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FREEDOM AND THE GENRE OF HISTORICAL FICTION

Editor's Note. Sarah McNair Vosmeier recently joined the staff of the Lincoln Library and Museum. In 1986 she received a master's degree in history from Brown University. M.E.N., Jr.

The genre of historical fiction has long presented reviewers, especially historians, with difficulties because it is neither truly history nor truly fiction. Even Abraham Lincoln was frustrated with books that seemed to mix history with fiction, according to his friend William Herndon. Herndon describes Lincoln criticizing a biographer of Edmund Burke who was "so faithful in his zeal and so lavish in praise of his every act that one is almost driven to believe that Burke never made a mistake or failure in his life." Herndon remembers Lincoln finally pronouncing, "History is not history unless it is the truth."

Any historian would agree that published history must be the truth, and most historians insist that any argument or historical description must be founded on substantial primary evidence. On the other hand, historical novelists usually agree that history must be truth, but they sometimes claim that fiction can express loftier truths about human nature than history can because history is tied to the facts as they appear in the documents.

Most people understand that the truths found in fiction and history are different, and yet they seem unwilling to accept it. The authors of historical fiction, trying to make history appealing to modern readers, inevitably make historical errors in the process, but readers who are not willing to plow through a monograph still hope that they can find the same sort of historical truth in fiction as they would in non-fiction. Thus, they often ask reviewers to tell them whether the incidents in a historical novel are "true." Similarly, historical reviewers almost always attack novelists who make historical errors. Perhaps readers and reviewers alike are expecting too much out of historical fiction, but we can expect *some* historical responsibility from novelists who choose to write history.

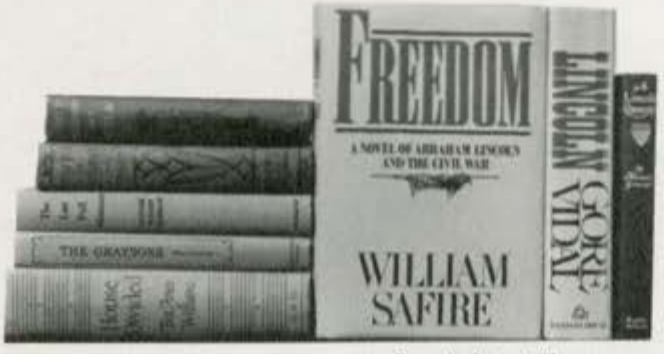
William Safire's *Freedom* is historical fiction about Lincoln and the Civil War between April, 1861 and January, 1863. Safire's main characters (Lincoln, Anna Ella Carroll, John Hay, and John C. Breckinridge, among others) are historical figures, but many of their thoughts and relationships are fictional. In this novel, Safire has accepted the responsibilities of a *historical* novelist in two ways. First he openly admits that parts of his book are "pure fiction," and he tries to tell the readers which parts they are. Second, he provides his readers with an "underbook" — a combination bibliographic essay and footnote section. In C. Vann Woodward's review of *Freedom* (*The New York Review*, Sept. 24, 1987), he remarked that, "Safire undoubtedly mixes up fiction with fact, but he acknowledges that there is some difference between them and that fictional history is not a tennis game without a net on a court without lines."

By providing the reader with this underbook, Safire lets the reader judge for him or herself how the novelist used the sources or departed from them. Safire has used a wide variety of sources, including diaries and letters of the principle actors, as well as many competent histories of the period. Unfortunately some subjects forced him to rely on books of questionable value, such as the Sydney and Marjorie Greenbie biography of Anna Ella Carroll.

These books of questionable value, along with a natural desire to make his story more interesting, led Safire to make some of the historical errors that concern historical reviewers. To explain how historical novelists can be misled by these sorts of sources, I have chosen to examine Chapter 38 of Book 9, which concerns a meeting between Lincoln, William H. Seward, and Thurlow Weed.

