

LINCOLN LORE

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THE HIDDEN HERNDON

A book has recently appeared under a title which is a misnomer. It is named "The Hidden Lincoln," it should be called "The Hidden Herndon." The text does not reveal in its factual evidence characteristics of Abraham Lincoln which have been unknown to students of history, but there does emerge from its pages, an irresponsible gatherer of folklore and traditions named William Herndon. This Lincoln biographer has been accepted generally, until the publication of this book, as a careful and dependable historian but no one who tries to harmonize his conflicting and scatter-brain statements about the martyred president will have very much confidence, hereafter, in anything that he has said.

The letters which Herndon, Lincoln's law partner, wrote to friends who were anxious to secure some information about the martyred president composes more than one half of the subject matter of this book. The internal evidence in this collection of personal correspondence gives us unmistakable evidence of how Herndon's mind worked but fails to reveal, as has often been alleged, that Herndon held the only key which opened and revealed the mind of Abraham Lincoln.

Herndon had been gathering information about Lincoln but three years, as he so stated (p 57) when he wrote to Ward H. Lamon on February 26, 1869, that his records about Lincoln were "the most perfect of any living or dead man." He did make one probable exception to this statement—Boswell's Johnson (p 60). Fame must have seemed to Herndon an easy taskmaster if in three years the collecting of a few manuscripts, while still attending to his law practice, had allowed him to stand by the side of the immortal Boswell. Herndon's exalted opinion of his own superiority as the interpreter of Lincoln's motives and achievements might well be called the thesis of the book.

The exaggerated claim which Herndon made for the completeness of his collection of notes and personal impressions of Lincoln was largely a sales talk. He told Lamon that only by the use of his records could the true life of Lincoln be written and then concluded that there was fame and fortune in the records when put in the form of a biography (p 57). The sales talk brought results and on September 17, 1869, Herndon sold his entire collection of records to Lamon for \$4,000 (p 61). This was purely a mercenary deal giving Lamon the power to "sell, publish, use or dispose" of the records as he wished or willed. The American Boswell whose very life was supposed to be motivated by his love for his chief had sold out, as he put it, "horse, foot, etc" (p 60).

Previous to the sale of the manuscripts to Lamon, Herndon had delivered a series of four addresses from which excerpts had been published that aroused the ire of Lincoln's friends. Lamon had occasion to question Herndon about the lectures after acquiring the manuscript collection. Herndon replied that he had never finished the fifth lecture remarking that he was too lazy. He claimed all of the lectures were penned hurriedly and then stated: "The wonder is that I could get time to think about anything except—whiskey" (p 65). Later Herndon admitted to Weik that when he wished "to say something smart he took a toddy as exciter" (p 261).

The general impression has been, and the words of Herndon now confirm the theory, that his lectures in 1866 were delivered at a time when his mind was very much confused by too much of the "exciter." One has but to read the letter which Herndon wrote to Charles H. Hart in 1866 to confirm this opinion (p 42). Lincoln's law partner, instead of being the supposed keen analyst, gives evidence of having contributed many rambling and incoherent statements about Lincoln which have done great injustice, not only to the Lincoln family but to those who have relied upon William Herndon as a dealer in facts.

Ten years elapsed between the sale of the manuscripts to Lamon and Herndon's second attempt to accumulate information about Lincoln. During this interval only one letter written by Herndon appears. When this second installment of information began to take form, Herndon was seventy years of age and Lincoln had been dead twenty years. Herndon had made the acquaintance of Jesse W. Weik of Greencastle, Indiana, who subjected the elderly man to a long series of interviews by correspondence. The replies of Herndon to his queries constituted the chief source from which the famous three volume work known as Herndon's Lincoln was compiled and written by Mr. Weik.

On January 30, 1887, Herndon advised Weik that he had in his memory a thousand unwritten facts about Lincoln (p 228) and for the next three years he drew upon this inexhaustible mass of reminiscences for what he called factual evidence. It was a changed Lincoln, as might be expected after so long an interval, that emerged from his memory. In his early discussions, he said that Lincoln was "true to his friends, never deserting them till they deserted virtue, veracity, and integrity" (p 83) but now Lincoln becomes "a remorseless trimmer with men. They were his tools, and when they were used up, he threw them aside as old iron and took up new tools" (p 208). In the old notes, Herndon said "he never knew Lincoln to do a mean thing" (p 82), but he wrote to Weik in 1886 that "when Lincoln used a man and sucked all the uses out of him, he would throw away the thing as an old orange peeling" (p. 135). Not only did the character of Lincoln undergo a change but both his father and mother were presented in an unenviable light and in the preface of the three volume work it is stated that Lincoln came from "a stagnant putrid pool."

As the famous book neared completion through the industry of Mr. Weik, both men became very much concerned about its acceptance by the public. Herndon advised Weik that success was what they wanted and that they should do anything to achieve it "short of lying or fraud" (p 210). That the economic urge was also a fact in the producing of this second accumulation of source material cannot be doubted from the internal evidence in Herndon's correspondence.

The second section of the book, "The Hidden Lincoln," containing about 175 pages and edited by Emanuel Hertz, contains much data of value but here also one is in doubt as to just how much of the information is authentic. For instance, Herndon claimed that he had no confidence in Dennis Hanks (p 59) and that Hanks "would go out of his way a mile to lie" (p 66) yet there is a ten page interview with Dennis used as an authoritative source (p 274-283).

By far the most valuable testimony in the whole book is the statement made by Abraham Lincoln's stepmother (p 350-353). Yet it is difficult to understand why Herndon would use the testimony of his "lying" Dennis rather than Abraham's stepmother when they seemed to be in disagreement about some incident.

When the book is read through, word by word, with a pencil in hand tabulating the characteristics of Lincoln, it is quite evident that as a source book about the Emancipator, it has never been equaled for contradictions. You may find in it just the kind of a Lincoln you want to find to suit your taste. Its adaptation to the needs of the writer of fiction and how it will be used is best illustrated by one of Lincoln's own stories about the Yankee peddler whose merchandise included a pair of pants "large enough for any man, small enough for any boy." To conclude that any factual evidence in the book reveals "A Hidden Lincoln" is absurd but it most certainly does remove for all time the claim that William Herndon is an American Boswell.