

LINCOLN LORE

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BOSWELL AND HERNDON — A CONTRAST

William Herndon had been gathering papers referring to Abraham Lincoln but three years following the President's death when he wrote to Ward H. Lamon: "I'll make the world pay for these records some time. They are the most perfect of any living or dead man—probably Johnson's biography by Boswell excepted." (Hertz, *Hidden Lincoln*, p. 60.). This statement by Herndon proved to be a good sales talk because a few months later he sold the records which had cost him "actually paid out \$153" (p. 51) for \$4,000 although there is some evidence he did not collect but \$2,000 for the records. Nevertheless it was still a good profit on his investment.

Can a historian conceive of Boswell disposing of his Johnson documents for profit to anyone at any price along with the power to "sell, publish, use, or dispose," of the records as the purchaser willed or wished? (p. 62*). It is true that Herndon did "make the world pay for these records" in more ways than money compensation. The world is still paying a tremendous price for the havoc caused by that part of the collection which is almost wholly unreliable and which has served as the chief source material for the personal life of one of the world's great citizens. The price paid in time and effort by subsequent biographers in trying to correct and repudiate purely fictitious stories and myths originated by Herndon is a costly one indeed.

Herndon's comparison of his records to Boswell's is one of the most ridiculous statements of the many boastful utterances Herndon made. Apparently there were two facts of which he was wholly ignorant: The extent of Boswell's researches while Johnson still lived, and the preservation of innumerable valuable collections of data about civilization's "living" and "dead" men then available both in the world's private and public archives. The 18,000 Lincoln papers now in the Library of Congress, the Jefferson papers, innumerable diaries, and several autobiographies of great Americans were then preserved to say nothing of the great collections in European archives.

Some brief observations about Boswell's life work are timely. Boswell hounded Johnson's steps for twenty years while his hero still lived. He wrote down immediately upon their occurrence the facts of the incidents he had observed. There were many conferences arranged between the two men for the specific purpose of recording certain biographical information for the ultimate objective of some day including it in a biography. Upon Johnson's death there was a careful compiling and arranging of the biographical material and finally the famous biography written by Boswell himself.

Although Abraham Lincoln had been elected to the highest office in the land and several biographies had already been written about him there is no evidence thus far revealed indicating that while Lincoln lived Herndon ever had any plans for writing a biography of his former law partner. There is no indication that Herndon during Lincoln's life ever wrote down a single memorandum of biographical importance about Mr. Lincoln with the

exception of a casual mention of him in correspondence or in normal business transactions.

It was not until Lincoln was dead and in his grave that Herndon began to gather what he called "facts" about Lincoln and after spending some three years picking up miscellaneous mass of good, bad, and indifferent data he had it bound in three volumes as if his work had been completed and began to seek a purchaser.

It is well known that Herndon did not make any attempt in gathering data, to cover the presidential years of the life of Lincoln, although most biographers would consider the war years were rather an important part of his life. Herndon wrote to Ward H. Lamon on one occasion, "I guess your facts of Mr. Lincoln since 1860 are full and complete. My facts of Mr. Lincoln from the womb to landing at Washington, 'as the gal says,' is more so." (p. 60). Later Herndon wrote a letter to Horace White in which he stated, "I am convinced that Lamon was no solid firm friend of Lincoln, especially during Lincoln's administration or the latter end of it." Did ever a great man fall into the hands of two more egotistical but incompetent quasi-biographers than Herndon and Lamon?

If it seems necessary to discover any of the Boswellian influence in the Herndon-Weik three-volume publication, it is probably Weik rather than Herndon who should be given the preference. He wrote the book and his voluminous correspondence with Herndon drew out from Lincoln's partner the reminiscences "still floating around in his memory," which constitute most of the source material Weik used in writing the book.

The fame of Boswell does not rest so much on his unusual tenacity as a collector of data as it does on his ability as an author. Of course it is well known that Herndon never wrote a book which fact alone should prevent his name from being mentioned in the same breath as that of Boswell. Herndon despised writing which is rather an essential task of any biographer. He wrote a letter to Lamon once wondering if "you and Black and friends can translate this." He then concluded, "I have not corrected it and wouldn't for ten dollars, and wouldn't write it for fifty dollars." He concluded this letter with the statement, "I hate a quill—hate the mechanics of 'the pen, like hell—so I do.'" (p. 69).

The letters written by William Herndon to Theodore Parker during the five years previous to Lincoln's election reveal that Herndon had little admiration for his partner and nothing to do with advancing his chances for the presidency. The two partners seldom tried law cases together and had little in common in later years as far as political interests were concerned. That Herndon was never a welcome guest at Lincoln's home and hated his wife would not put him in a position to speak with much authority on the domestic relations of his partner.

Any alleged characteristics which Boswell and Herndon are supposed to have had in common with respect to their methods of collecting or their ability to coordinate and write out their arguments, can only be put forth by one entirely ignorant of their respective efforts, or by a purposeful misrepresentation of the facts.

*All page references are from Hertz as above noted.