more legitimize the Confederacy's secession than the mutual consent among criminal conspirators can insulate them from prosecution. Klingaman is therefore wrong to say Lincoln overcame "the eighteenth-century notion that government was based on popular consent." In fact, the defeat of the South reaffirmed that principle. In Lincoln's words, "No man is good enough to govern another *without that man's consent*."

If Lincoln saw the inseparable connection between slavery and the war, why did he often insist he was fighting only for union? Because, as Klingaman shows, it would have been impossible for Lincoln to claim otherwise. For one thing, more troops would desert a crusade against slavery than a crusade for union.

And Lincoln took seriously the fact that he had no Constitutional power to end slavery in the states where it already existed. He only insisted that Congress could and should ban slavery in the West.

Slavery, Lincoln said, "has shaped nearly everything that enters into what we call government. It is as much Northern as it is Southern.... It is wrong, a great evil indeed." Nonetheless, he accepted that he could not force an end to the practice. Instead, by banning slavery in the territories, he would put it where the framers of the Constitution had put it: "in the course of ultimate extinction."

This was the issue on which Lincoln campaigned, and over which the South seceded. The South realized that a free West would eventually mean a turn of the teetering balance in the Senate away from slaveholding interests. Once that balance turned north, Congress could Constitutionally end slavery by law. *That* was what the South sought to avoid.

The war forced (and allowed) Lincoln to change tactics. If anything, he was slow to realize that hopes for a gradual end to slavery were now anachronistic. Long after it was clear that the war would be one of conquest, Lincoln continued to back measures for gradual and compensated emancipation. But abolitionists and generals pushed him to end slavery through confiscation, to weaken the South, keep Europe out, and raise the moral tenor of the war. Still, he hesitated. "I would do it," he said, "if I were not afraid that half the officers would fling down their arms, and...three more states would rise."

Lincoln was pressured on all sides by competing demands and tempers. There were Southerners fighting for the "positive good" of slavery, while others fought only for their native soil. There were uncompromising abolitionists, and Northerners who hated slaves more than slavery. There were border states that might secede if the war became a moralistic crusade, and Europeans who might support the South if it did not.

Thus Lincoln ended up running what today seems a haphazard attack on slavery. Today's Lincoln critics launch many contradictory attacks on him—simultaneously calling him a weak fool and a clever tyrant; accusing him of exceeding