



Lincoln Lore

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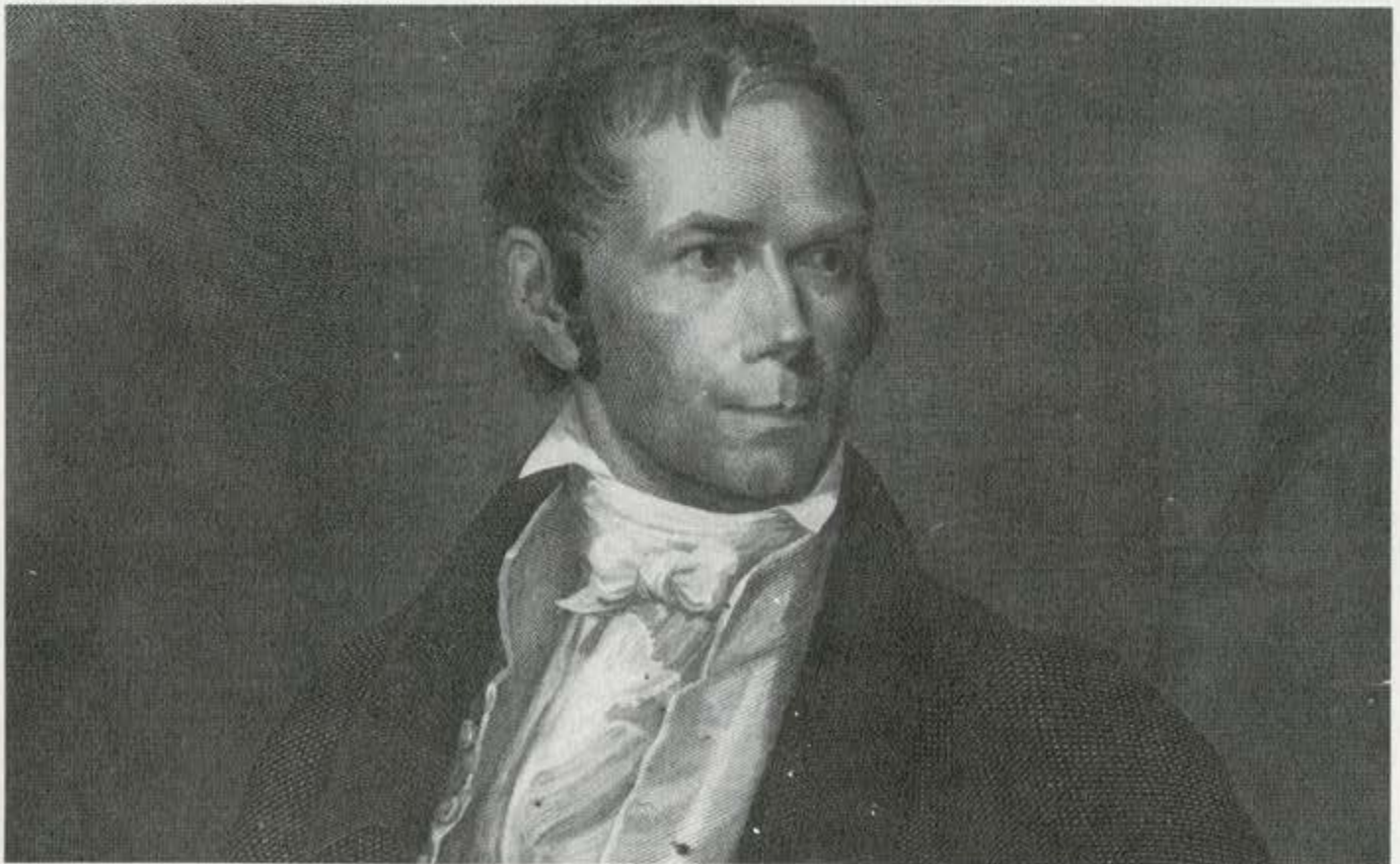
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HENRY CLAY'S FIRST BIOGRAPHER

