

LINCOLN LORE

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THE LINCOLN MOTHER CONTROVERSY

A contribution to the February 1945 number of the *Reader's Digest*, appearing under the caption, "*He Loved Me Truly*," pays a well deserved tribute to Sarah Johnston Lincoln, the revered stepmother of the President. While the monograph often approaches fiction, especially in portraying the early home surroundings of the Lincolns in Indiana, and in greatly exaggerating the shortcomings of the father, it is a statement in the postscript, added by one of the *Digest's* editors, which has aroused Lincoln students.

The nine line postscript comment printed in italics concludes with this statement:

"When Abraham Lincoln said, 'All that I am I owe to my angel mother' he was speaking of his stepmother."

The identity of the mother, to whom Lincoln is said to have referred, opens up again a mass of purely traditional data, which, because of its unreliable source, contributes little to the final deductions which can be made. However, the many queries which have come to the Foundation about the mother controversy almost necessitates this discussion.

The Townsend Version

George Alfred Townsend, an accomplished poet, lecturer, and correspondent, visited Springfield, Illinois, on January 24th and 25th, 1867, while on a lecture tour. He interviewed in Springfield, William Herndon, former law partner of Abraham Lincoln. Townsend sent a report of his interview to the *New York Tribune*. Later this article was published in a fifteen page booklet under the caption *The Real Life of Abraham Lincoln*. As far as we can learn this is the earliest publication which attempts to name the individual, who first put in circulation the famous statement Lincoln is said to have made about his mother. It follows:

"The pleasantest of his (Lincoln's) reminiscences were of his mother, to whom he imputed the best and the brightest qualities he had inherited. He broke out once to Mr. Herndon, as they were returning from court in another county: 'Billy, all I am or can be I owe to my angel-mother.'"

The Hart Version

Charles H. Hart, a Lincoln author with whom Herndon had been in correspondence, read the Townsend account of the Lincoln tribute to his mother and thought it contradicted the unlovely story he had received from Herndon about her. Hart wrote him inquiring about the inconsistency. Herndon replied on March 2, 1867: "When Lincoln spoke to me as he did he had reference to his mother's mind. Nothing else and it was thus I told it."

In 1870 Hart wrote a biographical sketch of Lincoln and after commenting on the death of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, referred to her in part as:

"The mother of whom in after years with tears in his eyes, he (Lincoln) said: 'All that I am or hope to be I owe to my angel mother.'"

The Arnold Version

In the paragraph which followed the statement about Nancy Hanks in the Herndon letter of March 2, 1867, he wrote: "Arnold's book is out," but stated he had not read it. Herndon had been corresponding with Arnold and also paid him a visit in Chicago. Arnold may have been the first person to whom Herndon told the mother story. Arnold's book, *Lincoln and Slavery*, although dated in 1866, apparently did not come out until early in 1867. It was probably the first cloth-bound book to carry the traditional Lincoln tribute to his mother. The version by Arnold will be observed in the following lines:

"His (Lincoln's) mother died when he was only ten years of age, but she lived long enough to make a deep and lasting impression upon her son. He ever spoke of her with deep feeling and grateful affection. He said, with his eyes suffused with tears, 'All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother.'"

The Leland Version

The Townsend, Hart and Arnold versions, it will be noted, all used the term "angel mother," Townsend even going so far as to make it one word "angel-mother." Even in this early stage of its use there was one Lincoln student, Charles G. Leland, who questioned the identity of the mother. He had also been in correspondence with Herndon very early, and later, in the meantime, had read the Lamon publication which used the Herndon sources and made Nancy Hanks anything but an angel. Leland noted in his book published in 1879:

"When in after years Lincoln spoke of his 'saintly mother' and of his 'angel of a mother' he referred to this noble woman (Sarah Bush Lincoln, the stepmother) who first made him feel like a human being."

The Lamon Version

Ward H. Lamon was the recipient of a letter from Herndon about the mother question on March 6, 1870. In this correspondence is revealed the occasion on which Herndon claimed Lincoln made the famous statement about his mother. It was the incident of the famous buggy ride placed by Herndon about 1851. The story in part follows:

"Lincoln and I had a case in the Menard Circuit Court which required a discussion on heredity, quality of mind, natures, etc. Lincoln's mind was dwelling on this case, mine on something else. Lincoln, all at once, said, 'Billy, I'll tell you something, but keep it a secret while I live.'" Herndon then claims that Lincoln told him among other discreditable things about the Hanks family, that his mother was an illegitimate child whose father was a nobleman of Virginia, and after explaining that his mother had inherited the quality of the nobleman and he (Lincoln) inherited these same qualities from his mother, Herndon alleges Lincoln exclaimed:

"All that I am or hope ever to be I get from my mother. God bless her."

The Herndon Version

In the correspondence which Herndon carried on with Jesse M. Weik over a period of years, he admitted on one occasion that he had not made any notes of what Lincoln said to him on the famous alleged buggy ride, but recalled the incident from memory. At least fifteen years had elapsed when he first tried to recall the conversation for Arnold and Townsend. He did write out for Weik, however, on January 19, 1886, this version of the tribute.

"All that I am or hope ever to be I got from my mother. God bless her."

The Weik Version

When the three-volume work of Weik, which appeared in 1889, was completed, the version of the tribute which was undoubtedly approved by Herndon, appeared in this form:

"God bless my mother; all that I am or ever hope to be I owe to her."

It will be observed that in every instance where Herndon himself writes out the quotation the word "angel" never appeared. There has never been any serious doubt in the minds of the great majority of Lincoln students about the identity of the mother to whom Lincoln referred in the traditional tribute—it was his own mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln.