

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 1015

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

September 20, 1948

BIOGRAPHIZING WILLIAM HERNDON

Lincoln's Herndon by David Donald
(Alfred A. Knopf, 392 p. \$5.00)

*"Now do I bless the man who undertook
These monks and martyrs to biographize."*

Properly paraphrased, the above two lines by Robert Southey would express the sentiment of approval which all students of Lincoln should entertain towards David Donald, the author of *Lincoln's Herndon*. Writing biographies of monks and martyrs, with their routine duties and glorious consummations, would be child's play compared with the task of biographizing William Herndon. When Professor James G. Randall of the University of Illinois suggested to his graduate student, Donald, an exhaustive study of Abraham Lincoln's last law partner, he gave him an assignment that would test the metal of an older and more seasoned historian. How well the pupil carried out the commission of the master, only those who have spent a lifetime in gathering, organizing, and presenting source material will be able to appreciate.

The movie promoters, and also the television operators place much emphasis on selecting performers who are photogenic. Pictures must have distinct delineations which will bring out in detail the clear cut features of the entertainer. Authors of biographical studies who create word pictures of individuals also aspire to a lucidity of expression that will allow the creature of their genius to stand out in bold relief. There is not a character in the whole circle of Lincoln's acquaintances who would be considered, in the literary sense, less photogenic than William Herndon. This does not mean that he was not colorful, but he had a Jekyll and Hyde personality, unwittingly developed, that would confound the most expert analyst. Mr. Donald admits the futility of a photogenic word portrait of Herndon in the concluding sentence of his book when he states: "Herndon stands in the background glance of history, myth maker and truth teller," a Dr. Jekyll and a Mr. Hyde. (p. 373).

Most individuals who have been thought worthy of a full length biography have given evidence of a gradual development until the crest of their objective was reached. This ascent in itself has furnished a stimulation to human interest which has been an important contribution as an attention factor so necessary to retain the reader's interest. Donald had no such assistance in the Herndon biography but was recording the behavior of a character who was fading out almost to a nonentity, during the season between forty-five and sixty years of age, when career building is usually at the most impressive stage. (p. 292).

It was a tremendous task for Donald to pick up Herndon again after this hiatus and revive interest in him. This was accomplished admirably, nevertheless, the subsequent picture presented the fading portrait of the aging man in sympathetic but pitiful story. It was during this period after all when most of Herndon's historic biographical letters were written, and when Donald claims the "acid etching of Lincoln" was produced. (p. 264).

Many biographers in following an individual through the years have to take into account but one absorbing vocation which the subject of his story pursues to the very end of life. It was not Donald's good fortune to follow a professional man who eventually reached a noteworthy elevation. Donald found that Herndon considered himself at one time "possibly as good a lawyer as Lincoln." (p. 41). It would be difficult, however, to convince anyone else that this was a valid conclusion. Herndon wrote to Theodore Parker, "I hate law." (p. 49). Left with one of the best law practices in the west and

calling to his aid by July 1861 a junior partner of ability, still he could not prevent the complete collapse of his business. The year Lincoln left Springfield, Herndon was named as counsel in as many as 50 cases before the United States circuit court, but within a dozen years after Lincoln's death Herndon's name was removed from the Springfield Directory of Attorneys. (p. 292).

With a vocational failure on his hands, Donald further faced the problem of accounting for the rampant political "mentor," which task he pursues with rare acumen. The author had some difficulty in keeping his finger on Herndon's political activities, because he blew hot and cold as various personalities entered the picture. He swore he would never be an aspirant for a political office and have "envy to shrivel up . . . (his) soul." (p. 30). However, in a comparatively short time he was appointed as a representative from his district to the political convention which formed the Republican Party in Illinois and affirmed it was "the highest honor of his life." (p. 84). The author finally traces Herndon into the Democratic Party, (p. 264), where he finds him announcing as a Democratic candidate for the state legislature. (p. 292). In this election he failed to poll a single vote in the city ward where he had lived for thirty years, and his political life was brought to an ignominious close. (p. 292).

The task of gathering facts about William Herndon in the field of moral behavior found Donald again battling with a Jekyll and Hyde personality. Donald seems to deal kindly with the youth whom he states "staggered in his father's footsteps;" later becoming an officer and lecturer for a Temperance Society; but eventually in the struggle with liquor "let his appetite win." During Herndon's last years however Donald finds him again inclining toward temperate habits. (p. 292).

The vocational, political, and moral phases of Herndon's life with their fading out qualities apparently could not have given Donald, a strictly objective historian, so much concern as Herndon's research technique and literary outbursts. Without Herndon's longhand reminiscences and his choice bits of gossip, short on the side of dependability, he would have slipped out of the Lincoln coterie of Springfield men without being missed. Donald fully appreciated Herndon's early efforts to gather facts about Lincoln and the accuracy of descriptions of men and events when personally observed. However, Donald holds that Herndon's correspondence with Weik was the basis of the three volume biography. These writings appear to Donald as "inextricable confusion" which causes him to remark, "If this is a portrait for posterity it is certainly the work of a cubist," and he further observes: "For almost any statement in one of Herndon's letters there is a contradiction in another." (p. 301). It is refreshing to discover one biographer who can observe Herndon's process of pseudo-psychoanalysis and his arrival at conclusions by intuition and smile when the concoction is brought forth. (p. 307). Donald ventures the opinion that, "One of the secrets of Herndon's popularity among later Lincoln students is his peculiar ambivalence. He can be quoted on all sides of any question." (p. 302).

David Donald should not only be praised for the most efficient manner in which he has biographized so difficult a character to fathom as William Herndon, but he should also be complimented for what he did not do. Even the pull of a magnetic personality like Abraham Lincoln was not strong enough to attract the author into the larger orbit of the emancipator, but he consistently followed through in the greatly restricted orbit of the satellite, William Herndon.