Henry Clay was a successful politician and the representative of a border state; therefore, he was a man of contradictions. He was a Jeffersonian Republican whom Jefferson himself criticized, a slaveholder who professed hatred of slavery as a moral evil, a "War Hawk" who feared military leaders as presidential candidates, and an apologist and counsel for the Second Bank of the United States who had claimed that the First Bank of the United States was unconstitutional. The Whig party, of which Clay became a leader, held many former Federalists who detested dueling, if for no other reason than because it had caused the death of Alexander Hamilton; Clay himself, however, fought two duels. For some, he was "Gallant Harry of the West"; for others, he was "the western Judas."

Abraham Lincoln's admiration for Henry Clay is much fabled but little analyzed. From statements he made

(mostly after Clay's death in 1852), we do know how Lincoln resolved many of the contradictions in Clay's character, but not all. We know less than we should about what Lincoln knew about Clay when both men were still alive and their Whig party was still alive. In fact, of some ten thousand items of Lincolniana in the Lincoln Library and Museum, only two short pamphlets written almost one hundred years apart focus exclusively on the subject of Lincoln's relationship with Henry Clay. Significantly, one argues that Lincoln was "a political disciple of Clay"; the other argues that they held opposite political principles. Few today hold the latter position, and indeed the charge was a part of the campaign of 1860 and not the judgment of history. Nevertheless, we do not know specifically the sources from which Lincoln gained his early knowledge of and admiration for Clay. Without knowing how much he knew of



Engraving From The Lincoln National Life Foundation

Henry Clay (1777-1852) was born in Virginia in a modest story-and-a-half frame house. Daniel Webster tried to meet the era of the common man half-way by saying "it did not happen to me to be born in a log cabin; but my elder brothers and sisters were." Although it is nowhere recorded that Clay tried to transform his frame house into a log cabin, he was fond of dwelling on his early years as a penniless and uneducated orphan. Actually, his father was a minister, and his mother, who remarried after the death of Clay's father, was hardly penniless. George Prentice chose to mention Clay's rags-to-riches story only in passing; it got greater emphasis from later biographers. The above engraving shows Clay at the age of 44 as a well-dressed legislator long removed from any humble origins. Perhaps such portraits forced Prentice to say of Clay that the "curse of aristocracy has never chilled the warm flow of his natural feelings."

this complicated man, we cannot be certain of the reasons why Clay appealed to Lincoln.

A number of Lincoln students have attributed Lincoln's early knowledge of Clay to his reading the *Biography of Henry Clay* written by Clay's earliest biographer, George D. Prentice, and published in Hartford, Connecticut in 1831 by Samuel Hanmer, Jr. and John Jay Phelps. Charles Carleton Coffin's *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893) made the most specific and extravagant claim: "... Mr. Prentice went to Kentucky and prepared a life of Mr. Clay, a copy of which fell into the hands of the young postmaster at New Salem, who read it with great care, and who accepted the political principles of the Kentucky statesman." On the strength of Coffin's statement, M. L. Houser, one of four important experts on Lincoln's reading, included Prentice among the biographers whom Lincoln read, though he called Prentice's book *The Life of Henry Clay*. In *Lincoln's Education and Other Essays* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1957), Houser asserted that in "Indiana, young Lincoln read various campaign biographies of his hero; at New Salem, the Prentice work."

As early as 1866, J. G. Holland in his *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Gurdon Bill) asserted that Lincoln "had the early privilege of reading ... a Life of Henry Clay which his mother had managed to purchase for him." Holland made no claim that it was Prentice's work; indeed, it could not have been, for Nancy Hanks Lincoln died thirteen years before its publication. Perhaps this statement led later students to believe that Lincoln read Prentice's biography simply because it was the earliest biography of Clay and, by virtue of its date, the only likely candidate to be Holland's volume. H. E. Barker, another student of Lincoln's reading, fell into precisely this trap. He concluded that Lincoln read Prentice's book because: (1) Holland said he did, (2) the life of Clay in the sale of Lincoln's personal library was published in 1853, (3) Prentice's biography was written early enough to have been read by Lincoln in his formative years as a political thinker, and (4) Lincoln was known to have read Prentice's newspaper, the *Louisville Journal*, regularly.

