Lincoln Lore

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Nathaniel W. Stephenson and the Progressive Lincoln

As new Lincoln books come off the presses each year, there is a tendency to shove the older biographies of Lincoln into darker and more inaccessible corners of the bookshelves. Each generation of Lincoln students has a hazier recognition than the preceding one of the contributions of early Lincoln biographers and historians. It is foolish to bemoan a process that is inevitable and, in fact, a sign that the field still thrives and produces fresh literature.

Still, there is something about the Lincoln literature which makes the field resist periodic checks of the historical pulse. About every ten years or so, a scholar writes an article to tell us what has happened in the field which deals with the Age of Jackson. No such periodic body of historiographical literature exists for Lincoln and none appears to be on the horizon. There are Paul Angle's *Shelf of Lincoln Books*, Benjamin Thomas's *Portrait for Posterity*, and Roy Basler's *Lincoln Legend*. And David Potter gave an interesting lecture at Oxford University in 1948 which discussed "The Lincoln Theme and American National Historiography." Don Fehrenbacher made a similar attempt at Oxford in 1968 with "The Changing Image of Lincoln in American Historiography." Yet, there does not seem to exist an impulse for comprehensiveness and subtlety. The reason is simple enough; the literature is so vast that it would take a large part of a lifetime to do a thorough job.

This problem is also an opportunity, however. With a literature so vast, one can find numerous works on Lincoln in almost every era. One figure, then, can provide a barometer for the spirit of every age and make comparisons easy and just. A good example is provided by the work of Nathaniel W. Stephenson in the Progressive Era.

Stephenson, as Fehrenbacher points out, was the first academic historian to write a biography of Lincoln and, at the time of Fehrenbacher's lecture (1968), one of only two academics ever to do so. The viewpoint he brought to the Lincoln field merits study.

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FIGURE 1. Nathaniel W. Stephenson.

Born in Cincinatti, Ohio, in 1867, Stephenson received undergraduate training at Indiana University and worked as a newspaper man. For more than twenty years, he was Professor of History at the College of Charleston. Later he taught briefly at Yale and Columbia, became editor of the *Chronicles of America* series, and ended his career at Scripps College in Claremont, California.

In the period from 1918 to 1922, Stephenson published a book on the Confederacy, two on Lincoln, and one on the Mexican War. It is this period in Stephenson's career which most interests Lincoln students, and a key to Stephenson's views can be found in an article he wrote on Lincoln in 1919, in the midst of this period of great scholarly activity.

Stephenson's "Lincoln and the Progress of Nationality in the North," published in the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1919*, was a perfect epitome of the Progressive mind. The image of Lincoln presented there revealed much more about Stephenson and his era than about Lincoln and the Civil War.

Stephenson's major focus in the piece was on the impediments on the *home* front to Lincoln's successful prosecution of the war effort. Written in the wake of World War I, this article revealed Stephenson's preoccupation with the recent war effort. He identified "the sharply separatist impulses of four groups of people, each too conscious of its own standard type to be fully conscious of the Nation as a whole." He called them "the rhetorical visionaries represented by the [Knights of the] Golden Circle; the fanatics represented by Greeley; the parasites, represented then as now by the profiteers; [and] the labor group, whose activity was obscure and can not be typified by any one familiar figure."

Stephenson seemed less interested in the greatest impediment to nationality in Lincoln's day, the secessionists. In fact, he granted them an heroic (if anach-

ronistic) status which he refused the enemies on the home front. It was not fair, he said, to confuse the latter "with the actual secessionists, those who flung themselves against the front of destiny, sword in hand." By contrast, the advocates of peace in the North simply "lacked character. . . . Though they seem to have intrigued with the Confederacy, and pretty certainly formed part of the inspiration of Morgan's raid through Indiana and Ohio, they were very careful, when their mood of dreamy speculation had brought them in sight of danger, to make haste to establish an alibi. Not for them the courage of the real enthusiast." Instead of the Copperhead, "Their badge ought to have been the white feather."

The Sons of Liberty lacked not only courage but also intelligence. Stephenson went to great lengths to ridicule Lincoln's enemies in the peace movement, particularly for their propensity to dote "upon that vile form of rhetoric which for certain types of visionary will always be the fulmination of Jupiter." It was impossible "to take seriously . . . men of such vague mentality" that they would swear to "this farcical oath":

> I do further solemnly promise and swear that I will ever cherish the sublime lessons which the sacred emblems of our order suggest, and will so far as in me lies impart those lessons to the people of the earth, where the mystic acorn falls from its parent bough, in whose visible firmanent [sic] Orion, Arcturus, and the Pleiades ride in their cold resplendent glories, where the Southern Cross dazzles the eyes of degraded humanity with its coruscations of golden light, etc.

Stephenson was inclined to interpret this opposition not as a stand on principles, however wrongheaded, but as the product of a disordered psychology. "Surely," Stephenson argued,

> the more we study the event the more we tend toward this conclusion: An impediment to nationalism these men were; but their psychology and that of the real secessionists were widely different. And it is worth remembering that there was a corresponding group in the Confederacy with the same impracticable ideas, the same joy in decadent rhetoric, the same lack of genuine imagination, the same passion for riding the off-horse. The type was common to America. It would have obstructed the formation of a southern nation quite as wilfully as it aimed to obstruct the northern. And is not the type familiar still? Here is a problem of temperament, of psychological history, not of constitutional. In this place, with a paper limited to 20 minutes, the short cut to one's conclusion is all that is possible. But is it a dizzying transition to skip the intervening steps and land upon the conclusion that the orders of the white feather help us to understand the dreaming pacifists of our own day? Can we not imagine certain distinguished gentlemen, and some even more distinguished ladies, taking the oath of the Pleiades in perfect seriousness?

Not all "impediments to nationalism" were fuzzy-thinking dreamers. The war profiteers "had clearer views of life." "You remember those two documents," Stephenson said, "which figure to-day in damning juxtaposition in Volume 122 of the Official Records, — that pathetic report of the quartermaster general describing the 'troops before the enemy . . . compelled to do picket duty in the late cold nights without overcoats, or even coats, wearing only the thin summer flannel blouses,' and along with this report, the formal protest of the committee of the Boston Board of Trade against the purchase in Europe of clothing for the Army. Even the profiteering of the World War can not beat that!" Stephenson found apt use for a passage from Lincoln's letter of June 29, 1863, to William Kellogg, "Few things are so troublesome to the government as the fierceness with which the profits of trading in cotten [sic] are sought."

The existence of the third group Stephenson attributed to the inadequate nationalization even of the North before the Civil War. These men, the likes of Horace Greeley, Wendell Phillips, John Greenleaf Whittier, the Cleveland convention which tried to run John C. Frémont against Lincoln in 1864, were antisecessionists but critics of Lincoln. These "gentle dreamers" were "another obstacle to nationality, different from the moral quicksand of the secret societies, different also from the antisocial predatory consciousness of the profiteers." Stephenson dodged saying precisely what their problem was and relied on phrases like "exaggerations of individualism" and "emotional individualism gone mad" to characterize them as nearly as he could.

With nationalization so obviously incomplete in the North, it was to be Lincoln's colossal task to develop American nationality. "Therefore, his views on his own role, on the function of his office, are so intensely interesting," Stephenson urged. Lincoln's view of American nationality, gleaned by Stephenson "from certain crucial events and from a relatively small number of utterances" rather than from any "general statement of his views on any of these points," retained federalism. There would be no obliteration of traditional state boundaries. "Secondly," Stephenson said, "Lincoln conceived our National Union as preeminently a people's government." "Whether we like it or not," Stephenson added, "we must see Lincoln as a statesman of the masses." Stephenson mustered a now familiar battery of quotations to make his case. In his speech in Cincinnati on February 12, 1861, Lincoln said, "the working men are the basis of all governments." In 1864, he stated with what Stephenson called "startling explicitness" that "Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."

These were "radical utterances," and Stephenson hastened to "qualify them by the limitations imposed by related utterances." Lincoln "excluded aristocracy from his political vision," but "he also excluded the political science of fairyland." There was, in short, nothing of inspiration for socialists in him, and Stephenson carefully balanced the "radical" quotations with this one:

> The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside the family relation, should be one uniting all working people of all nations and tongues and kindreds. Nor should this lead to a war upon property or the owners of property. Property is the fruit of labor; property is desirable, is a positive good to the world. That some should be rich shows that others may become rich, and hence is just encouragement to industry and enterprise. Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another, but let him work diligently and build one for himself, thus by example insuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built.

Only here did Stephenson mention the fourth great impediment to nationality in the North, labor. He seemed to be saying, not that labor had been assertive of its narrow demands, but that one who, like Lincoln, was sympathetic to labor could have gone too far — but did not.

Quite apart from his answers to the threats on the home front, there were other important aspects of Lincoln's nationalism which helped to lead America properly to her great national status. One was "his attitude toward the source and mode of political authority." Stephenson found Lincoln's approach to this problem analogous to his approach to labor. He was certainly a man of the people but not necessarily a slave to the people's every whim: "Lincoln was not a friend of the plebiscite or of the referendum; on the contrary, he was a staunch believer in representative government in the strict sense." Here, Stephenson found Lincoln's constitutional latitudinarianism instructive. Lincoln issued a "challenge to the country when refusing to yield to the clamor over military arrests," defended "the right of the President to assume in emergency vast authority," and explained to the people that if a President, "uses the power justly, the . . . people will probably justify him; if he abuses it, he is in their hands to be dealt with by all the modes they have reserved to themselves in the Constitution." Stephenson was not interested in the constitutional point: ". . . what is more to the point is Lincoln's refusal in various matters not involving his military authority to make any attempt to find out the popular will; likewise his frequent disregard of the nearest approach he had to a plebiscite — the opinion of the majority of the House of Representatives." Stephenson admired "the boldness with which he planted himself on the idea of delegated authority."

> He refused to be the mere spokesman of the people. He was in his own mind their representative, on whom, for a time, certain powers had been bestowed. For that time these powers were his. Horribly reactionary, the Bolshevik would say. In a way, yes. So reactionary, in a way, that there does not exist, probably, as a summary of Lincoln's basal attitude toward his own electorate, a better statement of fundamental theory than that immortal letter to the electors of Bristol signed by Edmund Burke.

Finally, Lincoln's conception of the nation was notable for its sense of place. "It has been pointed out," Stephenson said,

> that most American reasoning about nationality is in terms of people. On this fact is grounded, I am told, a distinction between the poetry inspired in America by the World War and that of England. The American poets attach their loyalty to the group of people, their countrymen. The British poets, while having that, have also something more — a sense of the soil, a loyalty to the very earth, our mother. Lincoln in his vision of nationality had outstripped his time and had the British point of view.

As proof, Stephenson, who had excellent command of the corpus of Lincoln's writings, could cite these words from the second annual message of December, 1862: "A nation may be said to consist of its territory, its people, and its laws. The territory is the only part which is of certain durability. 'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth forever.' It is of the first importance to duly consider, and estimate, this ever-enduring part."

It seems worthwhile to quote Stephenson at such great length, because an appreciation for the tone and texture of his writing on Lincoln is important to understand the nature of his interpretation of the Sixteenth President. Though not altogether ignored, Stephenson's place in Lincoln historiography has not received the attention it deserves. Richard Current showed an appreciation for Stephenson's work in the "Bibliographical Essay" at the end of *The Lincoln Nobody Knows:*

> A couple of widely read one-volume lives are Lord Charnwood's *Abraham Lincoln* (1917) and Nathaniel W. Stephenson's *Lincoln: An Account of His Personal Life, Especially of Its Springs of Action as Revealed and Deepened by the Ordeal of War* (1922). [Benjamin] Thomas, in *Portrait for Posterity,* does not deign to discuss the Stephenson book, but [Roy P.] Basler gives it considerable attention in *The Lincoln Legend,* concluding: "Sandburg combined with Stephenson may be recognized as the best version of the private Lincoln; Charnwood, perhaps, has the best of the public Lincoln."

Basler appreciated Stephenson for his ability to capture Lincoln's "poetic" nature and for his assertion that Lincoln was no mere political opportunist but a man of stern will and inflexible purpose. David Potter in "The Lincoln Theme and American National Historiography" gave Stephenson a rather different niche in the annals of Lincoln biography:

> At a time when Freudian interpretations were freely dispensed by everyone who had acquired a smattering of Freud's terminology, Nathaniel W. Stephenson garnished his *Lincoln, An Account of His Personal Life,* with psychoanalytical speculation. It must be added, in fairness, however, that Stephenson was also one of the first writers to attempt an appraisal of the meaning of Lincoln's preservation of the Union. To Stephenson, present and future developments constantly reveal new meanings in past events. Thus, Lincoln's preservation of the Union acquired new significance as the unfolding of world events revealed the increasing importance of the American republic in the history of the twentieth century. Asserting that the United States had become "the most powerful and probably the most distinctive country in the world," Stephenson suggested that
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> > because we are what we are, the world during the next chapter of its history will be what it will be. If the result should prove unfortunate, then Lincoln's achievement was in the nature of a tragic victory. If the outcome should prove beneficent, then Lincoln's achievement is one of the greatest in history. But whatever the eventual result, the enormous significance is not to be questioned. The statesman who determined the course of American development, who guided the Republic past its turning point, is one of the prime factors of modern experience. His work contributed to establishing a new balance of power among the social forces in his country. Out of this has resulted a new balance among the social forces of the world.
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> Although Stephenson could not foresee Hitler or Stalin, Lake Success or Hiroshima, the Truman Doctrine or the Marshall Plan, his analysis seems today [1948] more cogent than ever.

Potter came very near the mark but did not quite hit it. Certainly, nationalism was a major preoccupation in Stephenson's work — but why? The answer is that, like Freudianism, it was a major preoccupation of the age. In fact, if we call his age the Progressive Era, we could say that Progressivism was a form of nationalism. There are, as David Potter himself told us in "The Historian's Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa," many different kinds of nationalism. Nationalism is never really the love of the whole nation, but rather it is the love of a particular part of the nation with which the nationalist identifies. It is always a love of a particular ideal of nationhood.

Stephenson shared a particular ideal with many of the thinkers of his era, and this ideal explains the aspects of Lincoln's life he chose to emphasize. Progressivism, in its most familiar guise, wanted to see the government discipline private enterprise for the good of the whole. This preoccupation of the age led Stephenson to emphasize the impediment to nationality represented by the Boston Board of Trade. To quote Lincoln's remark about the rapaciousness of the dealers in contraband cotton does not give the same impression that stress on the administration's appointment of banker Hugh McCulloch as Secretary of Treasury would give or stress on their method of funding the war by relying on the private broker, Jay Cooke, would give. Stephenson's stress on Lincoln as a man of the people and as a man sympathetic to labor was the other side of the same coin. Progressives championed labor but not to the extent socialists did.

A bit less obvious, but still a part of the mind of the same age, was Stephenson's admiration of Lincoln's alleged scorn for plebiscites and referenda. A part of the reform movement of Stephenson's era championed such democratic processes, but the major impulse of the age ran quite the other way towards elitism. It was the first era of the expert, the heyday of the social scientist and "scientific" legislation. Experts know what the people need even when the people themselves do not, and the political ideal of the Progressive Era was a representative government, periodically checked by the people's will, and not a plebiscitarian democracy. Woodrow Wilson's views were good examples of this. He complained that Congress was "a body whose organization makes it disintegrate — only the nation in miniature." For a democrat, it would be ideal to make legislatures perfectly representative microcosms of the nation as a whole. Wilson, by contrast, was disappointed that Congress had achieved only that status. "The state," he admonished, "must have an individuality and oneness of its own which is not simply the aggregate or compromise resultant of the individualities of all concerned in its gov [ernmen]t." He looked for a government *"formed by the concert and prevalence of commanding minds,* not commanding numbers. Persuaded, not commanding, numbers." The government should command and not obey the people. Wilson was a great admirer of Edmund Burke.

Stephenson's appreciation for Lincoln's sternness and apparent willingness to arrogate wide discretionary powers to himself as President stemmed from the same ideal of government. It was doubtless reinforced by the recent experience of World War I, which had seen a stern President Wilson beleaguered by opponents of war just as Lincoln had been. Stephenson's identification with Wilson's plight is readily apparent in the contemptuous language with which Stephenson dealt with Lincoln's anti-war opposition. He pictured them as "disordered" misfits of "vague mentality," given to "decadent" rhetoric — and not unlike "the dreaming pacifists of our own day."

