

Lincoln Lore

Number 1839



LINCOLN'S WORLD: ELECTION-TIME IN BRITAIN

by Matthew Noah Vosmeier

The October through December 1991 issues of *Lincoln Lore* focused on the experiences of an anonymous British traveler who visited the United States in 1860 and was a witness to the exciting events of the presidential campaign during his stay in New York City that fall. The traveler's observations, which appeared as a colorful narrative in the April 13, 1861 issue of Charles Dickens's *All the Year*

Round, provided an enlightening perspective on Lincoln's political world. Its detail indicated that his perception had not been dulled by familiarity, and although this writer was only one of many observers commenting on American politics and society in Jacksonian and middle-period America, his narrative is intriguing for its clear descriptions of actual political events and recognizable campaign ephemera. In all, in a successful and entertaining way, he relayed the energy, seriousness, and peculiarly American characteristics of what he saw to the magazine's readers.



A line of voters at a polling booth in New York City on November 6, 1860, from the November 17th issue of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. From the back, the ballot receptacles appear plain, but it is possible that from the front, they were identified by party. [See Neely, *Lincoln Encyclopedia*, p. 101]

The tone of the *All the Year Round* article is a good indication that the British traveler, when not marveling at American electioneering, was respectfully tolerant of its excesses; yet there is, as well, an ambivalence concerning certain aspects of its less decorous side. His narration of the unruliness of antebellum politics — the violence of political clubs, or of the Douglas ox roast at Jones's Wood, for example, with participants more interested in beef than politics and rioting over a roasted and carved ox — can be interpreted as a conclusion that popular political activity was exciting but often lacked meaningful content. The writer's anonymity is an obstacle to knowing his personal feelings about such popular political expression, but to add context to his experiences, and to provide a different perspective on politics during Lincoln's lifetime, it might be useful to look at the political milieu of the countrymen for whom the British traveler was writing. That world existed between the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, a period that, coincidentally, chronologically encompassed Lincoln's own political career.

The style of politics that began to develop in Jacksonian America, with its liveliness and partisanship, has intrigued both contemporary and modern observers. Democratizing tendencies resulted in a political structure that allowed wider opportunity for popular participation (though primarily to adult white men). Also, as historian Roy Nichols argued, the varied state election schedules ensured that "there were so many elections and such constant agitation" that politics were a profound influence in American life, if, in his opinion, a disrupting one.¹

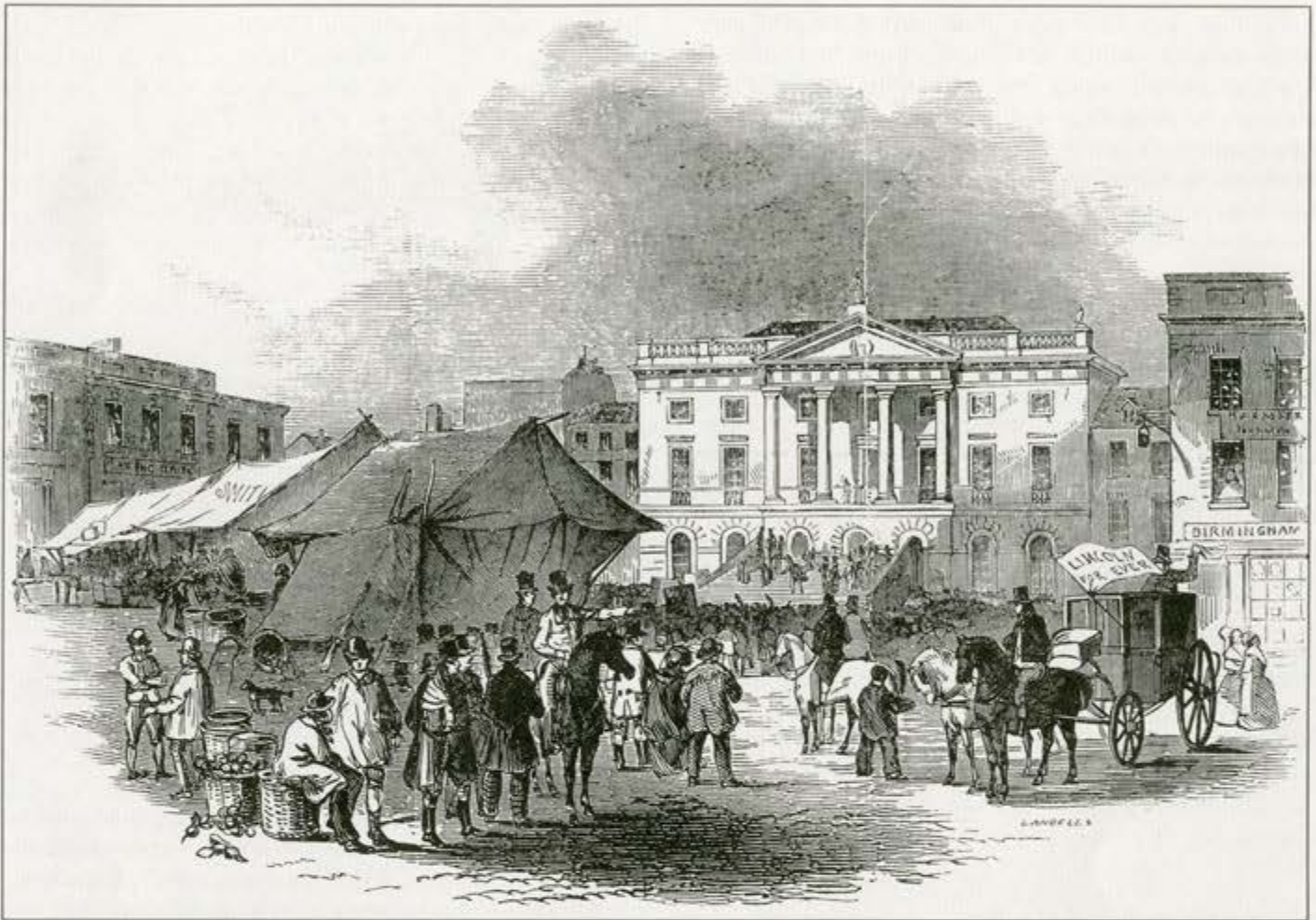
Tied to this democratization of politics was a growth of partisanship and high voter turnouts. To spur loyal party members to turn out on election day, political parties invigorated American political culture through hurrah campaigns, and entrepreneurs happily produced political memorabilia to satisfy a partisan public's demand. Ambitious men who sought to rise in society could thrive in this political culture. In 1832, Lincoln, having lived "in the most humble walks of life," with "no wealthy or popular relations to recommend" him, entered his first campaign for state legislature in frontier Illinois admitting his "peculiar ambition" to "being truly esteemed of my fellow men." Spending his life in his law practice and political career, Lincoln would rise to middle-class respectability. If at first Lincoln shied away from campaign hoopla, by 1848, he wrote to William Herndon to "gather up all the shrewd wild boys about town, whether just of age, or little under age" and "let every one play the part he can play best — some speak, some sing, and all hollow." In sum, as one historian has written, as a part of their personal identity, men saw parties as "a natural lens through which to view the world"



A Whig party procession in New York City for Henry Clay during the 1844 presidential campaign, as pictured in *The Illustrated London News*, January 11, 1845. During the campaign, Lincoln made speeches in Illinois and Indiana supporting Clay's candidacy.

and "found it second nature to perceive events from a partisan perspective and imagine a black-and-white world of absolutes, of political friends and enemies." Therefore, "partisanship had to be paraded and asserted in public."²

Thus the excitement surrounding the Wide-Awake parade held at the height of the era of popular politics, which entranced even the British journalist. Not all observers of the American political style were as entranced as he, perhaps because it seemed to replace the serious opinions of the politically-minded elite with unseemly partisanship and campaign hoopla. For example, in their study of Lincoln in the popular print, Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely, Jr., point to British traveler Frances Trollope's distaste for American electioneering as early as 1832, which was the year of Lincoln's first campaign. Trollope, who arrived in America in 1827 and stayed for nearly four years, offered shrewd, if highly critical, observations about American society in her book *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Her dismay at how American politics substituted "party spirit for personal esteem" is evident in her appraisal of the 1828 presidential campaign. She explained that, soon after her arrival in America, she learned that President John Quincy Adams, whom she believed did "honour to the office," was criticized for being "too much of a gentleman" and replaced merely because it was "best to change." She continued: "'Jackson for ever!' was, there-



The Hustings at Newark, in Nottinghamshire, England, as pictured in *The Illustrated London News*, February 28, 1846. At these pre-election events, speaking stands, or "hustings," were often constructed for the nomination of candidates. Crowds of voters and onlookers would gather, with, as the November 28, 1868 issue of the periodical put it, "groaning and cheers, cheers and groaning" for the nominees. The owner of the carriage on the right is a Lincoln supporter — in this case, Henry Pelham Clinton, Earl of Lincoln.

fore, screamed from the majority of mouths, both drunk and sober, till he was elected; but, no sooner in his place, than the same ceaseless operation went on again, with 'Clay for ever' for its war-whoop." Trollope concluded that "had America every attraction under heaven that nature and social enjoyment can offer, this electioneering madness would make me fly in disgust. It engrosses every conversation, [and] it irritates every temper."³

Although Trollope's book was criticized for its harsh appraisal of American society, according to Helen Heine-man, a scholar of Trollope, the book sold well in Britain, in part because the first Reform Bill was nearing passage in Britain and it prompted "great interest in America and its political democracy." The reformed political system brought about in 1832 reflected broader social and economic changes in nineteenth-century Britain. Under the complex electoral system before the first Reform Bill, most

counties sent two members (MPs) to Parliament and granted suffrage to every male who paid a land tax. In the boroughs, parliamentary representation was based on historical precedent, without regard for population movement and change, and the right to vote varied from town to town. The Reform Bill of 1832 reduced these inequalities and also extended the suffrage to more of the middle classes — in the counties, to those who owned a freehold valued at forty shillings per year, and in the boroughs, anyone who owned or leased a house valued at ten pounds a year. The number of men who could vote climbed from 400,000 to 650,000 voters in 1833, and it was 1,000,000 in 1864.⁴

