BOOK REVIEWS


The Lincoln theme is practically inexhaustible. Lincoln—the statesman, politician, abolitionist, emancipator, lawyer, military strategist, Christian, humanitarian—has been pursued by thousands of eulogists, scores of realists, and a few detractors. There are more than twenty-five hundred cards in the catalogue of the Library of Congress for publications concerning Abraham Lincoln, and thousands of magazine and newspaper articles in addition. A bibliography of more than ten thousand items could probably be made.

In 1931, the producer of this work presented in two volumes his interpretation of Lincoln. Now he presents a selection of basic materials from which the reader may draw his own conclusions as to what manner of man our Lincoln was. The editor introduces the work with a twenty-six-page statement, which his first readers may wish were longer. The major part, 240 pages, consists of letters that William H. Herndon addressed to half a dozen men who were writing about Lincoln, principally to Ward H. Lamon and Jesse W. Weik; the latter was Herndon’s collaborator in a biography of Lincoln first published in 1889. These Herndon letters extend over the period 1866–91. The remainder of the book consists of letters to Herndon from persons who knew Lincoln or his family, with Herndon’s reports of interviews, and miscellaneous notes and topical sketches. Finally, a poem by Lincoln is reproduced in print and in fac-simile.

The book might with some justification have been called “The Hidden Herndon Rehabilitated” (p. 23–26). William H. Herndon was born in Kentucky in 1818 and from the age of three lived near or in Springfield, Illinois. He knew Lincoln from boyhood and was Lincoln’s partner, political lieutenant, anti-slavery tutor, and most confidential friend from 1845 until Lincoln went to Washington. The partnership was dissolved only by Lincoln’s death. Herndon spent a large part of his remaining years collecting materials, lecturing, and writing letters to anyone who might inquire of him anything about Lincoln. He interviewed in conversation or by letter every person whom he could reach who had ever known Lincoln or Lincoln’s family. Lamon based his
work almost entirely on materials furnished by Herndon, and when the latter died, Weik "inherited" his collection. After that "no one was allowed to have access to this mine of information until in 1922 most of it had passed into other hands and a good deal of it into the Henry E. Huntington Library"; Weik, with the approval of Albert J. Beveridge, refused to permit Dr. Barton to use it. When Mr. Hertz got access to the documents in 1933, he "felt like Balboa standing on a peak in Darien, viewing the Pacific Ocean for the first time."

"If these papers serve to rehabilitate Herndon, they will not, as many have feared, do harm to Lincoln's name and fame. They contain the best yet said as well as the worst of the man Lincoln; and they may clear up many a problem which has not been heretofore understood, and which, because it had hitherto to express itself in guarded hints and rumors, created an atmosphere of slander. An unbiased and accurate Life of Lincoln is now much more nearly possible."

The opinion just expressed might seem even somewhat naïve, in view of the fact that Herndon and Weik, Lamon, and Nicolay and Hay at least had access to all or most of this information about Lincoln; but possibly the time has now come when all available data may be used in an attempt to portray the whole of Lincoln.

Henry Ford is alleged to have said that "history is bunk!"; Napoleon, that "history consists of the lies that historians have agreed upon." Herndon quotes Lincoln: "Biographies as written are false and misleading"; when a man dies, his children and friends should be able to purchase a biography "already written, but with blanks, which they can fill up eloquently and grandly at pleasure, thus commemorating a lie, an injury to the dying, and to the name of the dead" (p. 175). Herndon and Hertz particularly attack Nicolay and Hay, and their censor, Robert Todd Lincoln, for omissions, evasions, and suppressions in their supposedly complete and authoritative life. Herndon says "the boys" were afraid of Bob; "he gives them materials and they in turn play hush."

The editor quotes from Hay's diary, "distributed only among friends of the Hay family," to prove the complete and suspicious surveillance of Robert Lincoln, and he might have referred the reader to Thayer's Life and Letters of John Hay, where Hay can be discovered writing to Nicolay, during the progress of their work: "We ought to write the history of those times like two everlasting angels who know everything, judge everything, tell the truth about everything, and don't care a twang of their harps about one side or the other. There will be one exception. We are Lincoln men all through" (2:33). That there was at least one other exception to their "telling the truth about every-
thing” may be noted in Hay’s remarks to Nicolay about the treatment of General McClellan: “I have toiled and labored through ten chapters over him…. It is of the utmost moment that we should seem fair to him, while we are destroying him” (2:31).