What makes Stephenson's work so interesting is the way in which it reveals the great assumption behind much Progressive Era thought, to wit, nationalism. Capital was criticized for pursuing its own self-interest at the expense of national strength. Labor could probably do the same thing, given the chance. Representation should not be thought of as a mere reflection of the popular will broken up into geographical constituencies and brought together again by proxy in Congress where the sum of individual wills would become the will of the whole. The nation was too organic a unity for that, and the representative, once elected, spoke and voted for the good of the whole; he did not act as the mere messenger for his constituents' narrow and peculiar interests. National unity was too perfectly organic to be divisible in parts. Stephenson was interested in "the Nation as a whole" and admired Lincoln's conception of "our Federal Union as an elaborately articulated but also an entirely interdependent community, psychologically one." Stephenson searched for the origins of

"that profound spiritual cohesion which transforms a horde into a nation."

This preoccupation with nationalism was as much an aspect of Progressivism as any impulse for any particular reform. The reforms, in fact, were supposed to make the nation strong; that was their purpose. Nationalism was Stephenson's preoccupation and it led the historian to devote an entire chapter to "The Mexican Episode" in his book, *Abraham Lincoln and the Union*, published two years later than the article analyzed here. In "Lincoln and the Progress of Nationality in the North," Stephenson had said: ". . . let the blind admirers of Lincoln remember that in some of the disagreements between himself and Congress — as for example the Mexican issue — it is not proved past doubting that Lincoln was right and Congress wrong." In the subsequent book, Stephenson argued "that Lincoln's course was very widely condemned as timid." He continued:

> When we come to the political campaign of 1864, we shall meet Henry Winter Davis among his most relentless personal enemies. Dissatisfaction with Lincoln's Mexican policy has not been sufficiently considered in accounting for the opposition to him, inside the war party, in 1864. To it may be traced an article in the platform of the war party, adopted in June, 1864, protesting against the establishment of monarchy "in near proximity to the United States." In the same month Maximilian entered Mexico City.

By contrast, William Frank Zornow's *Lincoln and the Party Divided*, the only book-length study of the election of 1864, does not so much as mention Mexico. Interest in flexing the national muscle in Latin America was part and parcel of the enlarged view of the role of the state so many Progressives held.

Another Lincoln biographer who was a contemporary of Stephenson's also found Lincoln's lack of interest in Mexico distressing; he was Albert Beveridge. Already at work on his important book on Lincoln, Beveridge gave Stephenson's book a favorable review — doubtless, in part, because he too was looking for the nationalist hero that Stephenson had found. In Beveridge's case, however, Lincoln's myopia in regard to Mexico was to cause a strange reversal of expectations. Beveridge found the early Lincoln more partisan than nationalist. It seemed that Lincoln did not dream of opposing the Mexican War until he went to Washington and was dazzled by the shining brilliance of the national Whig leadership, to a man, staunch opponents of the Mexican War. William Herndon's attempts to dissuade his senior partner from his course of opposition to the war served merely to prove that Herndon was almost always correct and a great driving force behind Lincoln's later greatness.

Arthur C. Cole, reviewing Stephenson's *Lincoln* for the *American Historical Review* in 1923, shrewdly noted that "the breadth and depth of Lincoln's soul come out effectively; if he becomes less the 'great Emancipator,' he becomes more the 'great Conciliator.'" Cole astutely found Stephenson "unfortunately ignoring the Mexican War stand" of Lincoln. Only thus, one might say, could Stephenson make his portrait of Lincoln a unified one. This unity fell apart in Beveridge's hands; a more thorough biographer, he knew that the Mexican War episode was not ignorable. As a result, Beveridge could not find the great conciliator, to use Cole's phrase, that he sought — or at least he could not find him in Lincoln. Rather, Stephen Douglas began to crowd Lincoln off Beveridge's canvass as he painted the great conflicts over slavery in the 1850s. A reviewer of Stephenson's *Abraham Lincoln and the Union* had noted a similar tendency in that man's work. "Mr. Stephenson," wrote a reviewer for the *Catholic World* in 1919, "correctly appreciates the great Democratic leader Douglas . . . . Douglas' declaration to the copperheads should be emblazoned: 'There can be no neutrals in this war; only patriots or traitors.'"

