LINCOLN LORE

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WAR WEAPONS, 1861-1865

Bruce, Robert V., *Lincoln and the Tools of War*. The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 299 pp. Price $5.00.

Unless it be the quest for peace, the most exhaustive exploration of the modern day is the feverish search for weapons of war which would guarantee to some nation or league of nations the balance of military power. Into an atmosphere such as this, Robert V. Bruce has introduced his new book entitled *Lincoln and The Tools of War.*

One often hears lecturers assert in their preliminary remarks that "nothing new can be said about Lincoln", and then support the assertion by rehashing some Lincoln folklore. The assumption is of course that all the pertinent facts about him have been made known. While publishers of books are anxious to affirm that the information they are releasing is unique, yet they usually pronounce the work of the author as "definitive" closing the door to any student who might wish to pursue the same subject. The book by Mr. Bruce is so fresh and original in its contents that you wonder if there are not other available sources just as revealing, waiting to be discovered by some historical research sleuth.

Nearly a hundred years have passed since the close of the Civil War and literally thousands of books have been written about various aspects of the contest. No adequate analysis has been made heretofore of the part the ordnance divisions either army or navy had to play in the conflict especially as they selected or rejected implements of war.

When "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln" recently came from the press it was stated that the nine volume incorporate "virtually everything that Lincoln left us." It was estimated that "the collection covers 99% of all existing Lincoln autograph papers." Yet Robert Bruce found over thirty letters, notes and endorsements relating to ordnance alone, which do not appear in the collected works.

When a new book comes out it is always of interest to a research student to check the index for the main characters mentioned and observe how often they appear on the stage of action. A dozen persons are mentioned who receive the most attention by Bruce; Lincoln of course is the central figure in the book and he is constantly before the reader. The other two characters who are active throughout the argument are James W. Ripley and John A. Dahlgren. We might call them the villain and the hero respectively of the cast. Next in the number of references come Stanton and McClellan. Then there follows in order George D. Ramsey, Simon Cameron, Gideon Welles, Peter Watson, Henry Augustus Wise, Oliver S. Halstead, Jr., and Alexander B. Dyer.

James Wolfe Ripley was born in Windham, Connecticut December 10, 1794. He graduated from West Point in 1874 and saw service in the war with Great Britain and in the Seminole War. As a captain he was in charge of Charleston Harbor at the time of the nullification activities in 1832. Raised to the rank of major in 1838 he was from 1841-1854 superintendent of the Springfield (Mass.) armory and was breveted lieutenant colonel in 1848. As a full lieutenant colonel he became chief of ordnance in the Department of the Pacific from 1855 to 1857 and then became colonel and chief of ordnance U. S. Army at Washington.

John Adoph Dahlgren born the same year as Lincoln was the son of the Swedish counsel at Philadelphia. Young Dahlgren received his midshipman's warrant in 1826. He was detached for coast duty on the coast survey in 1834 and was commission lieutenant in 1837. Dahlgren was assigned ordnance duty at Washington in 1847. He was given the command of the Navy Yard on April 22, 1861 and on July 18 the following year was appointed chief of the navy ordnance bureau.

Lincoln's contacts with these two men, Ripley and Dahlgren, are of basic importance in the movement of the story about the rejection and acceptance of new tools of war during the hostilities. Ripley, although a man of integrity and loyalty to the union cause, was according to the New York Times an "old fogy . . . who combatted all new ideas in the fabrication of firearms, artillery and projectiles." Dahlgren, fifteen years younger than Ripley and the same age as Lincoln, was "a man of science and inventive genius," who "published many scientific works on ordnance."

As Bruce so well puts it in his book, "Abraham Lincoln was to be protagonist and General Ripley antagonist in the hidden struggle over new weapons which was played out in those fearful years." The author further correctly concludes that "all of Ripley's troubles were complicated by the peacetime office routine which he had inherited", and from which he refused to deviate in time of war.

The fact that Stanton, Secretary of War, was unapproachable drove large numbers of complaining citizens to the President's door and the same attitude by Ripley who was Stanton's counterpart in temperament at least, sent every inventor of a new weapon or new type of ammunition to the White House. After reading Bruce's book one will wonder how Lincoln survived as head of the complaint department with both Stanton and Ripley both driving there dissatisfied visitors to the executive mansion.

The one ray of light which Lincoln was not long in discovering came from the Navy Yard where Dahlgren was the chief. Bruce gives this word picture of the meeting of Lincoln and Dahlgren "Lincoln took immediate fancy to the man he saw standing before him, a man of earnest and thoughtful mein, utterly without self-consciousness. . . . The President grasped Dahlgren's hand in both of his as if the two men had been friends for years. . . . Lincoln had found his chief adviser on the tools of war."

Inasmuch as there had been no major war in America since the revolution, mostly skirmishes with Indians, Englishmen and Mexicans, weapons had become mostly antiquated. The spirit of science had not begun to find expression in the field of destructive weapons. The imperative need of a new approach towards arms and ammunition was a direct challenge to inventors. Although there were many of them who may have been moved entirely by the mercenary motives, it appears as if the desire to do something for one's country in the time of dire need drove many scientists to give their time and money to make available more effective weapons. Some of the so called capitalists whose foundries were turned into ordnance factories were left entirely without funds at the close of the war. A few of them of course prospered greatly. Bruce quotes General Sheridan, whose troops had been the beneficiaries of some of these improvements in arms, as saying, "The improvement in the material of war was so great that nations could not make war, such would be the destruction of human life."

Moving in and out through the changing ordnance drama is the President, always ready to give a fair hearing to the inventor about his dream. The stature of Lincoln so considerate of all seems to grow taller, if that is possible, as we observe him in the new field of authority which Bruce has placed him, in the book featuring "The Tools of War."