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LINCOLN ATTRACTS THE PROFESSORS OF HISTORY

The preparation of an address entitled "The Objectivity Trend in Lincolniana" delivered before the Rowfant Club of Cleveland, Ohio, caused the editor of Lincoln Lore to again review a most excellent article by Howard Beale appearing in a 1946 bulletin published by the Social Science Research Council. The importance of this discussion coupled with the coming of the month of June with its commencement days seemed to offer a congenial atmosphere for sharing with the readers of Lincoln Lore some of the high points in Professor Beale's presentation, as it deals indirectly with one of the most timely questions of current Lincolniana, namely, "What Historians have said about the causes of the Civil War." Another consideration which makes Mr. Beale's article appropriate at the commencement season is the fact that most of the biographers writing today on Abraham Lincoln are university professors of History. It is not until the past decade that any considerable number of trained historians have turned their attention to Abraham Lincoln as a subject for biographical study.

The majority of the present Lincoln authorities on historical procedure have been reared, educated, or domiciled in the South and possibly still further inclined towards a southern viewpoint by domestic and political affiliations. It is not strange that many of them have turned their attention to the *Causes* of the Civil War, especially those phases with which Lincoln may have been identified.

Prof. Beale mentions three different schools of approach in dealing with these causes: the first is the most common one which he distinguishes as the "why and how" method. The second he describes as the author's arrangement of data in sequence thereby "implying the causes," and the third a display of facts without any attempt of the biographers to interpret them.

These methods of approach are followed by the author's very interesting paragraph on what he calls the "*predisposition*" of the author, and here he is able to identify five different groups which may be designated by words defining their characteristic attributes as they approach their historical tasks.

1. "*Cocksurenness*"—Authors who write so called definitive books and feel that they have spoken the last word on any assigned topic.
2. "*Tentativeness*"—Those modest individuals who acknowledge the hazardous task of diagnosing human motives.
3. "*Detachment*"—Writers who to an unusual extent have achieved the very difficult role of impartiality.
4. "*Unavowed Bias*"—The objectivity biographers, who somehow feel along with their publishers that they are free from provincial urges.
5. "*Fair Mindedness*"—The school of biographers who openly admit their philosophical leanings and possible sectional influences yet are able to approach objectivity with an attitude of fair mindedness.

The presentation of the reasons for the continually changing emphasis through successive periods on the causes of the Civil War is a most significant contribution. Not only does it account for the vast amount of literature already available on the subject but also gives promise of new and possibly more significant approaches in the future as subsequent civilizations invite new trends of thought. Apparently the most satisfactory way in so limited a space to present these successive hypotheses and the periods in which they flourished is to more or less paraphrase in abbreviated form some of Prof. Beale's conclusions. Often a single word is sufficient to indicate the point of emphasis:

- (1) "Conspiracy"—The slave holders rule vs. ruin policy or the abolitionists coercion program usually stressed. Emphasis confined largely to the period of mutual animosity between 1861 and 1890.
- (2) "Constitution"—State rights vs. a centralization of governmental power, the alleged causes which attracted other historians during the thirty years following the war.
- (3) "Morals"—The right or wrong of slavery became a much discussed cause during the latter part of the 19th century.
- (4) "Economic & Social"—Conflicts of economic groups and class antagonisms received the emphasis as causes of war during the "big business" period extending over the first thirty years of the new century.
- (5) "Psychological"—The futility of war so keenly felt after the first World War and the prospects of another, gave emphasis to the psychological causes of the Civil War when emotion is said to have overcome reason.
- (6) "Individual Actors"—The responsibility of leadership in bringing on the Civil War is being stressed in this post second World War period.

It will be observed that we are now living in a period where the emphasis is placed on the behavior of "individual actors," due primarily to the dictators' war through which we have just passed, where the fate of the world seemed to be in the laps of less than a half dozen men. It is very natural that this environment would invite a new study of the "Causes of the Civil War" especially as they seem to point to individual leadership. Prof. Beale in referring to this new emphasis believes the problems of the modern historian influenced by the new approach is twofold which he puts in the form of a double question, "(a) How important were individual actors as opposed to impersonal forces and (b) To what extent were avoidable human blunders a cause of this (Civil) War?" Such an emphasis is bound to bring Abraham Lincoln more definitely under the observation of the biographer and we may expect the historians representing all five types of *predisposition* to hold him to account for every word and every act preliminary to the Fort Sumter episode.