The most frequently quoted evidence from those who knew Lincoln personally in the time when he might well have read Prentice's book comes from Dennis Hanks. Hanks claimed that "Abe turned Whig in 1827-8" because he "always Loved Hen Clay's Speeches I think was the Cause Mostly." By "Whig" Hanks probably meant National Republican, or so Albert Beveridge tells us, as there was no Whig party in 1828. Even so, there are other difficulties with the statement, not the least of which is that Hanks himself contradicted it. In a letter to Herndon, he claimed that Lincoln did not "Turn Whig" until "After He cum to Illinois aBout 1830." Lincoln may have known Clay's speeches from newspapers or pamphlets, but Prentice's book was a biography and did not reproduce Clay's speeches at length. There seems to be no way to twist Hanks's testimony into endorsement of the assertion that Lincoln read Prentice's *Biography of Henry Clay*.

It is, of course, not implausible that Lincoln might have read the Prentice book, but there does not seem to be any solid documentary proof for the contention. At the very least, the burden of proof rests with those who assert that Lincoln did read the book, since they rely mostly on each other for statements that Lincoln read the book. Disagreements on details abound; William Townsend even claims it was a two-volume work.

However controversial the proofs cited by students of Lincoln's reading are, the most remarkable thing about their works is their lack of interest in the question of what Lincoln learned or might have learned from the books they are so anxious to prove he read. It is much easier for the Lincoln student to find lists of titles Lincoln read than to find studies of what Lincoln took from the books and what he ignored and contradicted. In part, this stems from the power of Abraham Lincoln as a national symbol. Every book documented as read becomes further proof that his greatness stemmed from his being a self-made man. With less than a year's formal schooling, just look, these studies say implicitly, at what an education Lincoln got anyway. To this powerful didactic impulse must be added the historical disci-

pline's ability for self-generation. Once someone has concerned himself with the problem, and a literature on it has been built up, more literature gets written on the subject of that body of literature itself — whether the problem as originally formulated was properly conceived or not. From these two factors come our concern about and knowledge of what titles Lincoln read and our relative unconcern over what was in the pages beneath the titles.

It also seems clear that the direction the literature on Lincoln's reading has gone to date is explained by two assumptions that lay behind the reasoning of men like Barker and Houser: Lincoln was a great reader, and to be a great reader was to have read a large number of books. The first statement is controversial in itself; William Herndon and John Hay both disputed it. But the second may be the one that has betrayed historians the most, for it is not at all clear how readily available books were in Lincoln's early environment. Yet the presumption has always been in favor of the view that Lincoln read many books. Barker, for example, reasoned that since the Clay biography in Lincoln's library was published in 1853, therefore Holland must have referred to Prentice's earlier work. Why not just assume that Holland was wrong? He cited no evidence; neither did Coffin; Houser cited Coffin; and so it went. The question became which book he read rather than whether he read it at all. Dennis Hanks may prove to be the best source of all; he said only that Lincoln knew Clay's speeches. These were more readily available than biographies, for they were printed in newspapers and circulated in cheap pamphlet form for political purposes. Lincoln was no less a reader for having read the speech itself rather than George Prentice's abbreviated and biased report of the speech. But to think of Lincoln as a reader of newspapers and pamphlets rather than books is to think of him in a way that early biographers and creators of national symbols dreaded, for it is to think of him as a politician. Proof, again, lies in the availability of literature on what books he read and in the paucity of literature on what was in the books and, in a sense, in the culture around Lincoln. To compile the former is to be concerned about the symbolic Lincoln; to study the latter is to be concerned about the historical Lincoln.

