

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN BOOK OF THE YEAR, 1945

The Foundation Advisory Group which selects annually the outstanding volume coming from the press relating to Abraham Lincoln, seems to be in full accord with the book reviewers, who have concluded that Randall's *Lincoln, the President*, is worthy of unusual attention. The balloting by the group reveals that this two volume work by Prof. James G. Randall has been designated as the Lincoln Book of the Year. The next choice of the group is W. E. Baringer's "A House Dividing", designated as highly commendable.

Professor Randall's scholarly and carefully annotated volumes have been so widely and adequately reviewed that it would seem superfluous to make further comments in *Lincoln Lore* about the main thesis of this historical biography or the authoritative tone of the discussion. However, the contents of the preliminaries and the appendix which indicate that a partial break, at least, has been made with heretofore generally accepted Lincoln sources, invite some comments which would seem to be appropriate in announcing this Lincoln Book of the Year.

The author's preface of but four pages in *Lincoln the President*, is a brief but significant introductory note for a two volume work containing 834 pages. Of the 169 lines in this preface, 51 of these, or nearly one third, comment on the status of the Herndon folklore as a dependable source. This noticeable emphasis allows us to assume that Professor Randall sensed the importance of placing special stress on his unwillingness to draw so largely as his predecessor's had done upon the Herndon traditions.

Throughout the text of the book, Professor Randall uses rather freely, for bringing out the crux of a question, the ellipses symbol of three periods (. . .) indicating that data irrelevant to the immediate need of the author has been omitted. Utilizing this same expedient for the sake of brevity and emphasis, the author's fifty-one lines in the preface relating to the Herndon sources, are reduced to the following abbreviated formula:

"Popular ideas of Lincoln are in a large part traceable to that picturesque but provocative individual, William H. Herndon . . . but the Lincoln he has given us needs reconsideration . . . only recently has general access been given to his impressive but unsatisfactory body of manuscripts . . . he is sometimes unreliable even about the facts of his own life.

"To take Herndon at face value is no longer permissible . . . mere citations to the Herndon-Weik collection are by no means enough. The stuff of this collection is uneven and needs sifting . . . The author cannot give as full acceptance to Herndon's material as Beveridge did . . . Some of Herndon's statements have greater validity than others . . . One can doubt his accumulated masses of reminiscence and still give a measure of credence to descriptions which arose from close daily association . . .

"Herndon has profited by his well-known statement that he loved the truth . . . One must go back of this assertion to ask whether a man who thought he could grasp truth by intuition . . . could adequately set forth the truth . . . He prided himself on a kind of clairvoyance and knack for mind-reading. Information which he acquired by assiduous effort had to undergo Herndonian processing . . . His down-to-earth frankness, his pioneer tang and flavor, may be appreciated while one keeps a wholesome distrust for this excess of rhetoric and his psychoanalytical conjecture."

About the only current piece of adverse criticism of the Randall volume to come to our notice is the publishing in the appendix of a chapter on "Sifting the Ann

Rutledge Evidence." Attention has been called to the fact that later, when the two companion volumes on Lincoln, the President, are brought from the press, the Ann Rutledge story will be sandwiched in between the Gettysburg Address and the Message to Congress in December 1863.

The author does not make it quite clear why the traditional Rutledge episode which he admits is of no "intrinsic importance at all" should be presented in a book revealing *Lincoln, the President*. The setting forth of the piece of fiction, although it may have been relegated to the appendix does not, in reality, reduce it to a "subordinate status" but gives it much more emphasis than it would have received in a paragraph denouncement of the tradition in the text. The almost unanimous attention accorded it by reviewers substantiates the claim of its prominence. The fact that the conclusion drawn in the appendix about the Rutledge tradition, supports the main thesis of the preface, may have some bearing on the publishing of the appendix. The author states in the introductory paragraphs of the Rutledge article: "One may trace the popularizing, indeed, the exaggerated exploitation—of the tradition to Herndon; it was he who gave it publicity, filled the gaps."

The author further comments: "From November 16, 1866, the subject was peculiarly Herndon's. On that day he delivered in Springfield a lengthy, lush, and sentimental lecture under the title 'Abraham Lincoln, Miss Ann Rutledge, New Salem, Pioneering and the Poem'." He also referred to the folklore gathered by Herndon about the Rutledge story or "A mass of confused and contradictory evidence," and amplified this opinion with this conclusion:

"If one is treating only the things whose reality and significance for Lincoln are matters of solid proof, the familiar story of Lincoln and Ann may be omitted altogether."

Unless Randall's chapter on "The Home on Eighth Street" was written long before the appendix or even the preface itself, it is difficult to account for the eight pages which use the Herndon edited traditions which deal with the fake Lincoln wedding. In the very midst of the discussion Professor Randall states: "No competent historian will accept as authentic the Herndon-Weik story of the wedding party and the defaulting groom." Possibly this story should also have been expurgated from the text.

The estimate of William Herndon, and the importance of the documents he assembled set forth in preface, text and appendix by such a distinguished historian, as Professor Randall, is a revolutionary pronouncement in the field of Lincoln biography. Many students of the President, who have not been trained in the highly specialized atmosphere of university historical seminars, for many years have had their own opinions about Herndon and his sources, but have spoken and written with little persuasion. Now for the first time, an authoritative voice with academic sanction, dares to question the dependability of both the man and his manuscripts.

Without any thought of discounting in the least the splendid contributions which Professor Randall has made to our understanding of Lincoln, the President, we are not sure but what the word of caution about using Herndon sources which have been sounded in his book, will in the long run be of even more far reaching influence than the profound conclusions of his argument. The Randall book may in fact become the book of the YEARS.