The reviewer for the *Catholic World* noted another trait in Stephenson's writing:

> With capitalists he has little sympathy whether of the Southern type which Helper's *Impending Crisis* (with which he is impressed) condemns so heartily, or of the Northern class, whom he charges with looking at the whole issue from the point of view of profits and endangered Southern trade and investments. Cameron, Belmont, Frémont and the Cincinnati ironmongers, he castigates for their shameless profiteering and their contract frauds equally with the bankers who failed to float loans save at recklessly high interest and heavy discounts. There is something of the radical and a little of the iconoclast in the writer.

Beveridge would alter this Progressive strain in Lincoln writing as well. "Lincoln's whole attitude and conduct in the Bank controversy," said Beveridge, "were strongly conservative and in firm support of vested interests and the conduct of business, unmolested as far as possible, by legislative or any kind of governmental interference."

Nationalism dictated an obvious stance towards Reconstruction: any group which impeded speedy reconciliation of the States was bad. Probably Stephenson's longest-lasting legacy was his use of the term "vindictives" to describe Lincoln's enemies within the Republican party. This was new enough to provoke critical responses from more than one reviewer. *The American Historical Reiew* noted *Abraham Lincoln and the Union* briefly in 1920, and the reiewer said: "It seems . . . that the opponents of the President are too severely dealt with when they are labelled 'the vindictives.' The term is used cleverly and it serves to heighten the light on Lincoln, by way of contrast; but it is hardly just to men who were convinced that they were right. In the game of politics it is never safe to give all the integrity to one side and all the discredit to the other." Cole called attention to the same phenomenon in 1923 in reviewing *Lincoln: An Account of His Personal Life:*

> The bulk of the volume is given over to the struggle between President Lincoln and "the Jacobin Club," as he calls the Republican "vindictives," after John Hay. It is skillfully and dramatically portrayed. One sees, perhaps, too much of the hero in Lincoln and the villain in his critics; at such times the narrative is hardly fair to the radical Republicans . . . . One gets, too, the impression that Lincoln was putting all his energies into efforts to thwart the "Jacobins."

Stephenson's legacy was mixed. Some of his ideas were quickly modified by Beveridge's massive and careful work. Others had a much longer life. In any case, he did leave a legacy to Lincoln biographers, and it deserves to be understood and appreciated.

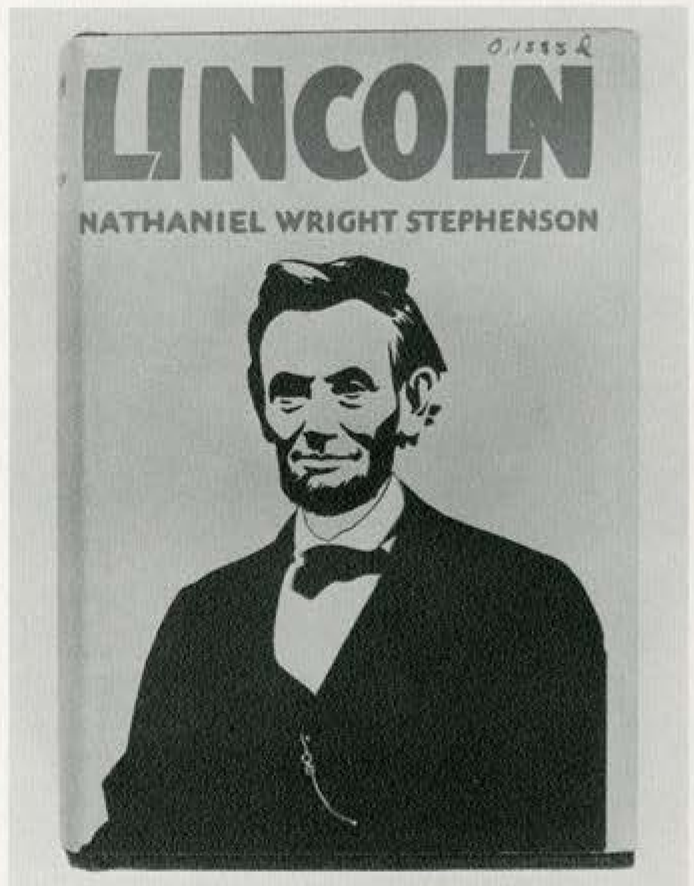

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FIGURE 2. First edition of Nathaniel W. Stephenson's *Lincoln: An Account of His Personal Life, Especially of Its Springs of Action as Revealed and Deepened by the Ordeal of War.* **(Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1922) in dust jacket.**