

LINCOLN LORE

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THE BURNT BOOK MYTH

Yesterday the Lincoln National Life Foundation was pleased to have as its guest Toyohiko Kagawa, who is recognized as the foremost Christian of Japan. For more than twenty years he has been an earnest student of Abraham Lincoln. Emerson O. Bradshaw, who accompanied him and arranges his American itineraries, related an interesting episode which occurred at one of their appointments. After a lecture delivered in a southern college on some phase of Christianity, a student during the question period asked Kagawa who he thought was the outstanding Christian that modern civilization had produced. As quick as a flash Kagawa answered "Abraham Lincoln."

This spontaneous reaction of Kagawa to Lincoln's exemplification of the Christian religion recalls immediately a tradition given wide circulation by William Herndon. This one time law partner of Lincoln had a peculiar faculty of making active volcanoes out of easily leveled mole hills. One of his flights of imagination or excursions as a psychoanalyst we shall call the Burnt Book Myth.

Apparently Herndon first learned of the tradition about the burnt book from a newspaper clipping which appeared in *The Menard Axis* for February 15, 1862. There is no evidence however, that the item was called to his attention until after Lincoln's death. The editor of the paper and writer of the article entitled "A Romance of Reality" was John Hill, a recognized political antagonist of Lincoln. John was not born until 1834 and was only about a year old when the alleged burnt book incident took place. He was only three years old when Lincoln removed from New Salem to Springfield, so any statements he made could not have come from his own personal observation. In a letter to Herndon he admits that the burnt book story was one he first heard when he was a boy. The Lincoln vs. Cartwright campaign for congress in 1846, when John was twelve years old may have incited it.

This is the version as released by Hill in the newspaper of 1862: "He (Lincoln) employed his intellectual faculties in writing a dissertation (sic) against the doctrine of the divinity of the scriptures. Of this he soon repented and consigned his publication to the flames. He had designed it for publication but his senior friends, pointing him to Paine and Valtaire (sic) wrought a change in his intentions, and perhaps his destiny." (*Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*, Vol. III, No. 3, p. 143).

It will be observed that Hill is recording this tradition twenty-seven years after it occurred and he is entirely dependent on the reminiscences of others. In a letter to Herndon on June 6, 1865 Hill said, "Enclosed I send the printed slip, I published it in 1862 . . . I made good inquiry before writing and think I arrived at the truth."

It was this same political thrust at Lincoln by Hill in 1862 which appeared in the *Menard County Axis* that provided Herndon with his original source material for the Ann Rutledge story, now everywhere repudiated. According to Herndon's version of the Burnt Book Myth, Lincoln was led to write the religious criticism because of his despondency over the death of Ann Rutledge and some other tragedy of an apocryphal character.

A memorandum written by Herndon in 1887 gives this version of the book burning, "Now for facts. In the years of 1835-36 Mr. Lincoln wrote out, fully wrote out, his

ideas and intended to publish them in pamphlet or book form. He read his manuscript to Samuel Hill, his employer, before or soon after. Hill was the personal friend of Lincoln at that time and said to Lincoln, 'Let me see your manuscript.' Lincoln handed it to him. Hill ran it in a tin plate stove, and so the book went up in flames. Lincoln in that production attempted to show the Bible was false."

The nucleus around which the original early criticism of Lincoln's religious views revolved, was created in the congressional campaign of 1846. The clergyman, Peter Cartwright, was the opponent of Abraham Lincoln for a seat in the United States House of Representatives. On August 11, 1846 Lincoln wrote a letter to Allen N. Ford, the publisher of the *Illinois Gazette* at Lacon, Ill., in which he said, "I was informed by letter from Jacksonville that Mr. Cartwright was whispering the charge of infidelity against me in that quarter. I at once wrote a contradiction of it. . . . I was informed that he had been putting the same charge in circulation against me in some of the neighborhoods, in our own, and one or two of the adjoining counties." The letter was concluded with this statement by Mr. Lincoln: "I here aver, that he, Cartwright, never heard me utter a word in any way indicating my opinion on religious matters."

Attached to this letter was a printed handbill signed by Lincoln and dated July 31, 1846 which Lincoln asked Ford to reprint in his paper and from which we make the following excerpts:

"I have never denied the truth of the scriptures, and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular. It is true that in early life I was inclined to believe in what I understand is called the 'Doctrine of Necessity' . . . I have always understood the same opinion to be held by several of the Christian denominations." (*Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*, Vol. II, No. 1, p. 4).

The traditional story about Lincoln's infidelity circulated in the congressional campaign of 1846 about which Abraham immediately "wrote a contradiction" raises its head again in the Burnt Book Myth fifteen years later. The untenable fragmentary writing in question continued to change emphasis until in the hands of Herndon it became an organized "attack upon the whole ground of Christianity." The alleged writing which according to John Hill, Lincoln destroyed of his own volition, now under the revision of Herndon states that "Lincoln refused to destroy it; said it was to be published," and concluded the episode by stating that Samuel Hill, John's father, "snatched it from Lincoln's hand when Lincoln was not expecting it, and ran it into an old-fashioned tin plate stove, heated as hot as a furnace, and so Lincoln's book went up to the clouds in smoke."

On Nov. 20, 1866 Herndon wrote a letter to Isaac N. Arnold of Chicago in which he made this statement, "Did you know that Mr. Lincoln wrote a work—a book on *Infidelity*—and that his friends say they burnt it up? Beware that some leaf is not slumbering—to be sprung on you, when we are dead and gone, and no defense being made—he, L., will go down all time as a writer on infidelity, atheism, etc." A "leaf" in the form of a broadside signed by Abraham Lincoln himself has sprung up. It places the Burnt Book Myth in the same category with a dozen other pieces of gossip which Herndon wove into his so called realistic story of Lincoln.