



Lincoln Lore

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CAN A HERO SURVIVE PSYCHOANALYSIS?

Most readers are afraid of psychohistory. They fear it will be filled with big Germanic or Greek words of indefinite meaning. They think it will demean its subject. (That may be all right with someone like Hitler, but most buyers of Lincoln books admire the man and are suspicious of his detractors.) They think it will be meaningless because it is impossible to accomplish with a man now dead for over a century what analysts accomplish only with difficulty after many weekly sessions on the couch.

These are not the silly fears of lay-persons to be equated with superstition and brushed aside by the learned. There are professional historians and serious biographers who, in essence, share all of these common doubts about psychohistory. Plenty of scholars detest "psychodogmatism" and jargon-filled writing. Some scholars are suspicious of the application of a "therapy," or rather a therapeutic method, to the life of a historic figure because it somehow implies from the very start that there was something "wrong" with the figure. Many scholars are concerned about the scarcity of documentation in ordinary historical sources for the things that are most important to psychoanalytic investigation.

Furthermore, there is good reason to fear psychohistory because of its record to date. As many psychohistorians are themselves quick to admit, the number of existing examples of excellent psychohistory is small, and the number of embarrassingly bad examples is distressingly large.

The result is that a great number of people who are interested in Abraham Lincoln have not read Charles B. Strozier's *Lincoln's Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings* (New York: Basic Books, 1982). They have not read it because they are afraid of its "avowedly psychohistorical" approach. Some, I am sorry to report, have been ready to scoff and giggle without so much as a peek inside the covers. I have been careful here not myself to scoff at the fears which underlie such a phenomenon; they are worthy of respectful notice.

The tragedy in all this is that many readers are missing out on something they would really enjoy and — more to the point — on something they deeply crave. Professor Strozier has written, no matter what he avows, a piece of what can best be called "intimate biography." This is a well-written and lively book about Abraham Lincoln the man. There is scarcely a scholar in this country, hardly an author with a monograph on some specialized Lincoln subject to his credit, who has not at some time or other winced at hearing a reader express a wish for a really readable book about Lincoln the man, his hopes, his fears,

his personal foibles, his inner strengths, his human weaknesses. That book is here now, and it would be a shame for the readers who have waited so long to be scared off from it.

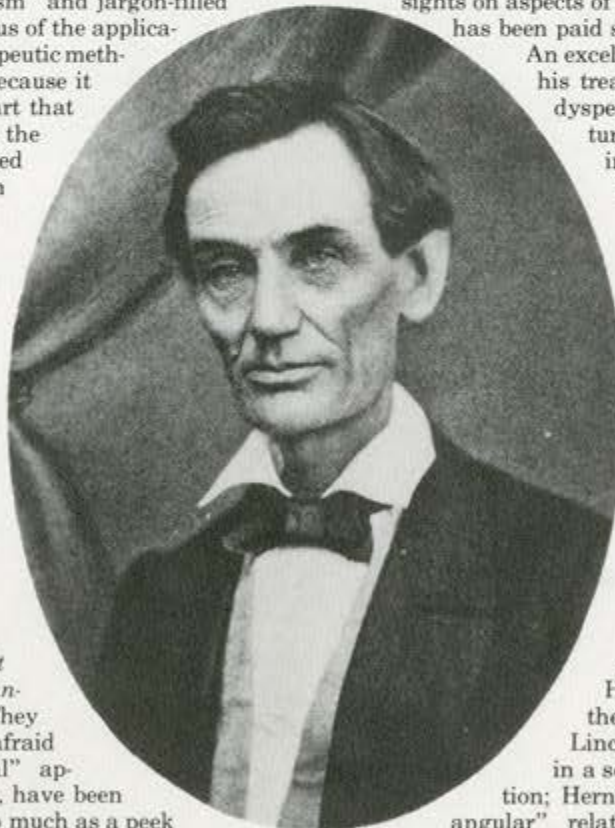
Oddly enough, writers interested in Lincoln's psyche, from Edmund Wilson to Dwight Anderson, have not really given the readers what they should. They have not offered readers even a perverted description of Lincoln's intimate or personal life. They have merely stood the traditional public Lincoln on his head and claimed that he was a closet tyrant stalking the presidency and thinking jealously about George Washington's reputation. Strozier has offered a genuinely personal portrait of Lincoln, real flesh-and-blood biography. This is something that was needed — especially since it includes helpful new insights on aspects of Lincoln's life to which little attention has been paid since the days of Billy Herndon.

