

# LINCOLN LORE

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## DR. BROWNE, OBSCURE BIOGRAPHER OF LINCOLN

Not many students would be able to recall offhand the title of a Lincoln book written by Robert H. Browne, M.D., although the work was one of the most voluminous undertakings in the field of Lincolniana, previous to the Lincoln Centennial deluge of literature. Two large volumes containing a total of 1,283 pages in the first edition, and 1,331 pages in the second "revised" edition, comprise what is called *Abraham Lincoln and the Men of His Time*. Possibly a part of Dr. Browne's obscurity is due to the confusion with a more widely acclaimed volume by Francis H. Browne, entitled, *The Everyday Life of Abraham Lincoln*. As far as we know Dr. Browne and Francis H. were not related.

When the first state Capitol building at Springfield was being constructed, a Scotchman by the name of Nimmo Browne, then living in St. Louis, was employed to assist in the completion of the edifice. He was educated in both engineering and art in the University of Edinburgh. Migrating to America in 1829, he remained in New York until 1840 when he moved to St. Louis. Upon his employment at Springfield he brought his family to the Illinois city where they remained until 1846.

Nimmo had a son named Robert, who was the Robert H. Browne, M.D., the subject of this monograph. Robert had this to say about his Springfield days.

"The author was a boy of twelve when he first knew Lincoln, and liked him, as all the boys in Springfield did, for he took pleasure in making us his friends and in telling us delightful little stories of birds and trees and the woods and the animals and the rivers, tales so well suited to our tastes and boyish ways that we always wanted to hear him tell another story."

Three years after the Brownes had returned to St. Louis they came back to Illinois, and settled on a farm in McLean County, sixteen miles from Bloomington, and it was in this county seat where Robert received a part of his education.

The youth's grandfather was a close friend of Judge Davis, through whom Browne made the acquaintance of Asahel Gridley and "became office boy, student, and general attache of the Gridley-Davis office and bank for several years." It was while working here that he made the further acquaintance of Lincoln who used the Davis-Gridley office as his legal headquarters in Bloomington.

Browne recalls the instance of his meeting with Lincoln at Bloomington, with Mr. Gridley addressing Lincoln as follows:

"Mr. Lincoln, I am very glad to have you here with us again. I have made some changes. This will be your desk, and the tables you can arrange as you like. This young man, Robert, will render you any assistance he can. He is here attending school. His people live in the country . . . ."

"Mr. Lincoln took my hand with a warmth and expression that lightened up the soul of anyone whom he respected or held to be a friend, saying: 'Yes, Mr. Gridley, I will get along first rate. This will all suit me very well'; and, turning to me: 'The young man will do as well as the rest of us; but he must not be kept out of school an hour on my account. It seems to me, Robert, that I ought to know you; but, then, you never know about boys of your age, who change every year, and grow out of your knowledge.' I replied: 'Mr. Lincoln, I know who you are very well. My father knew you when we lived in Springfield, when he helped to finish the south front and the top work of the Capitol building.' 'Yes, yes, I knew Mr. Browne, the Scotchman. I remember him quite well . . . .'"

Not only did both Nimmo Browne and his son Robert know Abraham Lincoln over a period of years, but they were even more intimate with Stephen A. Douglas. According to Robert, it was Douglas who introduced Nimmo Browne to Lincoln during Browne's Springfield residence.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Browne entered the service of his country and an assignment to Kentucky gave him an opportunity to make some original researches in the Lincoln country over a period of several weeks.

Dr. Browne has the distinction of being the first biographer to make a careful study of the surroundings where Lincoln grew up in Kentucky, and conducted the first planned pilgrimage of any group to the birthplace. He started gathering the source material for his biography shortly after Lincoln reached Washington in 1861. He first visited the community of Lincoln's birthplace in the Fall of 1862, and a few excerpts of his report of this visit indicates his method of gaining information:

"We first came to Elizabethtown supposing it was the principle point of interest . . . We were directed to a broken-down, delapidated, rough, one-room cabin, with a shed-room, unroofed in the rear. The front was about 12 x 14 feet square. The back room was about 8 x 14 feet. We had looked it over, mounted and were leaving it, believing as we had been told that it was the birthplace of Mr. Lincoln." As they were leaving a woman advised them: "I hearn tell that you gentlemen thought Abe Lincoln war born thar; but he warnt. That house is what is left of the cabin whar his father and mother commenced housekeeping. . . . No, Abe warnt born thar, he war born over to the farm on Nolin's Creek arter they moved."

Brown continued: "In due course we reached the farm and the cabin on Nolin Creek. We went all over it. . . . Our party with several neighbors, examined the place with much interest and care; and as we looked over it, all did so with becoming respect. There was no one of the little party—five of ours and ten or more of the people, most of the latter being women, who had any difference of opinion. . . ."

"We walked and rode all over the ground, as we could in every direction, on every open road and bridlepath, and often crosswise without either path or road. We traveled up and down the little roads and streams, scouted, zigzagged, and paralleled over it in something like military exploration, examining it in every way we could, riding as much as one hundred miles in traversing the district in every direction."

As a result of these investigations Browne prepared a most accurate description of Lincoln's early environment and the social and economic standing of his parents. If Lincoln students had relied upon the biography of Dr. Browne instead of the writings of William Herndon, who admits in a letter to Weik that he was never in the Lincoln country in Kentucky, we would not be confronted with the mass of unreliable folklore which now clutters up the pages of history about Lincoln's boyhood. His book is primarily a source book and those interested in Douglas as well as Lincoln will find it valuable for reference. The data is very poorly organized and it can hardly be called a well-written biography.

After the war Browne attended the Rush Medical College, at Chicago, where he graduated in 1869. The first edition of his two volume work was published in 1900 and a revised edition appeared in 1907. Two years after this last publication came from the press Dr. Browne died in Kansas on June 8, 1909.