Herndon and Hertz apparently agree in making the book a sustained plea for the whole truth about Lincoln. Herndon’s second major characteristic is his devotion to the idea of the greatness of Lincoln; it is the persistent theme of the Herndon writings. This is too easily lost from sight in the numerous spicy, scandalous, and vulgar details that the majority of readers apparently find interesting but that many object to being made generally public on the printed page. This element in the book, together with the numerous and prominent reviews, will probably attract many readers.

With frequent repetition Herndon describes Lincoln as “the great, good, strong, noble, God-loved man”; “the noblest and loveliest character since Christ”; he “stands high in the foremost ranks of men in all ages, their equal, if not their superior.” Lincoln had one of the greatest minds, and an unlimited capacity for growth in intellect and power; he was a consummate politician and a great master of men.

To illustrate some of Herndon’s other problems in his attempt to reveal the whole of Lincoln; Lincoln’s mother and possibly Lincoln himself were illegitimate; Thomas Lincoln was surgically sterilized as a result of mumps, the time of the operation being a troublesome puzzle to Herndon. The father whipped Abraham, and “would sometimes knock him a rod.” Lincoln contracted syphilis in his youth. He had “goatish passions” for women, “could hardly keep his hands off them”; but after marriage he was true to his sacred marriage vow, and “Lincoln’s honor saved many a woman.” Mary Todd Lincoln was “the female wildcat of the age,” but “not without cause; their home was a hell on earth.” Herndon could not remember any of Lincoln’s stories that would do to tell to a mixed audience; Lincoln repelled a suggestion that he should compile a book of his stories, saying that “such a book would stink like a thousand privies.” He was “an infidel, was a universalist, was a unitarian, a theist,” and a fatalist. Withal, Herndon insisted that Lincoln was generally good and great, with some “negative defects,” which Lincoln himself would not permit to be concealed. Herndon repeatedly expresses his contempt for suppression of facts; people “love to be put to sleep by pleasant stories or humbugged by falsehood” (p. 152); “nice, dainty, finical, kid-gloved asses, who loved smooth literature with no admixture of truth in it” (p. 222). Herndon fails to see why the dis-
cussion of certain aspects of Lincoln's life and conduct should cause "a blush on any man's or woman's cheek," and he adds, "some people are too nice for this material sphere, this muddy globe of ours" (p. 243).

Herndon's emphasis on some of the less pleasant aspects of Lincoln's origin and life may be explained by Herndon's most rugged spirit of frontier democracy, and his realism, rationalism, and possibly some sense of the dramatic. "So far as I am concerned," he said, "I don't care how Lincoln came into the world; the higher he was created, the higher and grander... to me he is"; and Herndon urges Weik to bring out strongly this great contrast between the humble beginnings and the glorious heights achieved. Herndon saw in Lincoln a continued progress and growth, which was stopped only by his untimely death.

The editor does not indicate adequately the relation of the material in the book to the mass from which it was selected. In the opinion of the reviewer, the editor slightly misinterprets in the introduction the respective attitudes of Herndon and Weik with regard to the inclusion of materials in their biography of Lincoln. The bookmaking is quite attractive and satisfactory. The volume is generously illustrated with portraits, cartoons, and facsimiles.

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Western Lands and the American Revolution (University of Virginia, Institute for Research in the Social Sciences, monograph no. 25).


The author states in his preface that the object of this volume is to bring together in a single narrative an account of the American West from the time when its first exploitation was begun by English colonists to the end of the Confederation. Later, he states that the "primary object of this study has been to investigate the political consequences of conflicting claims to Western lands." Both objectives have been achieved. Because of Virginia's vast claims in the western country, the study necessarily deals in much detail with that state's interests. Just as Virginia was the first transatlantic experiment of the mother country, so was the Old Dominion the first colony to venture across the Appalachian Mountains.

We are taken behind the scenes in chapter 2 and introduced to one of the deep, underlying feuds of colonial history. It was a three-cornered feud. Here we find Benjamin Franklin playing his cards both against the Virginians (the