



BOOKS AT BROWN

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FRIENDS of the LIBRARY of BROWN UNIVERSITY: PROVIDENCE, R. I.

FIRST ANNUAL LINCOLN MEETING

"Think it over, and see whether you can do better than go for me."

— A. LINCOLN

ON FEBRUARY 5 we held the first of what is hoped to be a series of annual Lincoln meetings. The principal attraction of the evening was an address, *The Humor of Lincoln and the Seriousness of his Biographers*, by our Librarian, Dr. Van Hoesen.

There were on display at this meeting gifts of Lincoln material received in the past from FRIENDS, as well as nineteen items which the library wished for the McLellan Collection. Ten of the latter have now been purchased by FRIENDS. Also, through the generosity of Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf and W. Easton Louttit, Jr. '25, three lots of Lincoln manuscripts have been added to this collection. These lots include the following items —

An autograph note signed, on back of an envelope dated June 8, 1861. The letter enclosed in the envelope is addressed to the President and was written by General James Cooper, "Com. Md. Vols."

Autograph endorsement signed, dated January 29, 1864, written on the verso of a petition, signed by citizens of Alexandria, Va., for the release of a soldier of Virginia.

Autograph note signed, dated November 1, 1864, and written on verso of a letter. The note promises to discharge a drafted soldier if the Navy Yard can employ him as a machinist; with an autograph note signed by Gideon Welles on another portion of the sheet.

Autograph note signed, dated December 14, 1864, being an order to release a prisoner, with an autograph note signed by Edwin Stanton.

Although it is not the policy of *Books at Brown* to print speeches given at our meetings, because of the importance of the occasion and of the McLellan Collection and because of the great demand for copies of Dr. Van Hoesen's paper of February 5, we are printing an abridged version of it in this double issue.

THE HUMOR OF LINCOLN AND THE SERIOUSNESS OF HIS BIOGRAPHERS

By H. B. Van Hoesen

FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY MEETING, FEBRUARY 5, 1945

I think I have never felt so unequal to an occasion. Our program committee designs this as the first of a series of annual Lincoln meetings, and I am so proud of the McLellan Lincoln Collection and so solicitous for its further development and for its exploitation toward a better knowledge and understanding of Abraham Lincoln that, to my mind, the only suitable speaker to begin the series would be a man who had made Lincoln his life's study, who knew all about Lincoln that I don't know — as well as the little that I do know — and who also had all the interest and solicitude for the Collection that I have.

Well that *just* the right person seems to be unavailable at the moment, and such is my concern for our Lincoln Collection and such my affection for the Friends of the Library, that I wanted to accept the invitation to speak only less than I wished I could speak as it should be spoken. My situation was like Lincoln's on the question of his going to the Republican national convention in 1860, when he said he was "too much of a candidate to go and not enough of a candidate to stay away." The difference between us is that Lincoln had the good judgment to stay away.

At a political rally last fall I observed, as I have thought I observed sometimes in church congregations, that people like to be told what they know or think already. But I have not been able to make myself believe that the FRIENDS would enjoy a repetition of *Books at Brown*, vol. 4, no. 3 (March, 1942) and I am not going to talk about what is uppermost in my mind — the McLellan Collection. Instead, I am going to ask you, seriously, to re-read that brief description of the Collection, and to refresh your minds on the present strength of the Collection in all types of material and on the particular acquisitions and projects toward which our ambitions are directed.

And in your reading on Lincoln, note not only the information but also the lack of information in the outstanding biographies. Surely Lincoln's connections with Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders are not covered in the accounts of his Rhode Island itinerary in the spring of 1860. Or, join me in looking for instances in which Lincoln's biographers misunderstood him because they did not see him smile when he said it, because they did not see or else forgot the circumstances and context of the remark.

I'm afraid I have been guilty of dreaming of great things to do by

and bye, and — what's worse — talking about them. I may have said "The Humor of Lincoln and the Seriousness of his Biographers" so many times that our program committee thinks I've done something about it and want me to get it off my chest. Or it may be they planned to make me do something about it and get it out of my system. But either supposition would be a mistake.