This meeting takes place after the cabinet crisis and before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation (i.e. between December 20, 1862 and January 1, 1863) when Lincoln's power was at a low ebb. The Republicans had just lost the 1862 elections; Lincoln had narrowly averted a radical take-over of his cabinet; and Union forces had been soundly trounced in the battle of Fredericksburg. Safire's Lincoln, recognizing his political weakness, admits that the newly-elected Democratic governor of New York, Horatio Seymour, "has greater power just now for good than any other man in the country."

"More than you, Lincoln?" asked Seward, giving Weed the



From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. Some historical fiction from our collection.

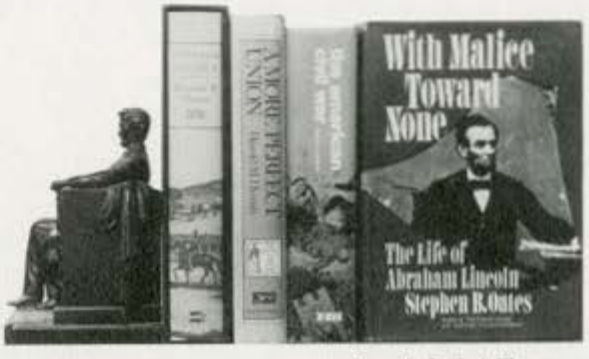


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FIGURE 2. A few historical monographs from our collection.

impression that the two of them had gone through this before.

"Yes. Governor Seymour can wheel the Democratic Party into line, and, because of that, he has the ability to put down the rebellion and preserve the government."

Long pause, deep sigh, and Lincoln took the plunge. "Weed, tell Seymour for me that if he will render this service to his country, I shall cheerfully make way for him as my successor."

Weed always thought that he himself had as good a poker face as any man, but that offer caused his jaw to drop. For someone already in the presidency to stand aside for another was the ultimate political sacrifice.

The Albany politician knew how Lincoln had longed to be the first President since Jackson to achieve reelection. . . . "And yet," Weed concluded, "having won all those battles over those who would replace you, you are now prepared to renounce your right to run for reelection."

"Beyond that," said Seward, delighting in the scheme's daring, "he is prepared to support the leader of the opposition party. That is something this republic has never seen. In effect, he is choosing his successor, because with Lincoln's support, the Democrat could not lose."

. . . "It would say to the world that you cannot win the war without Seymour's help," [Weed objected,] "and for that help you are willing to pay anything. Everything."

Lincoln nodded slowly. His offer had not been lightly made. (p. 923)

Like Weed, a thoughtful reader might be surprised by Lincoln's offer. The nineteenth century was a period of extreme partisanship, and Lincoln's problems in late December, 1862 do not seem to warrant such a drastic solution. Fortunately, in Safire's "underbook," the reader can examine his evidence and reasoning; unfortunately, the notes for this chapter are unclear and the sources do not convincingly support Safire's interpretation of them.

In his underbook, Safire cites five sources that support his conception of the meeting and attempts to refute one source that weakens his interpretation. His first source is *The Life of Thurlow Weed: Volume II, Memoir* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1884). It was written by Weed's grandson, Thurlow Weed Barnes and based on "Mr. Weed's own words, in well-remembered conversations, in newspaper articles, or in unpublished fragments of autobiography" (Barnes, p. vii). In his underbook (p. 1100-1101) Safire quotes the following section from Barnes' work.

> One evening in December 1862, Mr. Weed was sitting with the President, when Mr. Lincoln said, "Governor Seymour has greater power just now for good than any other man in the country. He can wheel the Democratic Party into line, put down rebellion, and preserve the government. Tell him for me, that if he will render this service to his country, I shall cheerfully make way for him as my successor." Mr. Weed delivered this message to the governor, and urged him to accept the suggestion. Their conversation occurred, of course, before the governor was inaugurated. (Barnes, p. 428)

After this extended quotation from Barnes, Safire continues, "Weed's son adds, without corroborative detail, that six months later 'Mr. Lincoln made almost identical overtures to General McClellen,'" (p. 1100).

Clearly, Safire has paid careful attention to his dialogue, using historical documents, whenever possible, as the basis for his characters' conversations. A comparison of Safire (p. 923) and Barnes (p. 428) shows that Safire quoted Lincoln almost exactly (— or more accurately, that he quoted Barnes almost exactly). Safire's use of Lincoln's actual words makes his novel more satisfying, helping the reader feel as if he or she were really experiencing the past and answering the historian's demand for authenticity.

The problem in this instance, however, is that the words Safire quoted did not actually come from the pen or the mouth of Abraham Lincoln. At best, they came from the "unpublished fragments of autobiography" that Barnes mentions in his introduction to Weed's memoirs. Thus, at best, the words which Safire puts in Lincoln's mouth were Weed's recollection of a conversation which had taken place as much as twenty years earlier. At worst, the words could have been from the "well-remembered conversations" Barnes mentions in the introduction. If so, they would have been Barnes' recollection of the recollections of an aging politican and grandfather. Thus Barnes' book, alone, does not support Safire's interpretation adequately because the book is too far removed from the events it describes.

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FIGURE 3. (Horace Greeley), Thurlow Weed, Lincoln, and William H. Seward in a *Vanity Fair* cartoon, March 2, 1861.

Also, although Safire quoted Barnes' dialogue accurately, he embroidered Barnes' story by adding that Lincoln would actually be willing to *support* the leader of the opposition party rather than merely stepping aside for him.

Safire's argument for his interpretation is further weakened by his confusing discussion of Barnes' book. The first confusing point in his discussion appears at the bottom of page 1100 where he incorrectly suggests that Barnes was Weed's son (see quotation above). Although this is only a minor error in proofreading, it is important that readers understand the true relationship and age difference between Weed and Barnes.

The second inaccuracy in Safire's discussion appears in the same sentence when Safire states that Barnes gives no "corroborative detail" to his story about the Lincoln/McClellan deal, implying that Barnes did give corroborative detail to the Lincoln/Seymour deal. In fact, the reverse is true. Barnes quotes a letter from McClellan to Weed which weakly supports the idea of a Lincoln/McClellan deal. (In fact, it only shows that Weed asked McClellan to preside at a meeting, not that Lincoln offered McClellan the Presidency if he would do so.) The only evidence Barnes gives to support the story of a Lincoln/Seymour deal is the undocumented words of Lincoln that are quoted above.

After finishing his discussion of Barnes' interpretation, in Safire's next section, he turns to Nicolay and Hay's *Abraham Lincoln: A History* and attempts to refute their position. This section is especially confusing. Nicolay and Hay argued against Barnes' interpretation, de-emphasizing any possible political deal between Lincoln and Seymour, but agreeing that Lincoln was anxious to obtain Seymour's loyal support. They explain that "it is probable that Mr. Weed, as is customary with elderly men, exaggerated the definiteness of the proposition," (Nicolay and Hay, v. VII, p. 12).

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FIGURE 4. Horatio Seymour.

Safire explains the Nicolay/Hay position as follows. (The ellipses and editorial comments are Safire's, and the word "Nicohay" stands for Nicolay and Hay's history.)

> Lincoln's secretaries, in Vol. VII, pp. 10-13, of their history, print a March 1863 exchange of letters between Lincoln and Seymour showing the President "desirous on public grounds to secure the cordial cooperation in war matters of the state administration in New York" and the governor responding "with the narrowness of a bitterly prejudiced mind . . ." Nicohay adds: "In an article [New York Times, August 18, 1879] published with his sanction many years afterwards, he [Weed] is represented as expressing his conviction that at the time of this correspondence there was a conspiracy of prominent Republicans to force Lincoln out of the White House; that the President was aware of it, and that this was 'the cause of the anxiety which he displayed to be on intimate friendly terms with Mr. Seymour.'" (p. 1101)

