

LINCOLN LORE

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WILLIAM HENRY HERNDON, 1818-1891

The fact that for seventeen years William Herndon was the law partner of Abraham Lincoln, has contributed more than any other one element to the recognition Herndon has received among students of the President. Nevertheless, he is not remembered for any single contribution which he may have made to the Lincoln-Herndon partnership. However, Herndon was responsible for gathering the most notable, early collection of reminiscences, folklore, and traditions relating to Abraham Lincoln, and for this contribution of source material, much of it valuable, he deserves the place on the Lincoln Recognition Roster, awarded him by the Lincoln Foundation Advisory Group.

Although Mr. Herndon assembled much valuable information, he could not be considered a discriminate collector of dependable sources. He did little or no research work in the public archives, but he was a persistent gatherer of folklore. He relied largely for his information upon personal interviews with those who knew Lincoln, and correspondence with others who had come in contact with the President.

Herndon was influenced in his search for information about Lincoln by his experiences as a lawyer, and went about his task as if he were trying to gather evidence, either to convict or to defend one under indictment. He referred to his historical efforts in these words, "When I was around taking evidence soon after, and long after Mr. Lincoln's death, etc." He was in reality a collector of evidence, good, bad and indifferent.

It is now possible, through the publication of the bulk of his manuscripts, to appraise his findings in the light of modern research technique. Herndon's source material now available in book form may be divided into: "Letters from Herndon," "Letters to Herndon," "Statements Collected by Herndon," and "Herndon's Notes and Monographs:" section divisions of *The Hidden Lincoln*.

One would immediately conclude that the letters Herndon wrote would be of greatest value because of his personal acquaintance with Lincoln. This is true of those letters written by him between 1866 and 1874, but there are only 55 pages of these pieces of correspondence, compared with 126 pages written between 1885 and 1890. This last group of letters, written nearly a quarter of a century after Lincoln was dead, cannot be accepted for authentic evidence, as Herndon's fading memory and a changed mental attitude toward Lincoln, invalidates a large percentage of them.

Most of the source material for the Herndon-Weik, three volume work, was gleaned by Jesse Weik from these letters which Herndon wrote to him over a period of four years, beginning in October 1885. Inasmuch as the beginning of this voluminous correspondence occurred over twenty years after Lincoln was dead and buried, and in many cases Herndon was trying to remember events which transpired in 1840 or earlier, one may conclude for himself just how accurate an event might be portrayed forty or fifty years after it took place.

In the same category, with the Herndon letters of 1885 and thereafter, there should be placed the 52 pages of "Herndon's Notes and Monographs," all of which were apparently written as late as 1887. In other words, only 55 of 233 pages of Herndon's own conclusions contain information which was transcribed within nine years after

Lincoln's death. Only 28 pages of Lincoln information were written by Herndon within three years after the President had passed away and even then Herndon often referred to events of Lincoln's earlier years.

The "Letters to Herndon," most of them from friends of Lincoln, are compiled on 74 pages and the other section of the book contains over 50 pages of "Statements Collected by Herndon." In 1870 Herndon wrote, "Much was told me which I did not reduce to writing, but which, much of which, floats about in my memory." It is to be regretted that Mr. Herndon did not write down all that was told him at the time it was related, as many of his conclusions are drawn from interviews which were "floating around in his memory" as late as 1888.

Although the Herndon three volumes were indirectly his portrait of Lincoln, he could hardly be considered an author. With his own pen he prepared very little for the publishers, except a few lectures which appeared in broadside form. *Herndon's Lincoln* was, in reality, a literary effort of Jesse Weik and was written in Greencastle, Indiana. It is a book, however, which will be more often associated with Herndon than with the author, and it has proven to be the most widely used Lincoln source book among the early biographers of the President.

The Herndon manuscripts served as the primary source for these five books: *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* known as the Lamon biography, but written by Chauncey F. Black and published in 1872, *Herndon's Lincoln* written by Jesse W. Weik and published in 1889, *The Real Lincoln* written by Jesse W. Weik and published in 1922, *Abraham Lincoln* by Albert J. Beveridge and published in 1928, and *The Hidden Lincoln* compiled by Emanuel Hertz and published in 1938. Now the accumulation of source material known as the Herndon-Weik Collection is deposited in the Library of Congress, where through micro-film facilities, students of Lincoln everywhere may weigh the evidence and use their own judgment as to how much of the data bears the imprint of authenticity.

In a letter written to Ward H. Lamon on February 26, 1869 Herndon states with reference to his Lincoln data, "I'll make the world pay for these records some day. They are the most perfect of any living or dead man—probably Johnson's biography by Boswell accepted." The world has paid dearly for some of these records, in that it has an entirely false conception of Lincoln's parentage, early life, and many of his personal traits, yet enough biographical data of importance was gathered and made available by Herndon to warrant him a place on the Lincoln Recognition Roster. However, we would not be willing to call Herndon another Boswell.

The body of William Herndon reclined in an unmarked grave in Oak Ridge Cemetery, Springfield, Illinois for twenty-five years before the friends of Abraham Lincoln placed an appropriate memorial stone on the lot bearing this inscription: "William H. Herndon/Abraham Lincoln's/Law Partner 17 Years/Dec. 25, 1818—Mar. 18, 1891/The struggles of this age and/succeeding ages, for God and/Man—religion—humanity and liberty/with all their complex and/grand relations—may they/triumph and conquer forever,/is my ardent wish and most/fervent soul-prayer."

Note: This is the fourth of a series of biographical sketches on the ten persons selected by the Foundation Advisory Group for enrollment on the Lincoln Recognition Roster.