

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 968

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

October 27, 1947

LINCOLN BIOGRAPHY — IDEALISTIC AND REALISTIC

"Portrait For Posterity," Lincoln and His Biographers. By Benjamin P. Thomas. (Rutgers University Press, \$3.00)

A delightful transition from the books of lighter vein for summer reading to the more serious autumn literature may be experienced by a perusal of *Portrait for Posterity* by Benjamin P. Thomas. The announcement in the first paragraph that the primary sources used consist of letters which "were not written for you and me to read" immediately whets the appetite for a peek into the personal correspondence which passed between students of Abraham Lincoln.

The increasing human interest with which the reader is led on from chapter to chapter does not encourage him to carefully analyze the argument of the text. He is more impressed by the portraits of the many Lincoln authors, compilers and collectors who appear as actors in a piece of pagentry without his giving too much attention to the texture of the costumes worn by the actors or the antiquity of the furniture in the settings.

Inasmuch as Lincoln Lore is primarily a bulletin issued for Lincoln students it appears that something more than the foregoing pleasing reaction to a casual reading of a book about Lincoln students might be expected. The preface usually serves as a doorway to the text but when a publication deals critically with a group of individuals among whom the reader might possibly find his name, his first impulse is to turn to the index. If he discovers his name there immediately he dips into the pages indicated to learn what the author has to say about him. The fact that not more than fifteen living members of the Lincoln fraternity are mentioned in *Portrait for Posterity* will be a disappointment to many whose contributions to Lincolniana seem to have been noteworthy.

The index of a book often serves as a lens through which we may not only note the individuals who have been accorded "close-up" portraits, but it also allows us to observe the emphasis placed on certain episodes as well as the general subject matter of the argument. Such an approach seems to have possibilities in the present instance.

With respect to persons, the great preponderance of data in the book refers to a group of four individuals, William Herndon, Jesse Weik, Ward Lamon, and Chauncey Black. All four of these men were collectors or interpreters of what is known as the Herndon Papers. Among them of course Herndon is the dominant figure, not only of the group but of the entire book. On 124 of the 288 pages of text Herndon is mentioned and the index

reveals references to him embracing 180 pages. Contemporaries are cited with the following page references: Lamon 72 pages, Weik 66 pages, and Black 60 pages, a total of 378 references for the group. Possibly Beveridge with 57 references, who claims to have received more help from the Herndon papers than any other source, also should be associated with the above four authors, as well as Horace White with 17 references, who collaborated with Herndon and Weik in the two volume edition of their work.

The other writers most often mentioned in the index and the number of page citations are noted as follows: Ida M. Tarbell 67, William E. Barton 43, Carl Sandburg 43, John Hay 30, J. G. Holland 25, Henry Whitney 19, I. N. Arnold 18, John Nicolay 17. Index mention of other Lincoln authors tapers down from the above totals to a single reference.

Excluding Abraham Lincoln, there are five characters excepting the authors, who seem to appear most often in the movement of the text. Robert Lincoln, son of the President with 36 page references, and Thomas, the President's father with 19 page notices are almost exclusive among the men. Among the women, the President's mother, although she died when Abraham was nine years of age, is given the most attention with 28 page references. Ann Rutledge, a mere acquaintance, is given the same amount of attention as Mary Todd Lincoln, the President's wife, who lived with him for twenty-three years. Both Ann and Mary have 19 page references.

A fairly comprehensive idea about the general subject matter discussed in a book may also be gained by approaching it through the index. In *Portrait for Posterity* the subject of Religion outnumbers all specific references. As many as 40 page notations are cited although it is well known that Lincoln did not belong to any religious body. The question of Lincoln's Paternity seems to be the next most engaging subject as there are 21 references to it but no one now questions that fact that Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln were the parents of Abraham Lincoln. The alleged Romance of Ann Rutledge and Lincoln and the Marriage of Mary Todd and Lincoln draw an equal number of references, 15 in number. Other subjects noticed in the index under the name of Abraham Lincoln include; Humor 6, Melancholy 4, Lawyer 3, Legislator 2, Congressman 2, Lost Speech 3, Gettysburg Speech 3, and Bixby Letter 2.

One might wish with respect to the subject matter in *Portrait for Posterity*, that the selection of episodes around which controversy centered might have been elevated to more im-

portant fields of discussion than the bulk of references indicate.

Leaving the index and turning to the preliminary pages with an approach to the general purpose of the argument, Mr. Thomas sets the stage for "a struggle between two conflicting schools of thought" who have contributed to the development of the Lincoln story. The author assumes that one group, the idealists, have emphasized the heroic attributes Lincoln "was supposed to have," while the other school, the realists, have depicted him "as he was."

The table of contents reveals that the opening chapter begins the action between the idealists and realists with the title, "The Issue Is Joined." The four major idealists introduced are Josiah G. Holland of the *Springfield Republican*, Henry J. Raymond of the *New York Times*, Isaac N. Arnold, Congressman and president of Chicago Historical Society, and Francis Bicknell Carpenter, artist, who spent six months in the White House. Representing the realists is Lincoln's former law partner, William Herndon, who "could not tolerate the above 'finical fools'" who did not write the truth.

The second chapter introduces Ward H. Lamon, former associate of Lincoln, who comes to join with Herndon in a contest which the author, Thomas, presents in the caption of the third chapter as "Two Against the World." The table of contents reveals in the fourth chapter the caption "Romanticism Is the Vogue" and John G. Nicolay and John Hay are brought into the ranks of the idealists. Herndon's "Iron Pen" in the following chapter elevates him to the position of one against the world.

As "The Epoch Ends" in the sixth chapter it is difficult to discover whether Henry C. Whitney has been enrolled among the idealists or the realists but probably he would have more in common with the Herndon school. Ida M. Tarbell is classified as "An Idealistic Realist," W. E. Barton as "A Prolific Preacher," so the following chapter "The Rout of the Romanticists" accomplished by Albert Beveridge must imply that Tarbell and Barton are in reality associated with the idealistic school. In chapter eleven we have "The Academic Procession" with Prof. James G. Randall leading the march. But the poet, Carl Sandburg steals the show in the next to the last chapter and Mr. Thomas has some difficulty in classifying him among either the idealists or realists, and in the last chapter on "The Emerging Portrait" the author admits that, "Both realism and idealism have a place in Lincoln literature. . . . For as our portrait of Lincoln becomes true it also becomes more superb."