For I have only made a few beginnings in the way of chance discoveries — if they are discoveries — and these are not of major importance. Still I hope they are illustrative and will help correct some misunderstandings of Lincoln's attitudes of mind — toward the wonders of nature, toward his father, toward college education, toward law.

Niagara Falls. On his way home from Congress in 1848 Lincoln visited Niagara Falls. A little later Herndon also visited Niagara Falls, and, he says, "was endeavoring to entertain my partner with an account of my trip . . . I indulged in a good deal of imagery . . . The mad rush of water, the roar, the rapids, and the rainbow furnished me with an abundance of material for a stirring and impressive picture. The recollection of the gigantic and awe-inspiring scene stimulated my exuberant powers to the highest pitch . . . 'What,' I inquired, 'made the deepest impression on you when you stood in the presence of the great natural wonder?' . . . 'The thing that struck me most forcibly when I saw the Falls,' he responded, 'was, where in the world did all that water come from?'"

In this audience, Lincoln's reply gets a laugh, but not so with Herndon. Herndon goes on: "He had no eye for the magnificence and grandeur of the scene, for the rapids, the mist, the angry waters, and the roar of the whirlpool, but his mind, working in its accustomed channel, heedless of beauty or awe, followed irresistibly back to the first cause. It was in this light he viewed every question."

We can check this account with Lincoln's own notes for a Lyceum lecture and see how right Herndon was, and how wrong! "Niagara Falls! By what mysterious power is it that millions and millions are drawn from all parts of the world to gaze upon Niagara Falls? There is no mystery about the thing itself. Every effect is just as any intelligent man, knowing the causes, would anticipate without seeing it. If the water moving onward in a great river reaches a point where there is a perpendicular jog of a hundred feet in descent in the bottom of the river, it is plain the water will have a violent and continuous plunge at that point . . . Yet this is really a very small part of that world's wonder. Its power to excite reflection and emotion is its great charm . . . It calls up the indefinite past. When Columbus first sought this continent — when Christ suffered on the cross — when Moses led Israel through the

Red Sea — nay, even when Adam first came from the hand of his Maker: then, as now, Niagara was roaring here . . .”

This is my first example of Lincoln's biographer's missing the joke and consequently misunderstanding the man. And what biographer had a better opportunity to know Lincoln in his Illinois days? Their close acquaintance began in 1834, in Springfield. In 1837 they shared a room over Speed's store. In 1842 Herndon began studying law in Logan and Lincoln's office, and in 1844 he became Lincoln's law partner — an active association for the next sixteen years and never actually dissolved till Lincoln's death.

Then why did Herndon misunderstand Lincoln? As Paul Angle says¹, “Herndon saw Lincoln, as it were, through the glass of his own personality,” and, we may add, of his own education and his own literary taste and style. Herndon was educated in private schools and had part of a year in Illinois College. He claimed to have had “an excellent library” — “hundreds, if not thousands” of books — until “financial troubles overtook” him in 1871-72. Lincoln, on the other hand, says that when he came of age, he “could read, write, and cipher to the rule of three, but that was all.”

Herndon's literary taste was the conventional educated taste of the period when “the ideas people had about style led them to think better of the highfalutin word-embroideries of scholars than of the hayfield talk of bumpkins.”² Lincoln, on the other hand, recalled that “when a mere child, I used to get irritated when anybody talked to me in a way I could not understand . . . I am never easy now, when I am handling a thought, till I have bounded it north, and bounded it south and bounded it east and bounded it west.” In writing or speaking, Lincoln's aim was not to embellish but to demonstrate. For that purpose he studied Euclid.

Certainly there is nothing highfalutin in his first reported stump speech in 1832 (as reported by one Bill Green): “Gentlemen and fellow citizens: I presume you all know who I am. I am humble Abraham Lincoln. I have been solicited by many friends to become a candidate for the legislature. My politics are short and sweet, like the old woman's dance. I am in favor of a national bank. I am in favor of the internal-improvements system and a high protective tariff. These are my sentiments and political principles. If elected, I shall be thankful; if not, it will be all the same.”

Herndon was exuberant. Lincoln was reticent — Herndonsays “He was the most secretive — reticent shut mouthed man that ever existed.”

Finally, one is tempted to turn against Herndon the statement he made of other contemporaries of Lincoln. “Lincoln outstripped his con-

temporaries and companions and they feel a terrible jealousy against the man who overheaded, outstripped them. I have seen this meanness often."

Incidentally, this statement has a certain implication regarding Lincoln's humor and melancholy if it is true that "laughter and tears are not far apart." What I mean to say is, that a man who has outstripped, lost congeniality with family and friends, is a lonely man, and, to the various supposed causes of Lincoln's melancholy — malaria perhaps, homeliness perhaps, lack of educational and social advantages perhaps, disappointment in love perhaps, unhappy married life perhaps — we may add loneliness. I don't think it is necessary to assume the mother-complex or Oedipus complex as Clark's *Psychobiography of Lincoln* does.

Work. Thirty-six years after the event one John Romeyn told this: "He worked for me in 1829 pulling fodder. I say Abe was awful lazy . . . [He] said to me one day that his father taught him to work but never learned him to love it."

Now, the essence of humor is its unexpectedness. And one of the best surprises is a natural or truthful reply when custom or convention would call for the opposite. When a man accuses you of laziness, the conventional thing is to deny it, and the truthful thing generally would be to admit it. We may then admit, as Lincoln himself admitted, that he was physically lazy — what boy that has grown to 6 ft. 4 in. at 18 years isn't lazy? But was he admitting a fault or was he bragging? And why mention his father? I suspect that Romeyn may have asked him if his father hadn't taught him to work or may have said something to the effect of "like father, like son." And so I suspect that his defense — that his father never taught him to love work — is not an accusation of his father, as it has sometimes been understood (i.e. implying that his father had overworked him) but a defense of his father and himself, citing his father as good authority (i.e. we Lincolns know better than to love work).

Education. But if Lincoln's father did not inspire him to love work, did he inspire him to read, to get an education? Some biographers think he did and quote the following:³ "My father suffered greatly for want of an education, and he determined at an early day that I should be well educated . . . We had an old dog-eared arithmetic in our house, and Father determined that, somehow or else, I should cipher clear through that book."

This anti-climax — "well educated" to the extent of ciphering clear through a dog-eared old arithmetic — is, to my mind, a good bit of irony, i.e. a statement which means the opposite of what it says. As to Tom Lincoln's attitude — his wife, Abraham's step-mother, says it was

she who persuaded him not to interfere with Abraham's reading: "I induced my husband to permit Abe to read and study at home as well as at school. At first he was not easily reconciled to it, but finally he too seemed willing to encourage him to a certain extent." Lincoln himself was always deprecatory as regards his education — here is the copy he supplied to the editor of the *Dictionary of Congress* (1858): "Born, Feb. 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. Education, defective. Profession, a lawyer . . ."

College Trained Lawyers. In 1855 Lincoln was retained in the Manny-McCormick harvester case, but was disappointed when it was decided, after the case had been called, that only Hardin and Stanton should speak for the defense. This was told by Ralph Emerson, as recently as 1909: "When the hearing was through, Mr. Lincoln called me to him as we left the court room and wanted to walk and talk. For block after block he walked rapidly forward, silent and deeply dejected. At last, turning to me, he exclaimed: 'Emerson, I'm going home.' A pause. 'I am going home to study law.'"

"'Why,' I exclaimed, 'Mr. Lincoln you stand at the head of the bar in Illinois now. What are you talking about?'"

"'Yes, yes,' he said. 'I do occupy a good position there, and I think I can get along with the way things are going there now. But these college trained men who have devoted their whole lives to study are coming west don't you see? . . . They have got as far as Ohio now. They will soon be in Illinois.'"

"'Another long pause. Then . . . 'I'm going home to study law! I'm as good as any of them, and when they get out to Illinois I will be ready for them.'"

"'He finished, and at once became very cheerful . . .'"