To explain the general confusion in regard to Lincoln's reading in the above way is, of course, to oversimplify a complicated question. Houser, for example, included an essay on Abraham Lincoln as "Practical Politician" in his collection of articles, *Lincoln's Education and Other Essays*. Yet he betrayed the didactic purpose which underlay his other efforts to discover what Lincoln read in the very first sentence of his essay on the "Practical Politician": "From the time of their first coming to America, the Lincoln family numbered among its members many major and minor politician statesmen." The awkwardness embodied in that piling up of nouns at the end of the sentence — "politician statesmen" — betrays Houser's fundamental uneasiness with the idea of conceiving of Lincoln as a politician. Moreover, to explain the confused state of the literature on Lincoln's reading as a part of a deeper fear of seeing him in political terms ignores the important purpose of some of the work on Lincoln's reading; some of it was done to help librarians and book collectors. Even granting the need for qualification of the judgment, one is still left with that judgment as the most satisfactory explanation for the strange story of George Prentice's *Biography of Henry Clay* and Abraham Lincoln.

To pursue an analysis of Prentice's *Biography of Henry Clay* from the standpoint of the question of what Lincoln could have learned from it, if he did read it, is bound to appear as something of an anticlimax. To make it appear so is to do a disservice to the book, for it is a remarkable production in many ways. For one thing, a small controversy around the book concerns the possibility that John Greenleaf Whittier may have written parts of it when sheets of Prentice's script were delayed or lost in the mail en route to the New England publishers. For another, as the first biography of Henry Clay, Prentice's book did much to set the tone for many of Clay's subsequent biographers, even ones who wrote over a hundred years later. Finally, the book is simply a bit above the run-of-the-mill campaign biography.

Prentice attempted to answer Clay's critics directly rather than by creating the impression that Clay was a man of whom no one in his right mind could be critical, and Prentice himself occasionally criticized Clay in the book.

Nevertheless, the circumstances of the origin of the book clearly suggest that Prentice's biography was written to promote Clay more than to understand him. Prentice was a newspaperman. Clay's friends, according to Betty Carolyn Congleton's study of "George D. Prentice: Nineteenth Century Southern Editor" in *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, LXV (April, 1967), 94-119, engaged Prentice to come from Hartford, Connecticut to write the biography because they wanted to promote him as a presidential candidate. Prentice worked fast; engaged to do the job in the spring of 1830, he had finished by November.

The origins being what they were, the book was perhaps surprisingly critical of Clay. The "Preface," in fact, sounds almost bitter. There Prentice explained that he had talked personally to Clay, but that Clay told him less than he might have for the very reason that he knew Prentice was writing his biography. When Prentice's publishers wrote Clay to ask permission to publish the book, Clay answered by stating "that, as his acts were before his fellow-citizens, he could properly exercise no censorship or control over the comments, either of friends or enemies; but, that he must frankly acknowledge the repugnance of his own private feelings to the contemplated publication." "Had I read this answer in season," said Prentice, "I should have remained in New-England."

Prentice's "Preface" may have been only a strategy to suggest his independence of judgment, but there are at least three indications in the biography that he did not write strictly a propaganda piece. First, in describing Clay's early success at the Kentucky bar, Prentice rather candidly pointed out that Clay won a case with a specious argument. "Such a decision," Prentice said of the court's judgment in the case, "could not now be obtained in Kentucky, and, at the period in question, was obviously contrary to law." By stating his reservations in such a manner, moreover, the New Englander flattered the state in which he had recently taken up residence and in which he would soon find permanent employment as editor of the *Louisville Journal*.

