

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 1397

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

January 16, 1956

THE PRINCE OF RAILS

Randall, Ruth Painter. *Lincoln's Sons*. Little, Brown and Company. 373 pp. Price \$5.00.

A descriptive subtitle for Ruth Painter Randall's book *Lincoln's Sons* would be, "Featuring the Prince of Rails." Robert Lincoln, the first born son of Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, was so dubbed by his Harvard University classmates upon his father's elevation to the Presidency. Inasmuch as Robert was the only one of the four Lincoln boys to reach maturity and rear a family, one might expect he would receive special attention by the author.

The Prince of Wales came to America in the fall of 1860 and among the cities on his extensive itinerary was Springfield, Illinois. He was a guest there on September 26, right in the heart of the political campaign when the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, was receiving a great many visitors. This situation was partly responsible for the fact that Mr. Lincoln did not meet the Prince, as one reporter put it: "He met so many *sovereigns* during the day that really the Prince had come and gone before he knew it." Everywhere the campaign posters portrayed the candidate of the Republicans as a rail-splitter, a rail old gentleman, or in some pose where fence rails predominated in the background. It will be observed that having been the first born of his father and introducing a play on the words, Wales and rails, Robert became "The Prince of Rails."

While Mrs. Randall presents a brief story about Edward, who died at four years of age, and rather a detailed account of Willie and Tad up to the time of their early deaths, it is the story of Robert beginning at the time of his father's assassination that contributes most to the post administration history of the family. In fact, the princely attempt which Abraham Lincoln's first born made to protect the good name of both his father and mother, is from this editor's viewpoint, the feature of the book.

After reading the Lincoln writings of both Dr. and Mrs. Randall and observing their struggle to overcome and discredit the untenable Herndon influence in Lincolniana, one wonders if any American President was so unfortunate in his early biographers as was Abraham Lincoln in the Herndon-Weik and the Lamon-Black combinations.

The introduction to the first volume of Dr. Randall's *Lincoln the President* discredits entirely Herndon's "masses of reminiscences . . . excessive rhetoric and his psychoanalytical conjecture" and concludes: "To take Herndon at face value is no longer permissible." A complete refutation of the alleged Lincoln-Rutledge romance which is accomplished in the appendix to the second volume of Dr. Randall's four volume work recalls Herndon's comment in a letter to Ward H. Lamon in 1870. Herndon said: "When that Ann Rutledge lecture shall be exploded, the substantial facts of it, Lincoln's name and memory will explode with it." The Rutledge story has exploded but the memory of Lincoln still lingers on.

But there were other Herndon explosions. Mrs. Randall in her book *Mary Lincoln Biography of a Marriage* (1953) not only demolished Herndon's ugly portrait of Mrs. Lincoln, but in *Lincoln's Sons* she has repudiated Herndon's unjust characterization of Robert Todd Lincoln. One would think that after the death of the former law partner, who had done so much for him, Herndon would at least have dealt kindly with Lincoln's widow and her children.

On November 16, 1866, Herndon gave a public lecture at Springfield, Ill. in which he stated that Abraham Lincoln's heart had been buried in the grave of Ann Rutledge and that Lincoln never loved Mary Todd, the mother of his four sons. The publication of this fabrication was a tremendous blow to the mentally ill, Mary Lincoln. Mrs. Randall refers to this attack as "the first of a number of episodes in which Lincoln's eldest son endeavors to protect the memory of his father," and we might say the integrity of his mother. Robert immediately wrote to Judge Davis about how to proceed in the face of these misrepresentations and Mrs. Randall states that probably on the advice of Davis, Robert went to Springfield and talked with Herndon apparently with respect to future releases about Mrs. Lincoln.

After returning to Chicago, Robert wrote Herndon that he wished to give to one of his friends a book which had been left by his father in the law office at Springfield. Herndon did not comply with the request because he claimed that Mr. Lincoln "had made him a present of all of the contents of the office as he was starting for Washington," which statement neither Robert nor David Davis believed.

Another lecture was delivered by Herndon in Springfield on Dec. 12, 1873 in which he alleged that Abraham Lincoln was an illegitimate child. Robert tried to refute the charge and the controversy ended with Herndon "practically calling Robert a liar in a public lecture in his home town" as Mrs. Randall puts it. In this same lecture Herndon charged that the President was an infidel and when Mrs. Lincoln remonstrated, Herndon in an open letter made available to the press "presented Robert's mother as a liar."

The Herndon-Weik book appeared in 1889, the very year Robert went to London as Minister from the United States, and the book was almost as offensive as the Lamon work. Mrs. Lincoln was dead by this time so she escaped the abuse heaped upon her. Herndon claimed that Robert bought up the books and burned them but no evidence has thus far appeared that would substantiate the accusation as Mrs. Randall points out.

Although Herndon had been dead many years his papers which Robert loathed were to be used again by Albert J. Beveridge in his contemplated biography of the President. This fact apparently caused Robert to block any attempt Beveridge might make to see the private papers of Abraham Lincoln in Robert's possession. Robert put a twenty-five year prohibitory clause in the bequest by which the Library of Congress received the papers. The fact that a letter Robert wrote denying the use of the papers to Beveridge bears the date of the codicil to his will containing the twenty-five year clause is no coincidence.

The Prince of Rails as an appellation for Robert might have been continued throughout his life. As Minister to England he was received by Queen Elizabeth, and in the business world as president of the Pullman Company, he became literally a Prince of Rails—steel rails now rather than fence rails.

Students of history who are interested in the home life of Abraham Lincoln will always be under a debt of deep gratitude to Ruth Painter Randall for her companion books, *Mary Lincoln Biography of a Marriage* and *Lincoln's Sons*.