I repeated this to a fellow Lincoln enthusiast, questioning Lincoln's seriousness, in view of the fact that Lincoln had been practicing law with pretty good success for twenty years, and suggesting that he was having a little gibe at these smart college fellows to comfort himself for the high handed way Stanton had frozen him out of his chance to plead in court, and that was why he "at once became very cheerful." The reply I got was, "Well I think Lincoln meant just what he said — that he *was* going back to Illinois and study law." This, of course, was unanswerable — probably Lincoln *was* going back to Illinois and study law. But I don't think this was why he "at once became very cheerful." Anyway, he had met college trained lawyers before, not only when he was in Congress, but back in the Illinois legislature and in Springfield twenty years earlier — Stuart his law partner, Edwards his brother-in-law, Orville H. Browning, David Davis, etc.

Thus far the examples I have given are based on reminiscences of things that happened from ten to fifty years before they were written down and that were to a certain extent told in the language and colored by the personality of the teller. To test their reliability involves all the types of criticism known to the historian. So the reliability of the narrator has to be investigated and, since the narrators generally prove to be unreliable, any of their reminiscences you believe must be tested by historical, literary and interpretive criticism.

Several people have studied Lincoln's literary style, and the reader of Lincoln gradually gets a feel for Lincoln's manner of saying things. Here again most of the reminiscent quotations from Lincoln fail to stand the test. They don't "sound like Lincoln." But there remains the possibility or probability that Lincoln said something like that. This is a feature in Sandburg's method — I heard him say on one occasion something like this, "Yes the witness is unreliable, and in the circumstances that existed, something else might have happened, but something *like* this did happen — and I liked this story." Many of the stories in *Abraham Lincoln, the Prairie Years* are frankly not attributed to Lincoln but, for Sandburg's purposes of creating the atmosphere of Lincoln's early environment, they are almost as good as true Lincoln stories would be. Lincoln, himself, said that he invented only two stories, but the evidence that he told many is indisputable. His wit appeared in his manner of telling stories, and in fitting them to the occasion or argument. His *inventive* wit is to be found mostly in bits of repartee, where he seems to have been very ready, in contrast to the slowness of his mental processes in general.

And, finally, if we decide Lincoln said that or something like that, there remains the question, what did he mean?

The Lightning Rod. In this case probably Lincoln's audience understood him better than one biographer. In the campaign for the Illinois legislature in 1836, seven democratic candidates and seven whigs (including Lincoln) held forth at a meeting in the Springfield Court House. After Lincoln, a former whig, turned democrat, named Forquer, announced "This young man must be taken down, and I am truly sorry that the task devolves upon me." When he finished, Lincoln said: "I am not so young in years, as I am in the tricks and the trades of a politician, but, live long or die young, I would rather die now, than, like the gentleman, change my politics, and with the change receive an office worth three thousand dollars a year, and then feel obliged to erect a lightning-rod over my house to protect a guilty conscience from an offended God."

Isaac N. Arnold explains! — "It is difficult today to appreciate the

effect on the old settlers, of this figure. This lightning rod was the first which most of those present had ever seen. They had slept all their lives in their cabins, in conscious security . . . These old settlers thought that nothing but the consciousness of guilt, the stings of a guilty conscience, could account for such timidity." (Anyway, I suspect Isaac N. Arnold of lacking a sense of humor a little farther on in his book, where he has a chapter heading: "Miscellaneous Speeches and Marriage.")

Law Evasion. Lincoln's first political speech — later printed as a handbill — announced his candidacy for the legislature. No less a person than Sandburg describes it thus: "He called for a strong law to stop the practice of loaning money at exorbitant rates of interest, and declared that cases of greatest necessity may arise when the evasion of laws is justifiable . . ."

Lincoln justifying law evasion! Usury was a ticklish subject, of course, and antagonism of people who had money out at interest might lose votes. But let's read that part of the speech: ". . . It seems as though we are never to have an end to this baneful and corroding system . . . unless there be a law made fixing the limits of usury. A law for this purpose, I am of opinion, may be made without materially injuring any class of people. In cases of extreme necessity, there could always be means found to cheat the law; while in all other cases it would have its intended effect. I would favor the passage of a law on this subject which might not be very easily evaded . . . Let it be such that the labor and difficulty of evading it could only be justified in cases of greatest necessity."