One reason this section of Safire's underbook is so confusing is that the chain of sources he is discussing is quite long. Safire is commenting on the way Nicolay and Hay interpreted an 1879 newspaper article about Horatio Seymour. The newspaper article itself, written by "H. C.", is an interpretation of the testimony of Seymour, Simon Cameron, and an "eminent Republican veteran of the City of New York" (i.e. Thurlow Weed). In addition, Weed is quoted quoting Lincoln. Thus, the article contains five separate voices: "H. C."; Cameron, Weed, and Seymour (each quoted by "H. C."); and Lincoln, quoted by "H. C." quoting Weed. To make matters worse, Safire's discussion introduces another set of voices, those of Nicolay and Hay. In the process, Safire identifies one of the voices incorrectly. In the section quoted above (line 9), Safire assumes that Nicolay and Hay were referring to Weed, but in fact, they were referring to Seymour. Thus, according to Nicolay and Hay, the article was written with Seymour's sanction, not Weed's, as Safire assumes.

Safire's error in identification led him to another inaccuracy when he wrote that the 1879 newspaper "featured a long obituary of Seymour." If the article was written with Seymour's sanction, as Nicolay and Hay insist, it could not have been an obituary as Safire explains — in fact, Seymour did not die until seven years after the article was published.

Safire completes his examination of the article by explaining that the conspiracy was described,

> not by Weed but by Simon Cameron; the former Secretary of War, returned from his Moscow assignment and presumed to be hostile to Lincoln, was invited to what he said was a meeting of prominent men whose "object was to find means by which the President could be impeached and turned out of office." Cameron said "it would be little short of madness to interfere with the Administration."

From his examination of the article, Safire concludes,

> Thus, it can be assumed that, contrary to Nicohay, Governor Seymour's mind was not warped with "partisan bitterness and suspicion"; we now know that there was pressure to reduce Lincoln's power or even replace him with a dictator, (p. 1101).

This conclusion does not follow from his previous discussion. Furthermore, the newspaper article is inappropriate as evidence to prove that there was pressure to reduce Lincoln's power. For instance, the diary of Gideon Welles would be a much more convincing piece of evidence.

The 1879 article would be more useful as evidence for showing the relationship between Lincoln and Seymour, and yet Safire does not quote the most significant part of the article. The *New York Times* reporter describes the Lincoln/Seymour relationship as follows (the editorial notes are mine).

> Gov. Seymour, though not in possession of those minute details of the scheme [to reduce Lincoln's power], is confident not only that it existed, but that President Lincoln was aware of its existence. It is just possible that this knowledge accounts for the great anxiety which [Lincoln], at different times, displayed to be on intimate friendly terms with Mr. Seymour and other prominent Democrats whom he could trust. That he did display that anxiety there can be no doubt. Indeed, it can be stated upon the authority of an eminent Republican veteran of the City of New York, who was closely identified with his Administration [Thurlow Weed], that [Lincoln], on at least one occasion, said, in substance: "If Gov. Seymour would like to be President of the United States nothing stands in his way." It, at least, cannot be denied that he caused an intimation of this character to be conveyed to the Governor.

Note that the second sentence of this quotation (beginning "it is just possible . . .") only *suggests* that Lincoln turned to the Democrats when he was threatened by Republicans in Congress.

Note, further, that Weed's quotation of Lincoln in this article does not match the Barnes quotation in 1884. This 1879 version is much less direct. In this 1879 version, Lincoln does not actually offer to support Seymour for the presidency, as he does in Safire's version of the incident; nor does he "cheerfully make way for him as his successor" as he does in Barnes' version. Instead, in the 1879 version of the incident, Lincoln seems to be admitting that he could not *stop* Seymour from winning the election. Also, by using the phrase "at least," "H. C." suggests that Weed might have conveyed a message to Seymour that the President had not intended to send.

Safire's next source brings us even closer to the event. This source was an article reprinted in Stewart Mitchell's *Horatio Seymour of New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938). The newspaper story appeared in the Albany *Evening Journal* over the initials "T. W.", sometime in early 1864. (Mitchell did not give a date for the story, but a reply to it was printed in the New York *Standard and Statesman* on April 12, 1864.) Only two years after the event, Weed's version of the incident was as follows.