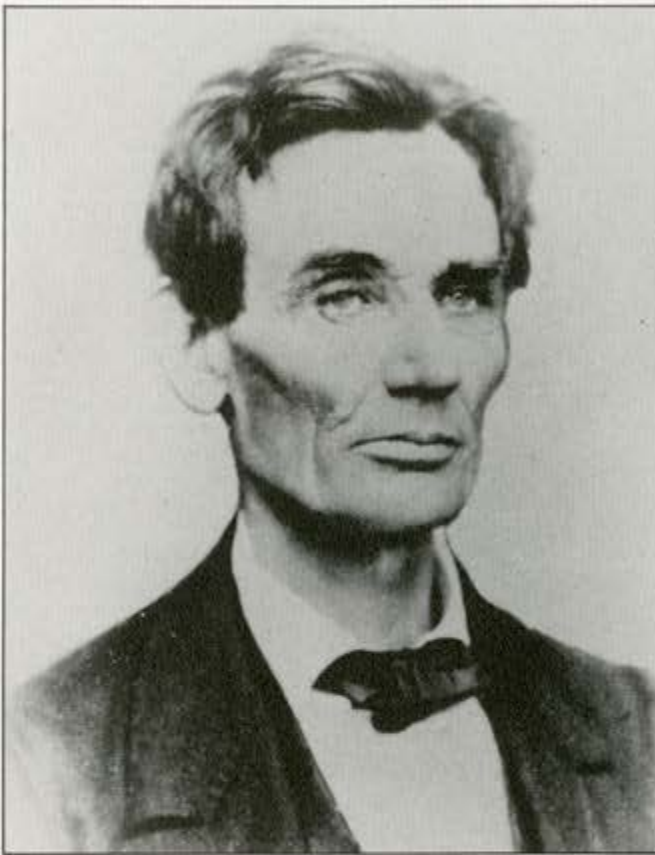
An excellent example of Strozier's best work is his treatment of William H. Herndon. That dyspeptic but clever critic of American culture, Gore Vidal, has recently been minning Herndon's irresponsible and uninformed speculations about his law partner's sex life for some considerable nuggets of sensational journalistic copy. It has been my lot to answer the questions raised by readers of Vidal's cynical speculations. They are easily enough dismissed, but something in my answers always bothered me. I was never quite satisfied that my explanations of Herndon's errors got to the bottom of the matter.

They did not, but Professor Strozier does. Herndon had, Strozier says quite accurately, an "obsessional interest in Lincoln's sex life." Lincoln was, in many ways, the most important person in Herndon's life. He was also, of course, the most important person in Mary Todd Lincoln's life. She and Herndon engaged in a sort of competition for Lincoln's attention; Herndon, Lincoln, and Mary had a "triangular" relationship. An "elemental jealousy" prompted the hatred between Lincoln's law partner and Lincoln's wife, and that jealousy explains Herndon's extraordinary interest in Lincoln's sex life as nothing else will.

This is only one example among many of the useful insights in *Lincoln's Quest for Union*, but it serves well to typify Strozier's focus on the personal. The language, it should be noted, is the language of common sense. It is English. It is not jargon or, as some cynics describe it, "psychobabble." Psychohistorical training seems to have equipped Professor Strozier particularly well to come up with insights like this, but, wherever such ability comes from, it has not been obscured by the customarily loose and impenetrable language of psychoanalysis.

I focus on language here because I think it is important —





and not merely because books should be written so that reasonably intelligent readers can learn from and enjoy them. It is important because the language of psychoanalysis is, on the whole, dangerous to historical writing.

Words have meanings, and the extreme language of psychoanalysis — “rage,” “killing fathers,” “annihilation,” “world-destroying rage,” “revenge,” “fantasies . . . of omnipotence,” “compulsive,” “obsessive” — does not translate well into precise historical analysis. The language most often distorts, but at best it might have some utility in dealing with extreme figures from history. It is not only useless but dangerous in dealing with figures who were eminently successful in bland and lawyerly occupations, who forged great political alliances balancing the ambitions and egos of hundreds of men, who wrote two-hour-long speeches and careful state papers on subjects like the tariff and the sub-treasury, and who somehow pleased large majorities of ordinary people. The extreme rhetoric of psychoanalysis can do nothing but violence to a Victorian sobersides like Abraham Lincoln, who confined his psychologically interesting behavior to a few risqué jokes, a handful of stirring references to the Declaration of Independence, a couple of cool remarks about his father, some periods of melancholy, and four dreams.