As I read it, the evasion sentence was said with a smile — or in such a way as to get a laugh — and meant "Of course some of you fellows will find your way around the law." Nothing is more characteristic of Lincoln than his use of humor to disarm an opponent, get a laugh from him or at him, and then, if necessary, give it to him straight — "I would favor the passage of a law on this subject which might not be very easily evaded . . ." And yet Morse, Tarbell, Barton, Beveridge, and Sandburg all took it seriously.

Cooper Institute Address. Finally, for humor in one of his greatest speeches — the Cooper Institute address. Such is the coldness of print that an oration becomes a cold depersonalized essay. I had never thought of its being humorous until I read in Nicolay and Hay of "the smiles, the laughter, and the outburst of applause which greeted and emphasized the speaker's telling points." I reread the speech and marked a few passages but was still mystified. Then I read the newspaper reports. The N. Y. Tribune daily (Feb. 28, 1860, reported: "We present herewith a very full and accurate report of this Speech; Yet the

tones, the gestures, the kindling eye and the mirth provoking look, defy the reporter's skill. The vast assemblage frequently rang with cheers and shouts of applause, which were prolonged and intensified at the close. No man ever before made such an impression on his first appeal to a New-York audience . . ."

The Tribune weekly issue (Mar. 3) gave another clue: "Mr. Lincoln's speech excited frequent and irrepressible applause. His occasional repetition of his text never failed to provoke a burst of cheers and audible smiles. The completeness with which Popular Sovereignty and its progenitor were used up has rarely, if ever, been equalled" . . .

Tone, gestures, mirth-provoking look, repetition of his text, completeness with which Popular Sovereignty was used up — these are the clues to the humor of the Cooper Institute address. The text is: — "Senator Douglas said: 'Our fathers, when they framed the government under which we live, understood this question just as well, and even better, than we do now.' " When you come to think of it, this is really a ridiculous argument, and Lincoln says, near the end of his discussion of it, "I do not mean to say we are bound to follow implicitly in whatever our fathers did. To do so would be to discard all the lights of current experience — to reject all progress, all improvement." We may imagine then that Lincoln quoted his text in a somewhat ironical, derisive manner; the effect of the first statement of the text repeated itself, of course, with each repetition of the text or any part of it; and the number of repetitions counts up to fifty! The only way to make this clear would be to read the whole speech aloud. I suggest that you try it out, with the proper tones, gestures and mirth provoking looks. Even the completeness with which you will "use up" Popular Sovereignty will, in itself alone, give you a feeling of satisfaction very similar to mirth.

What do Lincoln's biographers make of this? Well, Russell H. Conwell (later President of Temple University and author of *Acres of Diamonds*) wrote a book *Why Lincoln Laughed*, and gives his eye-witness account of the Cooper Institute speech in a chapter "When Lincoln was laughed at"!

But before leaving it at that, Conwell's interesting and valuable account deserves acknowledgment. He had seen hoodlum preparations for throwing onions at the speaker, was impressed by the contrast in physical appearance, bearing and costume between Lincoln and William Cullen Bryant, who introduced him, and witnessed the sniggers of the audience and some hisses. Lincoln was obviously embarrassed and was "trebly chained to his ms.," until, after about half an hour of "painful recital," he lost a sheet of it, disregarded the rest of the ms. and "let himself go." Conwell quotes Charles Sumner to the effect that if Lin-

coln's prepared speech had not been circulated, and if he had actually delivered the speech as written — "the car of progress would have met with delays and disasters beyond the limits of human calculation."

On Lincoln's humor in general, Conwell says, "Did he use his humor to disarm opposition, to gain good will, or to throw a mantle around his own melancholy thoughts? . . . I am sure I cannot say. I only know that humor to Lincoln seemed to be a safety valve without which he would have collapsed under the crushing burden which he carried during the civil war." And in so saying, Conwell has provided a good concluding paragraph for any paper on Lincoln's humor.

1. *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, New York, 1930.
2. Walter Blair, *Horse Sense in American Humor*, Chicago, 1942.
3. M. Houser, *Abraham Lincoln, Student*. Peoria, private print, 1932.

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