> Soon after the election of 1862, Mr. Lincoln remarked to me that, as the Governor of the Empire State, and the Representative Man of the Democratic Party, Governor Seymour had the power to render great public service, and that if he exerted that power against the Rebellion and for his Country, he would be our next President. I think Mr. Lincoln authorized me to say so, for him, to Governor Seymour. At any rate, I did repeat the conversation to him. (Mitchell, p. 274)

This version more nearly resembles the 1879 version than the 1884 version. In both this version and the 1879 version, Lincoln

merely notes that Seymour could become president. Also in both versions, there is some doubt about whether the message Weed gave to Seymour was what Lincoln intended to say. Safire argues that Weed's reservations are "Weed being very careful with the story during Lincoln's lifetime" (p. 1101), but we have noted that Weed made the same reservations in 1879, after Lincoln's death.

Safire's next source is Ward Hill Lamon's *Recollections of Lincoln* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1895). Although Lamon is listed as the author of this book, it was published after his death and edited by his daughter, Dorothy Lamon, from "notes jotted down on a multitude of scraps scattered through a mass of miscellaneous material," (p. vi). It is not clear which Lamon wrote what material, and this source is not entirely trustworthy. According to Lamon, Lincoln proposed,

> upon certain conditions a frank, full, and honest renunciation of all claims to the Presidency for a second term; and in declining, under any circumstances, to be a candidate for re-election, he would cordially throw his entire influence, in so far as he could control it, in behalf of Horatio Seymour." (Lamon, p. 213)

The "certain conditions" were that Seymour withdraw his opposition to the draft, suppress the riots in New York, and cooperate with the Administration. These conditions suggest that Ward Hill Lamon did not remember the incident clearly or that his daughter did not interpret his notes correctly. If one of the conditions was the suppression of the riots in New York, the meeting would have to have taken place in July of 1863, not December of 1862 as the other sources suggest. Furthermore, since Lamon's book was written after Weed's memoirs had been published, he or his daughter may have been influenced by the way Barnes described the meeting. Thus, Lamon's account does not strengthen Safire's argument.

Safire's next source is a May 23, 1864 letter from Edwin Stanton to Seymour, which he refers to as "corollary evidence." First, Safire quotes the letter: "Would it be possible for you to come to Washington immediately to enable me to confer with you personally on some matters of great personal interest? Please answer." Then Safire comments that "the two uses of 'personal' suggest that Stanton wanted to talk of matters more political than official," (p. 1102). Possibly so, but this letter is much too vague to support an argument about the Lincoln/Seymour deal. Furthermore, why would Stanton want to discuss the Lincoln/Seymour deal in 1864?

After examining Safire's five sources (Barnes' *Weed Memoirs*, 1884; the 1879 *New York Times* article; the 1864 New York *Standard and Statesman* article; Lamon's *Recollections*, 1895; and Stanton's 1864 letter), we can see that Thurlow Weed is the ultimate source of every story about the alleged deal. (Lamon also describes a Lincoln/Seymour deal, but the story contradicts itself and may have been influenced by the publication of Weed's memoirs.) As time went by, Weed's story became more and more exaggerated. In 1864 Weed described Lincoln saying that if Seymour exerted his power against the rebellion and for his country, he would be the next President. Also in 1864 Weed added that he *thought* Lincoln wanted him to repeat this to Seymour. (Even if Lincoln had wanted the story repeated, he would not have been making a firm offer to Seymour, only encouraging him to continue assisting the government.) In 1879 Weed described Lincoln as saying that if Seymour wanted to be president, nothing stood in his way, and Weed again put a modifier on his story, suggesting that he was still not sure that he had delivered the message Lincoln intended to send. Only in 1884, after Weed's death, did the Lincoln/Seymour deal assume the definite nature which Safire ascribes to it in his novel. In any case, Safire adds the idea (from Lamon) that Lincoln was actually willing to support Seymour, instead of merely standing aside, as Barnes suggests. In conclusion, there is not sufficient historical evidence to support the sort of deal which Safire describes in his novel.

