

LINCOLN LORE

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN—A MELANCHOLY MAN

*The melancholy days are come
The saddest of the year.
Bryant.*

It is accepted, generally, that Abraham Lincoln was a melancholy man. There is much disagreement, however, as to what contributed most to his melancholy disposition. There are three different sources which have been investigated in attempting to explain this very prominent characteristic: the traditional background, the historical record, and scientific conclusions.

The Traditional Background

The earliest attempt to discover the reason for Lincoln's melancholy was made by William Herndon who set out for Kentucky soon after the president's death to gather traditions and folklore about the Lincolns and Hankses. In the preface of his famous three-volume work he writes: "In drawing the portrait tell the world what the skeleton was with Lincoln. What gave him that peculiar melancholy? What cancer had he inside?"

Herndon then began to shake the genealogical tree of Lincoln's mother and alleged he found some spoiled fruit that accounted for the cancer. He also listened to stories about the Lincolns by people who had forgotten the obscure family residing in the county fifty years before. Some of the old citizens did remember a woman of bad character by the name of Nancy Hanks who lived not far from the Lincolns when they resided in Hardin County. It was the stories about this woman, whose name was the same as Lincoln's mother's maiden name, that Herndon confused and associated with Nancy Hanks Lincoln. The stories he heard about this wayward woman led him to believe he had found the source of Abraham Lincoln's melancholy.

The idle gossip about Lincoln's origin, which was undoubtedly responsible for Herndon's theory of the skeleton in some closet of the family, did not originate until the political campaign of 1860. Even if these stories then in circulation became known to Lincoln, it does not account for the fact of his melancholy in the early years of his life.

No student of Abraham Lincoln who has made a painstaking study of Lincoln's parentage and ancestry will accept for a moment the conclusions of William Herndon about irregularities in the Lincoln family. With nothing to worry about in this respect the source of Lincoln's melancholy must be discovered elsewhere.

The Historical Record

When one recalls the tragedies which occurred during Lincoln's early days, he is tempted to rely on the historical record to reveal the mystery of his melancholy.

Abraham Lincoln's infant brother but two years younger than himself died while the family lived in Kentucky. This event, however, could have left no lasting impression on Abraham. Even though at seven years of age when the family moved to Indiana he visited the grave of this child, it is not likely that he was deeply influenced.

The first great tragedy in Abraham's life occurred when he was but nine years of age. His mother died. In the one room of Thomas Lincoln's wilderness cabin all of the preliminary arrangements for the funeral were made, and the family was obliged to live in the same room with the remains until interment took place. All the painful tasks associated with the making of the coffin and the actual burial must have left a deep impression on this boy. The mother was buried on a little hill in front of the cabin. Each morning when Abraham came to the door the burial place of his mother would be most likely to draw his attention. For the next eleven years of his life the

incidents relating to her death would be kept fresh in mind. It was many years later that he spoke of her as his angel mother.

Upon the death of Mrs. Lincoln, Abraham's sister, Sarah, but two years older than himself, took over the burden of caring for the home. If Lincoln had been greatly attached to her before the decease of Mrs. Lincoln, he now became doubly so as she was serving in both the capacity of a sister and a mother. Although a stepmother came into the home a year or so later, Lincoln's affection for his sister did not diminish.

The second great tragedy in Lincoln's life was the death of this only sister, which occurred but ten years after the death of their mother. She died in childbirth which made her passing much more pathetic. One of the neighbors who recalled how Lincoln was affected upon hearing of the calamity said:

"Abe was in a little smoke house when the news came. He sat down, burying his face in his hands, the tears trickled through his large fingers, and sobs shook his frame. From then on he was alone in the world you might say."

Lincoln visited the site of his Indiana home in 1844, and in writing to a friend about the trip he said:

"I went into the neighborhood in that state in which I was raised, where my mother and only sister were buried." Their deaths seemed to be the outstanding facts among his reminiscences of the place. Soon after returning home he wrote a poem which helps one to learn the frame of mind he was in at the time of that visit.

Seven years after the passing of his only sister there occurred the death of his sweetheart, Ann Rutledge, to whom he is said to have been engaged. While no doubt the seriousness of his alleged collapse after this shock has been greatly exaggerated, yet no one will deny that the event contributed to his already depressed spirit.

It is not strange that the death of his mother, his only sister, and his sweetheart occurring at intervals would have a tendency to cast a gloom over his early life from which he never recovered.

Scientific Conclusions

There are those who feel that the source of Lincoln's melancholy can be traced to physical or mental disorders rather than to any emotional climaxes occasioned by a series of events such as has just been related.

John T. Stuart felt that Lincoln's melancholy was due to his abnormal indigestion. Stuart said, "I used to advise him to take blue mass pills and he did take them before he went to Washington and for five months after he was president."

Another reason for his seasons of depression is put forth by Dr. Thomas H. Shastid who feels that it was eye strain. He claims "Lincoln's eye muscles were not well balanced. His left eye had a tendency to turn upward. . . . It caused an unusually severe form of eye strain."

There is still another group which feels that his unnatural, morbid condition was hereditary and that traces of the same disposition to melancholy have been observed in other members of the family.

Regardless of whether any one or any combination of these causes were responsible for Lincoln's sad days, which occurred with more frequency as the great struggle to preserve the Union came to a close, it must be accepted that the loss of mother, sister, sweetheart, two boys of his own, and thousands of his soldier boys, as well as the mental condition of his wife, which verged on insanity, would bring enough sorrow into his life to set him apart as A Melancholy Man.