

LINCOLN LORE

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AN EARLY REVIEW OF LAMON'S LINCOLN

The first biography which attempted to discuss the traditions associated with the more intimate private life of Abraham Lincoln came from the press in 1872, seven years after the death of the martyred President. Although the authorship of the book was credited to Ward H. Lamon, the actual writing of the text was done by Chauncey F. Black, who used as a primary source the manuscripts which Lamon had purchased from William Herndon. A better statement of the origin of the book would leave the name of Lamon entirely out of the picture and call it Black's interpretation of the Herndon manuscripts. Herndon was an indiscriminate gatherer of folklore and Black had no love for Lincoln, so we might expect just such reviews of the book as appeared in *The Southern Magazine*, for September 1872, published at Baltimore, Maryland. Inasmuch as the Herndon manuscripts were first spread before the public by Black, and have largely influenced all subsequent biographies, it has been thought wise to make some excerpts from the review, mentioned above. Statements by the reviewer "W. H. B." will give one the earliest, widely, circulated glimpses of Lincoln as portrayed by Black.

The Life of Abraham Lincoln, from his Birth to his Inauguration as President. By Ward H. Lamon. Boston: Jas. R. Osgood & Co. 1872.

Source.—"The author—or compiler—has gathered from all sources, but especially from Mr. Herndon, Mr. Lincoln's intimate associate and business partner, a vast mass of material; and has used it, as he affirms, and as we see no reason to doubt, conscientiously and justly."

Author.—"That he has acted conscientiously, indeed, even to the extent of doing violence to his feelings, is evident from the repressed disgust which, in spite of him, is manifest throughout this volume, and the open expression of which he can not always prevent."

Reviewer.—"For ourselves, we shall confine our remarks to a brief outline sketch of the facts narrated."

Ancestry.—"To say that Abraham Lincoln was born in 'obscurity,' or 'humble poverty,' is to use the language of flattery toward one who, according to his biographer, neither knew his own grandfather, nor the name which he had no legal right to bear."

Birth.—"Abraham Lincoln was born in 1809, in a 'miserable cabin' near Hodgenville, Kentucky."

Parents.—"There is no evidence, the biographer says, beyond cohabitation, of any marriage between his parents, and indeed from the account given it is not likely that either attached much importance to the formal rite."

Father.—"His father seems to have been a ne'er-do-well, with a considerable dash of the ruffian about him. . . . As for 'Tom Lincoln,' the biographer heartily congratulates himself when he is able 'to discard him, his family and fortunes from further consideration.'"

Early Writings.—"Part of these first-fruits of his muse are yet in existence, but we are told that, unfortunately, they are too grossly obscene for even a specimen to be given."

First River Trip.—"It turned out very profitably, and greatly raised the estimation in which young Lincoln was held. The goods were well sold partly for counterfeit money, and 'Abe displayed his genius for mercantile affairs by handsomely putting the counterfeits off on the innocent folks along the river.'"

Black Hawk War.—"Lincoln raised, though he did not command, a company chiefly distinguished for want of discipline and for mutinying."

Early Political Affiliation.—"As the Democratic party was then in an overwhelming majority in the State (Illinois), and as Mr. Lincoln was not the man to espouse the

cause of the minority, he must have been a Democrat."

Political Strategy.—"As the Whig party was evidently coming into power in Sangamon, Mr. Lincoln presented himself as a Whig, though declaring at the same time that he was run by the Democrats. This strategy secured the votes of both sides and elected him."

Public Speaking.—"It was plain, direct, and profusely spiced with indecency."

Theology.—"He wrote a book—which was never published, however—'intended to demonstrate, first, that the Bible was not God's revelation; and secondly, that Jesus Christ was not the Son of God.'"

Ann Rutledge's Death.—"This loss produced a great effect upon Mr. Lincoln's mind, and he had to be watched to prevent him from committing suicide."

Deserts Miss Todd at Altar.—" . . . preparations made for the wedding, but at the last hour he failed to keep his engagement, and 'declared that he hated Mary (Todd) and loved Miss Edwards.' Again razors, pocket-knives and other edge-tools had to be kept from him, and he wrote 'some gloomy lines' for the Sangamon Journal, entitled, 'Suicide.'"

Slavery.—"None of his public acts, either before or after he became President, exhibited any special tenderness for the African race, or any extraordinary commiseration of their lot."

Affiliated with Abolitionists.—"He was finally brought into the party by the favorite scheme of signing a name without authority, and leaving the person to repudiate or acknowledge as it might seem expedient later. Mr. Herndon did it for him this time, and it seeming expedient, he adopted the action."

Nominated for Presidency.—"With his eyes on the campaign of 1860, he wanted 'to take the wind out of Seward's sails.' In this wise did he contrive, far beforehand, 'to dig pitfalls and lay obstructions in the way of his most formidable competitors.'"

Story Telling.—"Whether it arose from early training, from mental constitution, or merely from a motive of policy—or, more probably, from all combined—an ineradicable love of obscenity, and that not merely of witty smut but of simple filth, was a characteristic of the late President."

Reviewer's Conclusion.—"We had thought to take some notice of Mr. Lincoln's religious views, as he has been almost canonized by his admirers, while his biographer produces a mass of evidence from his intimate and life-long friends to show that he was never a Christian at all, but 'lived on the border-line between theism and atheism,' in that forlornest of mental states, superstitious unbelief. And we had purposed to notice briefly the events of his nomination and election to the Presidency, and of that wretched flight in disguise through Baltimore to the capital, which seems to have been a device of Mr. Seward to cast disgrace and ridicule on his successful rival—but we can not. The whole story of this career from beginning to end is so dreary, so wretched, so shabby, such a tissue of pitiful dodging and chicanery, so unrelieved by anything pure, noble, or dignified, that even to follow it as far as we have done, has well-nigh surpassed our powers of endurance; and when, putting all partisan feeling aside, we look back at the men who once were chosen by their countrymen to fill the places that this man has occupied—a Washington, a Jefferson, a Madison, an Adams, or later, a Webster, a Clay, or a Calhoun—men of culture and refinement, of honor, of exalted patriotism, of broad views and wise statesmanship—and measure the distance from them to Abraham Lincoln, we sicken with shame and disgust. W. H. B."