Given insufficient evidence to support Safire's story about a Lincoln/Seymour deal, should we care that a historical novelist presents a few historical inaccuracies? If Safire's book were more like other historical novels (like Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*, for instance), the role of the reviewer would be extremely important in reining in the novelist's flights of fancy. Using Woodward's metaphor, one would need a reviewer to establish the court lines and to set up the net for the tennis game. Thus, the reviewer would have some obligation to list all the fallacies and historical untruths a novelist might present in the name of literary truth. Beyond reviewing the book, the historical reviewer would be expected to serve as the novelist's footnotes as well. With his underbook, Safire has taken a huge step forward in the writing of historical fiction, and has earned some forgiveness for errors in interpretation. Nevertheless, we should care about inaccuracies, and especially, we should expect Safire's "underbook" or footnotes to be as clear as possible.

Beyond the minor inaccuracies which are inevitable in historical fiction, I found one major error and two disappointments in reading *Freedom*. First, Safire and his characters frequently describe John Cabell Breckinridge as responsible for Lincoln's election. Safire explains that, "By running for President as a Peace Democrat, Breckinridge had split the vote of War Democrat Stephen Douglas, helping Lincoln to win the presidency with fewer than four votes out of ten cast," (p. 4). First, Breckinridge could not have run as a Peace Democrat because at the time of the 1860 election, there was no war. The war began with the firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, more than a month after Lincoln's inauguration. A more accurate distinction between Breckinridge and Douglas would be to say that Breckinridge was a Southern Democrat and Douglas was a Northern Democrat. In any case, Breckinridge did not give Lincoln the election because presidents are determined by electoral votes, not popular votes. Even if all the Democrats *and* all the third party supporters had voted for one candidate, that fusion candidate could not have defeated Lincoln who received 180 of the 303 total electoral votes.

Considering *Freedom* as a novel, I was disappointed that Safire did not give more attention to blacks. There were several scenes featuring the freedwoman Elizabeth Keckley (who lived in Washington with the Lincolns) but the section titled "The Negro" only included three chapters (out of nine) which included blacks. None of the three gives us any real understanding of the lives of black people during the Civil War. Chapter 8 of this section is especially disappointing, and even a little disconcerting. The chapter concerns a meeting between Benjamin Butler and a group of black men who had served in the Confederates' "Native Guard, Colored." Safire does not give these men names, and only identifies them by shade. Upon examining Safire's underbook, we find that Butler did not give the blacks' names when he described the incident, but in this case, historical accuracy detracted from the quality of the novel. Beyond simply creating names for these men Safire could have used other sources to tell us more about black people's lives during the period.

My second disappointment with Safire's novel was that the only women he dealt with at any length were rather atypical. In particular he focused on Anna Ella Carroll, an unusually independent woman, who wrote political pamphlets, designed military strategy, and never married. Most women in the nineteenth century centered their lives around their homes and families; their personality, their interests and their use of power were quite different from those of Anna Ella Carroll. If Safire had portrayed sympathetically a more ordinary nineteenth century woman, like Mary Todd Lincoln, he could have given modern readers a chance to know a person they could never meet. Instead, he introduced them to a person very much like themselves.

In the end, I enjoyed reading Safire's book. It does have the inevitable inaccuracies of historical fiction; in many cases Safire's sources lead him to some mistaken conclusions, and he misinterpreted Breckinridge's role in the 1860 election. I wish he had given more attention to blacks (or else limited the book more strictly to white politicians); and I wish he had introduced us to some more typical nineteenth century women. Nevertheless, *Freedom* is a good historical novel. As a novelist should, Safire brings history to life, and as a *historical* novelist should, he has accepted the responsibilities of a historian: to examine the evidence, present his interpretation of that evidence, and cite his sources so that his readers can judge them and his interpretation of them, for themselves.