Second, Prentice did mention Henry Clay's duel with Humphrey Marshall in 1808, a duel resulting from a quarrel over a resolution Clay introduced in the Kentucky legislature that would have required the members to wear "garments of domestick manufacture." Here Prentice stated his independence in no uncertain terms: "It is the legitimate province of the biographer to state facts, and not to apologize for error. We believe that duelling, in all its forms, should be reprobated. We have no doubt, that Mr. Clay erred in this affair with Mr. Marshall, and it is said, that he himself looks back to the incident with disapprobation and regret. . . ." Nevertheless, Prentice did find for "Mr. C.'s admirers, . . . much consolation in the fact, that the quarrel which led to the catastrophe, had its origin in his devotion to the policy of encouraging domestick manufactures — a policy which . . . has done so much for the prosperity of the nation." Prentice also found, in the otherwise unfortunate episode, proof of Clay's "personal courage." He saw the duel as mitigated by the primitive circumstances which produced "the laws of honour, which every Kentuckian of that day was taught to reverence." Clay may have regretted the Marshall duel, but the early Kentucky code of honor lingered to cause a later duel, fought just four years before Prentice wrote his book. On April 8, 1826, Clay exchanged two shots with the brilliant, but eccentric John Randolph, who disguised his silhouette by wearing a loose-fitting sort of robe and provided too vague a target for Clay to hit. This later farcical contest Prentice chose to shunt off into an appendix following the body of the biography.

Third, Prentice was most outspoken in his criticism of a legal case involving Clay and the institution of slavery. Clay acted as prosecutor of a Negro slave accused of murder. The slave was a trusted servant unused to corporal punishment. When, during an absence of his master, a young overseer struck him, the slave killed the man in a fit of passion. Prentice held firmly

that the case "had all the distinguishing characteristics of manslaughter, having been committed in a moment of sudden exasperation, and without the shadow of previous malice. The offence, if the perpetrator had been a white man, would have been . . . clearly a case of manslaughter. . . ." Clay argued, however, "that, although a white man, who, in a fit of rage on account of personal chastisement killed his assailant, would be guilty of manslaughter and not murder, a slave could plead no such mitigation . . . inasmuch as it is the duty of slaves to submit to punishment." Prentice had "not a doubt, that this argument was directly opposed to the true spirit of the law. . . . The particular law which distinguishes manslaughter from murder, has no reference to the duties of the offender, but has its whole foundation in the indulgence, which has been thought due to those weaknesses and passions of human nature, which lead to the violation of duties."

Again, Prentice sought mitigating circumstances. Clay customarily appeared for the defendant, but in this one case wound up in the prosecutor's role because he was trying to get a friend the job as prosecuting attorney. The court rejected the friend but offered the job to Clay, who accepted it because he would be able to transfer the job to his friend at a future date. The murder case arose before the transfer took place. Clay did not witness the execution, and Prentice had "heard him remark, that he regretted the part he had taken in procuring the conviction of this poor slave, more than any other act of his professional life."

Make no mistake about it, however; Prentice's book for the most part is a brief for Henry Clay. A consistent theme of the book from preface to conclusion was specifically partisan. The theme began as an apologia for biographies of civil figures. "I am not unaware," said Prentice as he introduced his work, "that the written history of a man, whose life exhibits no adventures, save those of an intellectual character, is seldom read with that enthusiasm, which is generally called forth by the story even of a second rate chieftan." Nevertheless, Prentice announced that Henry Clay was "a man . . . whose moral and mental history should be regarded as a portion of the common riches of the human race — one of those noble-minded existences, from whom the world's happiness and glory are yet to spring; and there is more profit in scanning the mind of such a being — in marking the origin, the combination, and the development of its powerful elements — than in contemplating the successes of all the military conquerors, from Alexander to Napoleon." Fifteen years after Waterloo, Napoleon was much on the American as well as the European mind, and contrasts with Napoleonic military glory did not hurt a political figure's reputation.

