

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S SOURCE OF HUMOR

The campaign biography published by William Dean Howells and annotated by Abraham Lincoln himself, contains many casual statements in the text which were left uncorrected by the President, yet it is of historical importance heretofore overlooked.

In the strange blending of pathos and humor in Lincoln's character, many theories have been set forth about the origin of Lincoln's unusual melancholy. We need not speculate about the early contributors to his sense of humor as it is clearly set forth in Howell's volume in these words:

"From his father came that knack of story-telling, which has made him so delightful among acquaintances, and so irresistible in his stump and forensic drolleries".

Lincoln did not wish to appear in the role of a comedian and remarked with reference to his stories, "I am not a manufacturer but a retailer".

Lincoln often introduced a story with these words: "My old father used to tell a story about ———". It is quite certain that his old father could not have been the wholesale warehouse where all his stories originated, so it is necessary to look elsewhere for the source of his anecdotes.

There are several books by outstanding American humorists which Lincoln is known to have used, and some of his humor was evidently imported, as he acquired famous books of humor from Europe. It is the purpose of this bulletin to present a bibliography of the most important books of humor which Abraham Lincoln is known to have read.

Baldwin, J. G., *Flush Times in Alabama*.

This book, the product of a circuit riding lawyer, was of special interest to Lincoln because the characters created by the author were types with whom Lincoln often came in contact in the Illinois days.

Browne, Charles Farrar (Artemus Ward),  
*Artemus Ward, His Book*

This volume, published in 1862, was read by Lincoln with much glee and has become one of the most famous of early books of humor. One chapter, entitled "High-handed Outrage at Utica", was read at a cabinet meeting just before the discussion of the Emancipation Proclamation, according to the Chase diary. The book also contains a chapter on an "Interview with President Lincoln".

Locke, David Ross (Petroleum V. Nasby),  
*The Nasby Letters*

His humor was especially enjoyed by Lincoln because of his political and military witticisms. The negro, the Copperheads, General McClelland, and the Democrats in particular came in for consideration. Locke also had an interview with Lincoln which he reports in true Nasby fashion.

Halpine, C. G., *Life and Adventures of Private Miles O'Riley*.

This was another of those war time books of humor which have a very definite place in the life of a nation that is going through a period of deep humiliation and sorrow. Lincoln enjoyed the witticisms of Miles O'Riley.

Miller, Joe, *Joe Miller's Jest Book*

This is the book which Whitney claims Lincoln borrowed from Judge Treat and from which Lincoln, after

learning the contents, began telling stories around the circuit "but very much embellished and changed, evidently by Lincoln himself". This has been a very popular jest book, and has gone into many editions. Joe Miller was primarily a maker of puns, and Lincoln enjoyed this type of humor. One of the early copies of the book was published in London by Charles Mason.

Newell, R. N. (Orpheus C. Kerr), *The Orpheus C. Kerr Papers*

This man Newell, who wrote under the name of "office-seeker" (the literal pronunciation), was constantly ridiculing those in important positions in the government, and he did not spare the President whom he also had interviewed by one of his "boys" as he called the characters who became his messengers.

Quinn, James, *Quinn's Jest*

This is a small book which was published in London in 1776 and which contains stories and repartee of the English actor, James Quinn. Many of the stories are not on a sufficiently high level to be suitable for reading in polite society. They were read by Lincoln as a young man in the wilderness of Indiana.

Richter, Johann Paul Friedrich, *Werke*, Vol. 14 to 17.

Of this famous German humorist it is said, "His humor, the most distinctive of his qualities, cannot be dissociated from the other characteristics of his writings. It mingled with all his thoughts, and to some extent determined the form in which he embodied his most serious reflections".

Richter's sixty volume work appeared in 1826, and a second edition of thirty-four volumes came from the press in 1840. It was probably volumes fourteen to seventeen inclusive of this last edition which Lincoln took from the Library of Congress in March 1863 and kept at the White House for about two weeks.

No finer illustration of Lincoln's appreciation of a humorous writing is to be found than that in Carpenter's reminiscence of an incident in the White House.

"Among the callers in the course of an evening which I well remember, was a party composed of two senators, a representative, an ex-lieutenant-governor of a western State, and several private citizens. They had business of great importance involving the necessity of the President's examination of voluminous documents. He was at this time, from an unusual pressure of office-seekers, in addition to his other cares, literally worn out. Pushing everything aside, he said to one of the party: "Have you seen the 'Nasby Papers'?" "No, I have not," was the answer: "who is 'Nasby'?" "There is a chap out in Ohio," returned the President, "who has been writing a series of letters in the newspapers over the signature of 'Petroleum V. Nasby'. Some one sent me a pamphlet collection of them the other day. I am going to write to 'Petroleum' to come down here, and I intend to tell him if he will communicate his talent to me, I will 'swap' places with him." Thereupon he arose, went to a drawer in his desk, and, taking out the "Letters," sat down to read one to the company, finding in their enjoyment of it the temporary excitement and relief which another man would have found in a glass of wine. The instant he ceased, the book was thrown aside, his countenance relapsed into its habitual serious expression, and the business before him was entered upon with the utmost earnestness."