Incidentally, this rhetorical problem is not one that stems from Sigmund Freud and the infancy of psychobiography. As Professor Strozier points out, Freud “all but missed rage,” and it is the newer theoreticians of psychoanalysis, including Strozier’s favorite Heinz Kohut, who have given us this language of extremism. Strozier uses it occasionally himself but only occasionally, and it has not done to him what its use has done to other psychobiographers — made them tone deaf to excesses in any sort of language. Words like “tyrant,” “demonic,” and “malignant” come all too easily to less careful psychobiographers like Dwight Anderson.

Professor Strozier prides himself on his “conservative” use of evidence. As one of the leaders of the discipline of psychohistory, he is keenly aware of the criticism that psychohistorians have used evidence carelessly. Strozier strives to use as evidence only things which most other historians would also be willing to use. He is, by and large, successful in this. But he should perhaps be even prouder of his respect for language and the meaning of words. That too has prevented him from writing a book that no one could or should read.

He has been successful in using evidence conservatively, by and large, and when he has faltered in this, there have been

conventional historians like me quick to pounce on him. Don E. Fehrenbacher, for example, in the issue of *Reviews in American History* for March 1983, took Professor Strozier to task for putting too much emphasis on Lincoln’s mention in a brief autobiography of shooting a wild turkey — and for misinterpreting the incident to boot. The gaffe by Strozier is uncomfortably reminiscent of Freud’s now notorious misinterpretation and mistranslation of an allusion to a bird by Leonardo da Vinci. Freud’s error has become a classic instance of the misuse of evidence by psychohistorians. One wishes Professor Strozier had not, at the very least, chosen a bird incident for one of his least convincing arguments.

Happily such instances are few, and there are many instances of close, careful, and original readings of documents to outweigh them. For example, he nicely juxtaposes two letters of Mary Todd Lincoln about her son Robert:

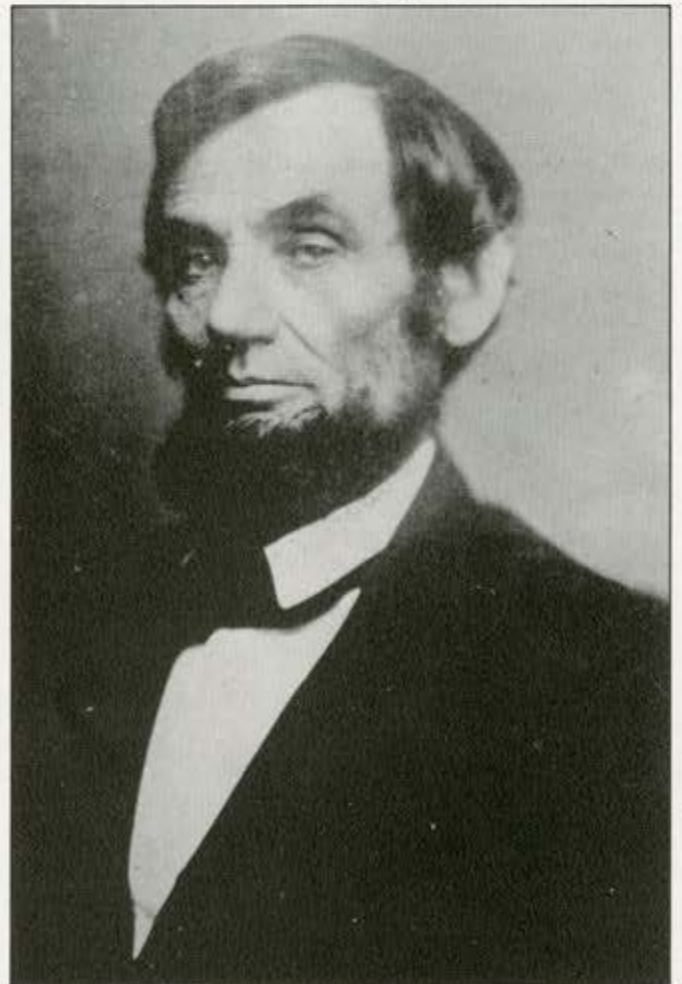
[1859] I miss Bob, so much [now that he has gone away to school] that I do not feel settled down, as much as I used to & find myself going on trips quite frequently.