Yet, if the first Reform Bill has long been seen as a milestone in Britain's political history, it has also been disparaged for conservative elements that made the new electoral system seem little different from what had gone before. Consequently, British politics in this period has sometimes

been dismissed as lacking popular participation and vigor. With the passage of the bill, more parliamentary seats from the counties were added, strengthening the influence of the landed classes, and the vote was still largely restricted to the middle and upper classes, with only one in five Englishmen able to vote. Because parliamentary elections were not held on a regular schedule, voters might not cast their ballots very often. In some constituencies, MPs regularly ran unopposed, limiting campaign excitement — especially in comparison with American campaigns.⁵

Moreover, popular partisanship was less pronounced in Britain during Lincoln's lifetime. Frances Trollope complained that, in America, "personal esteem" had been replaced with "party spirit," but in Britain, historian Gary Cox writes, the 1830s through 1850s were "the golden age of the independent MP." He argues that the cabinet's role increased in these decades, with the cabinet tightening party discipline and centralizing its authority around 1860. Voters perceived the diminishing of the significance and influence of any individual MP. As a result, because voters did not (and do not) vote directly for a national executive, they began to act as partisans — casting votes for their party's candidates as a way to choose the Prime Minister — only in the last third of the century.⁶

Even given such evidence of less vigorous electioneering in mid-nineteenth century Britain, the first Reform Bill and the political style that proceeded from it continue to prompt lively debate among historians about the nature of politics and campaigns. Among the ways they have reconstructed how people have engaged in Britain's political life, one of the more visible artifacts of British politics, election pollbooks, have proved useful because they recorded the electors' publicly-spoken (*viva voce*) votes in the years before the secret ballot adoption in 1872. In ways similar to the "new" political historians of American politics, who used voting behavior to reconstruct the social foundation for the political behavior of antebellum voters, historians of Victorian British politics can try to see how the electoral system operated in British society — who could vote, the extent to which the 1832 bill actually opened the system to new voters, what motivated and influenced voters, and how freely voters could make political choices.⁷

For instance, how did class, religious affiliation, occupation, or social relationships (such as the "deferential" relationship between landlord and tenant farmer) affect a voter's choices? Historians' ability to interpret this information is aided by the fact that, in constituencies sending two members to Parliament, British electors could cast two votes. Voters might cast a "straight" ticket, that is, both votes for candidates of the same party, they might "split" their votes between the parties, or they might "plump" their vote, that is, cast only one vote and thereby increase its

weight by denying the other candidates a vote. Seen through time, this information could indicate whether partisan loyalties were strengthening, and it could also tell something of the structure of a voter's community — what influences were shaping his political decisions. For instance, a split vote might indicate that partisanship was taking second place to something else — perhaps a shopkeeper hedging his bet so as to upset neither his Tory landlord nor his Whig customers.⁸

(To be continued.)

Notes

1. David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York, 1961), p. 228; Roy F. Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York, 1962), p. 503.
2. Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print* (New York, 1984), pp. 3-5; Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* 9 vols. (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1953) 1: 8-9, 491; Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York, 1986), pp. 13-14.
3. Holzer, Boritt, and Neely, "The Lincoln Image," in *The Historian's Lincoln: Pseudohistory, Psychohistory, and History* (Urbana, 1988), pp. 49-50; Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (London, 1832), 2: 33-34.
4. Helen Heineman, "Frances Trollope," *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 21: 320-321; Clayton Roberts and David Roberts, *A History of England, 1688 to the Present* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1985), pp. 557-558; John A. Phillips, *The Great Reform Bill in the Boroughs: English Electoral Behavior, 1818-1841* (New York, 1992), p. 2.
5. Roberts and Roberts, *A History of England*, p. 558; Holzer et al., "The Lincoln Image," in *The Historian's Lincoln*, pp. 49-50.
6. Gary Cox, *The Efficient Secret: The Cabinet and the Development of Political Parties in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 46-52, 65-66, 136, 92; Holzer et al., "The Lincoln Image," in *The Historian's Lincoln*, pp. 49-50.
7. David Cresap Moore, *The Politics of Deference: A Study of the Mid-Nineteenth Century English Political System* (New York, 1976), pp. 1, 15-15.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 2; Cox, *Efficient Secret*, pp. 95-96, 115.



Lincoln Lore is the monthly bulletin of
The Lincoln Museum,
Part of Lincoln National Corporation,
1300 South Clinton Street,
P.O. Box 1110, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.
© 1994 The Lincoln Museum