Even more on the American mind was the specter of an American chieftan, Andrew Jackson. Thus a consistent theme of Clay's life meshed perfectly with the stance Prentice took as the biographer of a civilian whose adventures were all of the mind (excluding a couple of minor duels, of course, in which no one was hurt). Clay's career of attacking Jackson began as early as 1818, when he denounced Jackson's role in the Seminole War in a speech in the House of Representatives. Prentice echoed Clay's attack on Jackson's actions in no uncertain terms. The war in 1818 was caused by the harshness of the treaty made with the Indians in 1814, following a war in which Jackson had also been the victorious general. "By this treaty," said Prentice, "the American general subjected the miserable natives to terms more odious and tyrannical, than even the Goths and Vandals . . . were ever known to impose upon a conquered people. Although the condition of the Indians was so pitiable, that our people were absolutely required to save them from starvation by gratuitous supplies of bread; although they were bending down before us as humbly and as helplessly as they could have knelt before their God — the chieftan-conqueror, forgetting, perhaps the eternal principles of justice and mercy in the intensity of his patriotism; refused to grant them peace, unless they would yield a large portion of their territory, convey to the United States important powers and privileges over the remainder, and surrender into his hands the prophets of their nation . . . not one of the hostile chiefs, who, with their followers, constituted at least two thirds

of the nation, affixed his mark to the instrument." The treaty violated the ninth article of the Treaty of Ghent with England, which stipulated that war with the Indians (fighting at the time of the Treaty) must cease and that their lands must be restored. Prentice ended with a judgment on Jackson's Indian treaty that would have shaken the frontier: ". . . its whole character was so manifestly oppressive, that the poor Indians who were the victims of it, had, if we mistake not, a right, under the immutable laws of nature, to rise at the first opportunity, and redeem themselves from vassalage."

As if the conclusion of the first war were not enough, the second witnessed, according to Prentice, even greater outrages on the part of General Jackson. He massacred Indian prisoners; he executed two British citizens, one of them in direct defiance of the sentence of a court martial Jackson had himself instituted; and he attacked and occupied a Spanish fortress.

In 1830, the anti-military theme was even more specifically partisan; Jackson was not only a one-time enemy of Clay, but also the President and Clay's most likely opponent if the latter were to run in 1832. The consistency of this partisan theme in the book should never be ignored. It should also be noted, however, that Prentice incidentally pointed to a theme in Clay's views on Indian policy which was largely ignored even by twentieth-century biographers and has only recently begun to attract the interest of historians of the Whig party (see, for example, Daniel Walker Howe, ed., *The American Whigs* [New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973]).

Prentice's interest in proving that Clay was a Jeffersonian may surprise those whose view of the Whig party stems largely from acquaintance with Daniel Webster's thought. Prentice stated flatly that Jefferson was "the man from whom he [Clay] had learned his own political principles." And Prentice urged this in the face of some obstacles thrown in the way by his own book. To urge Clay's Jeffersonianism was to be at odds with Clay's other great distinguishing characteristics in Prentice's scheme: his consistent advocacy of a national system of internal improvements and protective tariffs. The biographer himself duly noted the problem: "It was the opinion of Mr. Jefferson, as expressed in one of his messages to congress, that, under the constitution, roads and canals could not be constructed by the general government, without the consent of the state or states through which they were to pass." Moreover, James Madison, who clearly had a stronger claim than Clay to being the inheritor of the Jeffersonian mantle, had also "stated his convictions . . . that Internal Improvements were not within the constitutional power of the government." Modern biographers simply note with irony what for Prentice was an insoluble anomaly. Nor did Prentice note what Clement Eaton did in 1957 (in *Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics* [Boston: Little, Brown]), that Jefferson condemned Clay in 1818 for "rallying an opposition to the [Monroe] administration."

What is perhaps most notable for Lincoln students about Prentice's brand of Clay partisanship is its peculiarly Northern hue. It has already been noted that Clay's successful prosecution of a slave for murder gained Prentice's critical denunciation. This anti-slavery stance permeated the whole book. Writing in 1937, Glyndon G. Van Deusen in *The Life of Henry Clay* (Boston: Little, Brown) found Clay's career of involvement with the slavery question a rather checkered one. Even in the first stages of the Missouri controversy, from which Clay would ultimately emerge as a symbol of compromise, the Kentuckian appeared as an ardent champion of strictly Southern interests. Van Deusen summarized Clay's position on the crisis as of 1819 this way: "He expounded volubly the old Jeffersonian argument of mitigation by diffusion [thus supporting slavery expansion into the West], extolled the black slavery of Kentucky as contrasted with the 'white slavery' of the North, and stood staunchly for states' rights, using the argument later made famous by William Pinkney's demand that Missouri should not be forced to come into the Union 'shorn of her beams.'"