[1877] In our household, he was always trying to obtain the mastery, on all occasions — never daring of course to be insolent, to my amiable devoted children or myself, when my beloved husband, was near, it was a great relief to us all, when he was sent to school, then we had a most loving peace.

By reading closely and carefully, Strozier comes up with astute judgments, including his now famous interpretation of Lincoln’s letters to Joshua Speed about courtship and marriage, an almost adolescent correspondence by men in their thirties. Strozier makes good sense of them without making fun of them. There are also good sections on Lincoln’s humor and on Lincoln’s search for a metaphor for the expansion of slavery.

The overall impression given by the book is not one of being assaulted by the avant-garde. It seems, rather, almost curiously old fashioned, full of anecdotes and vivid quotations from letters.

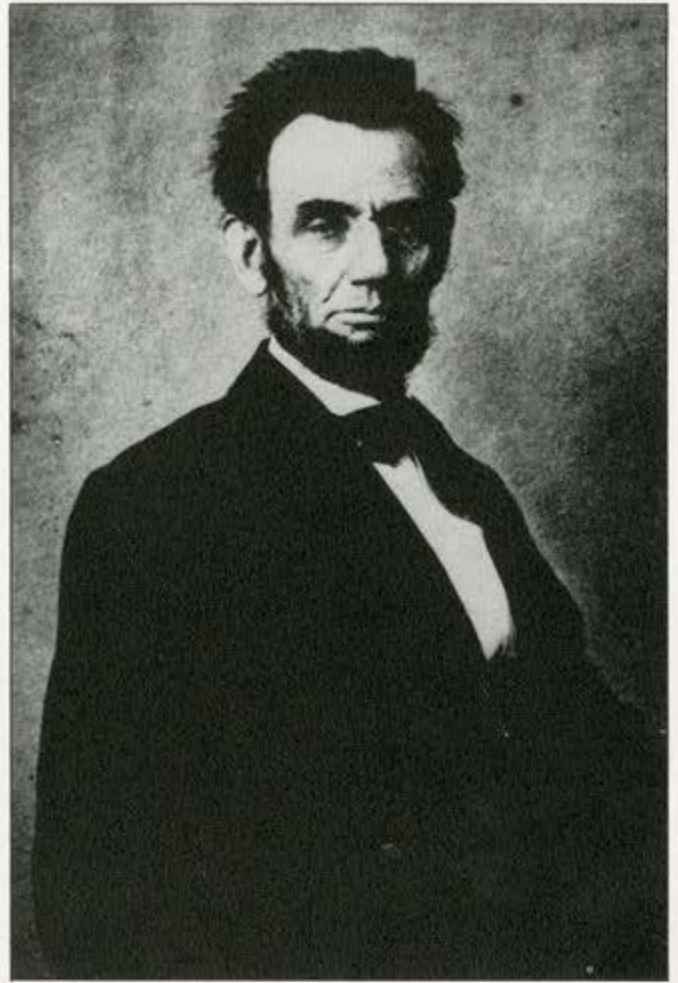
One other distinguishing characteristic of *Lincoln’s Quest for Union* is the author’s modesty. This is a welcome but rare attribute. In the “Preface” Strozier admits: “The ‘real’ Lincoln remains obscure to me.” Lincoln has a stubbornly intriguing ability to remain obscure to most people who write about him,



