

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN PAPERS FOR THE PUBLIC

Mearns, David C. *The Lincoln Papers*. The story of the collection with selections to July 4, 1861. Bound in buckram, 2 volumes boxed, 681 pages. Doubleday & Company, Garden City, N. Y. \$10.00.

The Robert Todd Lincoln collection of his father's papers has now been made accessible at the Library of Congress for more than a year. Many microfilm copies of the eighteen thousand documents containing nearly forty-two thousand sheets and voluminous indexes have also been acquired by centers of Lincoln research. Many students of Abraham Lincoln have made use of the source material, and fragments of the contents of the papers have appeared in printed form, but the public at large has had little opportunity to share in the rich heritage presented to the nation by the son of President Lincoln.

It was a happy thought indeed that prompted David C. Mearns of the Library of Congress to submit for the perusal of the general public, a two volume work containing an intensely interesting selection of writings from the papers, previous to July the fourth, 1861. Mr. Mearns' long association with the national library has allowed him to evaluate the subject matter selected from the human interest viewpoint of the casual observer. This approach assures a wide and appreciative group of readers who will receive a refreshing and impressive portrait of President Lincoln.

The history of the gathering, preserving, storing, protecting, bequeathing, impounding, and finally the formal opening of the papers on July 26, 1947, is in itself a story of sustained interest. The legends associated with the traditional sifting, and burning of the papers are so thoroughly discounted that they should not again become a subject for discussion.

There are twenty pages of autobiographical sketches of Lincoln and reminiscences by his friends which brings Lincoln up to the year 1846. Little correspondence was received by Lincoln during the early Illinois period, and but a few fragments seem to have been saved.

When the editor of Lincoln Lore with other Lincoln students was invited to look over the original papers on the night that they were opened at the Library of Congress he first sought out those volumes which contained manuscripts referring to the congressional years, March, 1847 to March, 1849. He was amazed at the bulk of data available but he has since had opportunity to go over most of these manuscripts and agrees with Mr. Mearns that the letters received by Congressman Lincoln from correspondents were "principally concerned with securing or maintaining public office." Considerable information is available on the Land Office appointment, a post congressional contest, which contributes much to an understanding of this interesting episode in Lincoln's patronage experience.

After an interval of five years there is another batch of documents bearing directly or indirectly on the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, Lincoln's return to the political arena, and his two senatorial contests, the last one embracing the debates with Douglas.

The reaction to Lincoln's election to the Presidency is set forth in letters from different parts of the country.

The sentiment most often expressed is the fear that harm might come to him especially by poisoning. On the other hand a correspondent advised him he was "hung in effigy last night." The first volume closes with many letters setting forth the emergence of Lincoln as a national figure, letters and telegrams sent to the nominee from the Chicago Convention and correspondence received during the subsequent political campaign.

It is unfortunate that the break in subject matter between the data in volume one and two does not depend on some chronological sequence. The election date in November seems too early to close the format for volume one and January 1, 1860, appears to be too late to begin volume two. If other volumes are published, which we hope is already contemplated, an arrangement of text with some thought given to identification of volumes would greatly enhance the reference value of the work.

After this mild censure about arrangement of format possibly the subject matter in the second volume of Mr. Mearns' compilation should be observed from a viewpoint which scans only the more highly elevated crests of political action, beginning of course with Lincoln's major immediate task of choosing a cabinet. Through January, 1865 the burden of correspondence Lincoln received referred to appointments to be made in the official family.

On the third day of January, 1861 William Cullen Bryant wrote Lincoln with respect to Cameron that there was an "ancient and deep seated distrust of his integrity," and on the following day wrote a more severe judgment on Cameron's corrupt character. On January 5, however, R. V. Johnson of Chambersberg, Penn. commenting on Cameron states, "A more honorable man could not be found in our state." This is but a sample of the contradictory correspondence which came to Lincoln during the period he was trying to temper patronage with efficiency.

The chief subject of discussion in the February letters relates to the safe conduct of Abraham Lincoln to Washington, especially through Baltimore. Captain Hazzard's long and detailed plans for passing through Baltimore opens the series and it concludes with Seward's note of February 21 delivered by Seward's son to Lincoln at Harrisburg.

The inauguration in March was a subject of much concern and the post inauguration letters seem to effuse a glow of thankfulness that the ordeal is over, but its beams are soon scattered by the ominous reports from Ft. Sumpter which presage war. This section of the writing, including March and April installments, will attract more research students than perhaps any other group of letters written to Lincoln.

With the movement of troops the letters and events during the months of May and June are mostly of a strictly military character, although a gem such as a long letter instructing him on his personal manners, occasionally breaks into the seriousness of war correspondence. Recalling the criticism about the division of subject matter at appropriate intervals with respect to volumes, if one is time conscious, he will remember that the second volume closes on July the fourth, 1861, with the war message of the President.