

LINCOLN LORE

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"BEHIND THE SCENES"

Discerning students of literature have usually come to the conclusion that some ghost writer was the real author of the book, "Behind the Scenes," attributed to Elizabeth Keckley. The same year this publication was released, in 1868, a lampoon edition of a booklet comprising twenty-three pages was published entitled "Behind the Seams," ascribed to "A nigger woman who took in work from Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis." The preface was signed:

Her
Betsey X Kickley (Nigger)
Mark

It is evident from a review of this pamphlet, a copy of which is in the Library of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, that even at the very time "Behind the Scenes" first appeared the authorship of the original publication was questioned.

It was not surprising to read in an Associated Press story, released from Washington on November 9, 1935, that the genuineness of the authorship had been openly challenged. David Rankin Barbee, who is apparently responsible for the statements with reference to the writer of the Keckley book, also is reported to have stated that there was "no such person at all" as Elizabeth Keckley. This announcement has not been received with the same assurance as the question of authorship, as there is available much evidence to prove that Elizabeth Keckley was a historical character and was associated with Mrs. Lincoln as her modiste.

Smith D. Fry, a newspaper correspondent, interviewed Elizabeth Keckley when she was eighty years old and then living at No. 1131 Fifteenth Street, Washington, D. C. An undated clipping from a Minneapolis paper presumably about the year 1905 contains a two-column story of the interview.

The account of Elizabeth Keckley's employment by the Lincolns is recalled in the interview and also the fact that she worked for the families of Douglas, Harlan, Breckenridge, Chase, and many others. Mr. Fry reports her as saying:

"Today I had to be trusted for a few spools of thread with which to do my sewing. In the old days I employed upwards of 20 sewing girls. My credit was good for hundreds of dollars' worth of goods. My services were sought everywhere, and I was always busy. I still have plenty of work to

do, but I am too feeble to do it. I am only able to do enough work to keep me in bread and butter. . . . I made dresses for Mrs. Lincoln, the ladies of President Johnson's family, and also for the ladies of the Grant administration. I was famous, in my line, for many years. I was proud; yes, very proud. But fame and pride do not last, as I have found to my sorrow. . . . I made lots of money when I was young and strong. While I was a slave, I performed all of my duties and earned \$1,200 additional with which I bought the freedom of myself and my boy; the boy I lost in the civil war; the boy who would to-day be my comfort and support."

In concluding his interview with Elizabeth Keckley, Mr. Fry wrote:

"Here, in the national capital, in a rented room in a small house, in an obscure neighborhood, friendless and growing gradually weaker and nearer the end of earth, lives this born slave, who bought her own freedom, who became famous among famous women and more famous men, in a wonderful period of the history of the republic. Here she lives alone, and here she soon will die, for not many moons will elapse before the inevitable summons must come to Elizabeth Keckley."

The interview which Fry had with Elizabeth Keckley not only established the fact that there was a person by that name; but he also drew from her a brief statement about the publishing of the much discussed book, "Behind the Scenes."

The real author of this book, according to Mr. Barbee, as related to the Associated Press, was Jane Swisshelm. He claims to have received the lead which led to her identity as the author from George Alfred Townsend and he states that "further research convinced him that Townsend was right."

Barbee describes Jane Swisshelm as an "able abolitionist sob-sister," and further alleges that Jane "in her utter devotion to the anti-slavery cause, invented an ex-slave who made Mrs. Lincoln's dresses." Mr. Barbee's evidence that Jane Swisshelm was the author seems to be based on a similarity of her known writing with the text of the Keckley book and the coincidence that Jane Swisshelm herself in early life was a seamstress like the Keckley woman.

Elizabeth Keckley tells a different story, however, about the authorship

of the book. She relates how two newspaper men in New York interviewed her in 1868 and had her tell the story of her White House days. She said that they published all that she said and a great deal that she did not say in a book entitled "Behind the Scenes." "The book was printed and my name was on the title page as the author of everything contained between the lids," she told Mr. Fry. She said also that the newspaper men hired stenographers. Possibly Jane Swisshelm was one of them but this is not likely, as she was born in 1815 and was fifty-three years old at the time the book was written.

The testimony of Elizabeth Keckley with reference to the publication of the book in New York is confirmed by the publisher's imprint: "The New York Printing Company, 81, 83 and 85 Centre St., New York." The preface of the book is signed by "Elizabeth Keckley, 14 Carroll Place, New York, March 14, 1868."

Further confirmation about the authorship of "Behind the Scenes" is now available through the courtesy of an interview given to the editor of Lincoln Lore by Ralph C. Busbey. Mr. Busbey is in possession of one of the original editions of the Keckley book which was presented to him when but a boy by his Uncle Hamilton Busbey. Upon presentation his uncle told him that he (Hamilton Busbey) "had been the ghost writer, that he obtained the story from Elizabeth Keckley, had gone over the letters quoted in the book, and had compiled it, and had published it in her name."

The book presented to Ralph C. Busbey bears the signature of Hamilton Busbey with the date 1870. At the time the book was published Hamilton Busbey was the editor and one of the owners of "Turf, Field and Farm" at 37 Park Row, New York City. This further substantiates the story of Elizabeth Keckley that she was interviewed by newspaper men. Thus it appears that most of the subject matter for the book "Behind the Scenes" came from the reminiscences of Elizabeth Keckley and was conserved through the literary efforts of Hamilton Busbey.

The original edition of the book has now become quite rare but recently another edition has been published which is available at a moderate price.