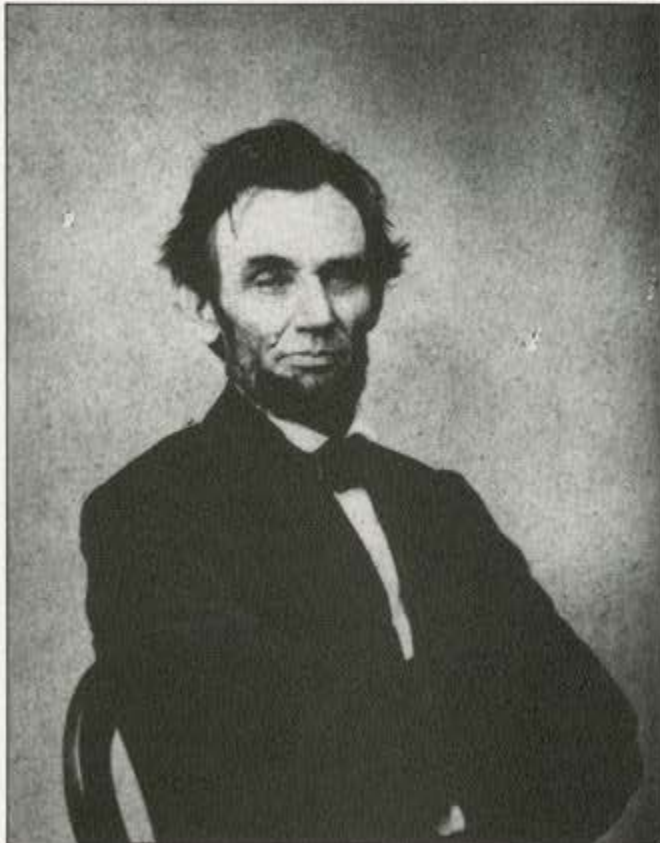


but few of us ever admit it in print. Professor Strozier also warns readers in the "Preface" about one chapter in the book in which the emphasis is not on Lincoln and in which the "analysis is complicated." "For those whose interests focus solely on Lincoln," he says, "it might be wise to skip Chapter 8. For the rest, take a deep breath."

Strozier has done what lamentably few of his fellow psychohistorians — or perhaps I should say few historians in general — have done: he has kept his readership in mind. He wrote



Lincoln's Quest for Union in the hope of gaining a large readership, and the book certainly deserves it. The hero of Strozier's book survives the psychoanalysis, and so will the readers.



AN EARLY ASSUALT ON LINCOLN'S PSYCHE

The history of psychological studies of Abraham Lincoln goes all the way back to William Herndon, who speculated for years on his famous law partner's mind. Probably the first scholarly study with a psychological bent was Nathaniel W. Stephenson's widely acclaimed *Lincoln: An Account of His Personal Life, Especially of Its Springs of Action as Revealed and Deepened by the Ordeal of the War*, which appeared in 1922. Over a decade would pass before the publication of the first full-fledged psychobiography, L. Pierce Clark's *Lincoln: A Psycho-Biography* (1933).

The most sensational foray of psychoanalysis into the field of Lincolniana, at least before the appearance of Edmund Wilson's chapter on Lincoln in *Patriotic Gore* in 1962, was A. A. Brill's speech on "Abraham Lincoln as Humorist" at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in Toronto on June 5, 1931. Even before Brill delivered his speech, he met sharp resistance. An abstract of the address appeared in the convention program circulated before the meeting and incensed a Brooklyn psychiatrist named Edward E. Hicks. A week before the convention met, Dr. Hicks sent a formal protest to Dr. Walter M. English, president of the American Psychiatric Association. Hicks called Brill's remarks on Lincoln an insult to right-thinking Americans and to the memory of "one of the two greatest Presidents in the history of this Republic." Hicks thought it time the American public "awoke to the fact that we have an element in this country who seem to thrive on slime and filth." He called it "blaspheming the memory of the immortal dead." The Association's program chairman responded only that the group would continue to take care in choosing speakers for its meetings. Brill delivered his speech as announced.

The speech attracted press attention not only because of its subject but also because of the speaker. Abraham Arden Brill was America's first psychoanalyst and her foremost champion of Freudianism. Born in Austria-Hungary in 1874, Brill emigrated to the United States at age fifteen to escape his father's authority. He lived in New York City for most of the rest of his life but studied psychoanalysis in Zurich and Vienna. He translated Freud's works into English and spread the gospel of psychoanalysis wherever he went. Historian John C. Burnham has said that Brill's work was marked by "preoccupation with the grossly sexual" and "insensitivity to intellectual subtlety," but these traits probably served psychoanalysis well in its infancy by describing it in "sensational" and "simplistic" terms.

In the paper on Lincoln, Brill claimed that Lincoln was the only President "to produce wit." The psychiatrist's experience

had taught him that genuine wits were "a mixture of the schizoid and syntonc personalities." Brill added that "the extreme of this type" was the "schizoid-maniac psychosis" and that Lincoln "had undoubtedly suffered" from this "malady." Brill once described his own psychology facetiously as "schizoid manic."