Prentice, by contrast, could find but one exception to Clay's consistent opposition to slavery (the murder trial

noted previously). Clay's political career commenced with his advocating a provision for gradual emancipation in the campaign to revise Kentucky's constitution in 1797. In this effort, Clay failed, but as a lawyer Clay volunteered to act as counsel "Whenever a slave brought an action at law for his liberty." Clay advocated colonization of freed Negroes in Africa as an anti-slavery measure. He knew of "the sufferings, the mental and bodily degradation, of the slave." Yet he also "spoke of the dangers to be apprehended from an insurrection of the blacks." The solution for the one problem was to free them, but for the other it was to send those freed away. The colonists would be missionaries of republicanism and Christianity in Africa.

To make Clay's anti-slavery career consistent, however, Prentice had to draw a subtly different picture of Clay's first reaction to the Missouri controversy. Prentice did not hide Clay's action. "From the first introduction of this unhappy topic into the house of representatives," he wrote, "Mr. Clay, who, at one rapid glance, foresaw all its fearful consequences, took a decided and active part against the proposed condition [that Missouri could enter the Union only by forbidding slavery]." Prentice merely said that Clay's arguments were different from those Van Deusen describes. Prentice claimed that Clay's objections were made strictly on constitutional grounds: "No man was more ready than he to embrace every practicable scheme for eradicating or mitigating the evil. Of this disposition, he had, from his boyhood, given frequent and abundant evidence; but he believed that the constitution had withheld from congress all power over the subject." Prentice made no mention of Clay's treading on ground that approached the pro-slavery argument (cf. Van Deusen's references to Clay's advocating geographical expansion and, more important, his argument that chattel slavery was better than wage slavery). For his own part, Prentice took the view which, when adopted by Seward and Lincoln more than twenty years later, outraged many advocates of compromise on the slavery question: the slavery question "will continue to convulse the country more or less, whilst the union or slavery remains."

George Prentice's view of Clay was special, one is tempted to say, for its New England-ness. He did make gestures towards frontier democracy, saying that Clay was a self-made man, that he was an enemy of aristocrats, and that he was a friend of the laboring man. Clay's economic policies "called up, as by the wand of enchantment, the lively village and the flourishing manufactory, upon half our mountain streams"; Prentice never suggested that they could create cities. But the ringing condemnation of Jackson's Indian policies (whatever suggested it, and it seems likely that it was political animosity to Andrew Jackson, who happened to have been a general) and the anti-slavery emphasis marked the book as reading for another constituency.

Whether Abraham Lincoln literally formed a part of that constituency we do not, as was argued in the first part of this article, know. Certainly Prentice created a Henry Clay from whom Lincoln could learn about Indian policy and with whom an anti-slavery Republican could be comfortable. Difficult as it is to find evidence whether Lincoln read a book or not, it is even harder to ascertain what he derived from what he read. In the case of biographies, it is especially difficult — if we are to believe William Herndon, who described Lincoln's reaction to a biography of Edmund Burke which Herndon had just purchased:

One morning Lincoln came into the office and, seeing the book in my hands, inquired what I was reading. I told him, at the same time observing that it was an excellent work and handing the book over to him. Taking it in his hand he threw himself down on the office sofa and hastily ran over its pages, reading a little here and there. At last he closed and threw it on the table with the exclamation, "No, I've read enough of it. It's like all the others. Biographies as generally written are not only misleading, but false. The author of this life of Burke makes a wonderful hero out of his subject. He magnifies his perfections . . . and suppresses his imperfections. . . . In most instances they [biographers] commemorate a lie, and cheat posterity out of the truth."