When the controversy hit the national press, it produced the

usual high comedy. The Associated Press story gave considerable space to the comment on Brill's speech given at the convention by Dr. J. L. Moreno. Brill had characterized Lincoln's humor as being

a "low" type, "frankly sexual" and "obscene." Moreno objected that a psychoanalyst should not rely on stories told about Lincoln by others who might have had "all sorts of motives for telling them." Dr. Brill commented on Lincoln's melancholy and his "unsatisfied love life." Moreno argued that the psychoanalytic method was not well enough developed to warrant application to Abraham Lincoln.

The comedy developed when newspapers picked up and adapted the AP story. There was the inevitable trotting out of shopworn psychological bromides — that Lincoln was "a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde who had his baser nature under rigid control." The wire service provided the customarily solemn and poorly written dictionary definitions of the obscure words for the rubes the reporters pictured as their readers: "Schizoid is a word of Greek derivation, meaning to split, and the expression applied to Lincoln does not mean insanity." Headline writers stretched the truth: "CALLS LINCOLN MAD; AROUSES HOT PROTEST." And some rubes really did get things mixed up; one paper said that Brill attributed a "schizoid-maniac" personality to Lincoln.

Ida Tarbell, Emil Ludwig, and L. Pierce Clark were quoted in the press as responding to the "attack on Lincoln's mentality." Tarbell wrote a reply for the AP, claiming that she could never trace any story to Lincoln that was unsuitable for decent-minded persons. She accused those who found "grossness" in Lincoln of reading their own obscenity into his story. Ludwig, in a radio address, said that Lincoln had the "most beautiful" spirit among American heroes. Dr. Clark, noting that "schizoid" or "schizophrenic" personalities indicated a failure to accept reality, declared that no President had the innate power that Lincoln possessed to grasp the realities of national policy in the intricacies of constitutional debate over states' rights.

The controversy soon died and has long since been forgotten. It occurred in an era when psychiatrists were still commonly called "alienists" and was a good deal removed from the modern era, with its glib ability to spout Freudian terms.

Yet it seems a familiar enough scene. Brill focused on Lincoln's humor, still a favorite subject in psychological studies of Lincoln. His paper was almost immediately characterized as an attack. And his reception was overwhelmingly hostile. If nothing else, the incident stands as a warning to future psychobiographers. Their task will never be an easy one.



Dr. A. A. Brill.

Says Lincoln Had Dual Nature

New York Psychiatrist Reads His Protested Paper—Puts Blame on Parents.

TORONTO, June 5 (A. P.).—Abraham Lincoln was analyzed as a "schizoid manic personality"—a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde who had his baser nature under rigid control—at the American Psychiatric Association meeting today. The analysis was read by Dr. A. A. Brill, a psychoanalyst, of New York city.

When an abstract of Dr. Brill's speech appeared in the program of the association last month, it brought a bitter protest from Dr. Edward E. Hicks, prominent Brooklyn psychiatrist, who described the allusions to Lincoln as "insulting." Dr. Hicks entered a formal protest against the speech with officers of the association.

Schizoid is a word of Greek derivation, meaning to split, and the expression applied to Lincoln does not mean insanity, Dr. Brill explained. He found the trace of dual personality in a reputed tendency to tell off-color anecdotes, which bubbled up as part of Lincoln's humor. The split personality source was traced to his conflicting inheritances from his mother and father, two natures "that never became fused in him."

Ranked With Mark Twain.

Dr. Brill ranked Lincoln as a wit with Mark Twain, Uncle Remus and other great American humorists. He confined his study to the emotional side of the emancipator.

"What is very peculiar about Lincoln's stories and jokes," said Dr. Brill, "his own and those he appropriated from others is the fact that many, if not most, are of an aggressive or signologic nature, treating of pain, suffering and death, and that a great many of them were so frankly sexual as to be classed as obscene. Most of his biographers speak of the latter, but are at a loss to explain why Lincoln resorted to this form of wit. Thus, Beveridge remarked that 'he had faults extremely human, such as his love of a certain type of anecdote, a taste which he never overcame and the expression of which, as will appear, was so marked a feature of his manhood and so shocking to the eminent men among whom he did his historic work.'"

Dr. Brill named as other authorities for the anecdote, "Carl Sandburg's *Quoting Henry Villard*" and Dr. Holselt's *Abraham Lincoln*.