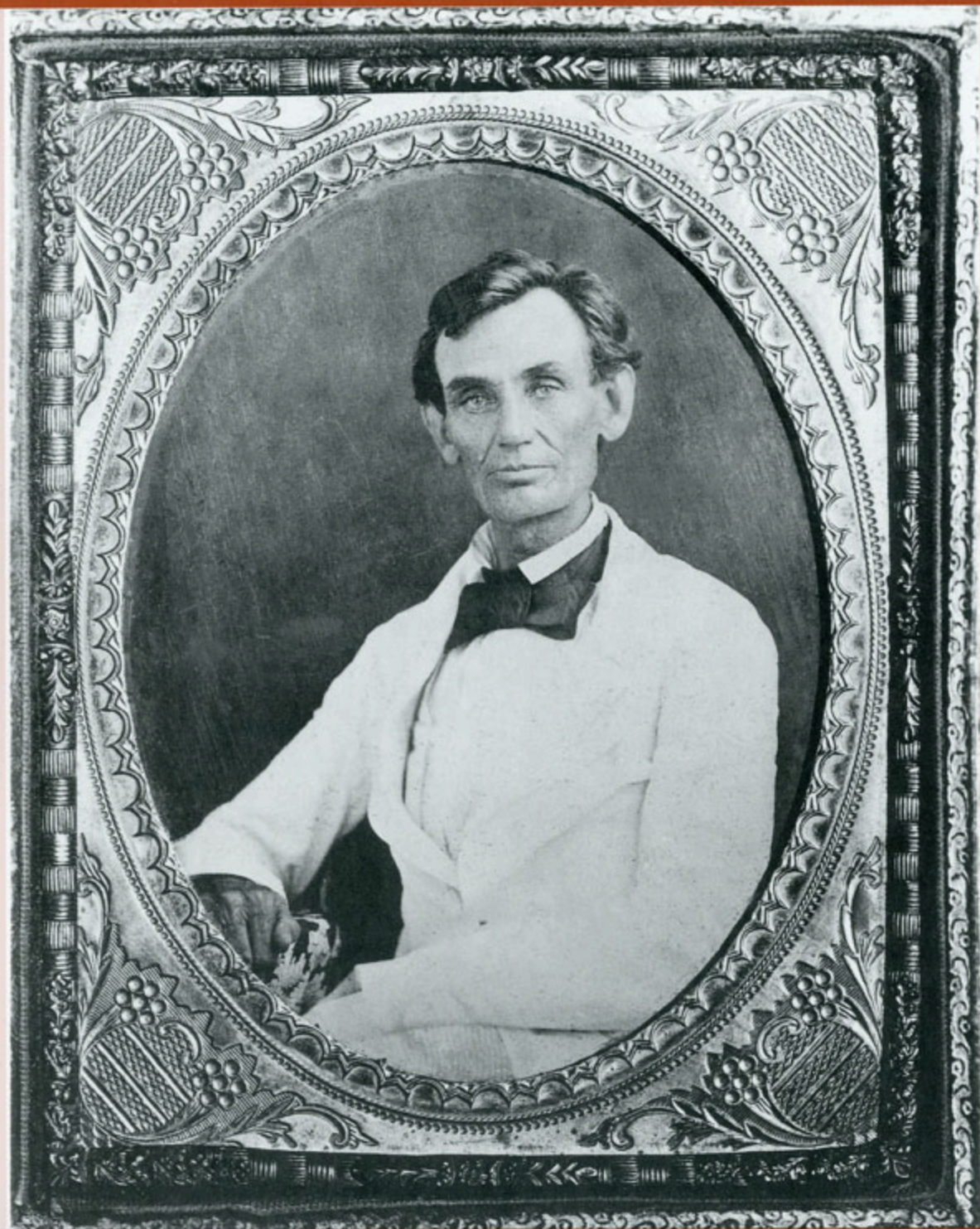


Lincoln Lore

The Bulletin of THE LINCOLN MUSEUM



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He Will Be Good — But God Knows When

McMurtry Lecture, Lincoln Museum,
Fort Wayne, Indiana, September 18, 1999
William Lee Miller

[Editor's Note: We have preserved the "lecture style" in this printed text by format, punctuation and abbreviated footnotes. After this Lecture was given in 1999, some of the material appeared in 2002, in different form, in Dr. Miller's book, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography*.]

The Twentieth Century American playwright and novelist Thornton Wilder took a sentence from one of his own novels, *The Woman of Andros*, and used it as an epigraph for another of his novels, called *Heaven's My Destination*. This second novel is the affectionately told, comic story of a middle western Protestant American good boy — the sort of fellow who will write in the margins of an encyclopedia article about Napoleon, "I am a great man, too, but for good." The epigraph quoted from the other book — Wilder quoting himself — is this: "Of all the forms of genius, goodness has the longest awkward age."

That Is Our Text.

Abraham Lincoln was in most ways quite different from Wilder's rather innocent and blubbing fictional hero, who keeps getting into scrapes because he doesn't recognize or measure the evil in the world or the distorting egotism in himself. Young Lincoln did not have either of those problems. Lincoln was a good man, but he was not a *naive* good man. But he was like Wilder's character, and he does illustrate that epigraph, at least in this: that his goodness, his moral worth, though it would prove to be extraordinary and in the end triumphant, would be for a certain time a work in progress.

Lincoln Lore

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The mission of The Lincoln Museum is to interpret and preserve the history and legacy of Abraham Lincoln through research, conservation, exhibitry, and education.

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THE
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The Life and Legacy of Abraham Lincoln



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On the Cover: Ambrotype taken by Abraham M. Byers, Beardstown, Illinois, Friday, May 7, 1858. This is the only studio photo taken of Abraham Lincoln in something other than a black coat. The photo was taken the day that Lincoln won the Duff Armstrong case, successfully defending Mr. Armstrong against a murder charge by illustrating with an almanac that the witness could not have seen what he claimed because there was no moonlight on the night of the murder. "After the acquittal, Lincoln was stopped in the street by Abraham Byers, an eighteen-year-old amateur photographer who had acquired his gallery in settlement of a debt. Recalled Byers: Lincoln was attending court and boarded at the National Hotel, where I did. After dinner he stepped out on the street ahead of me. I caught up with him as I went to my rooms, and said to him: 'Mr. Lincoln I want you to go upstairs with me to my gallery; I wish to take an ambrotype of you.' He cast his eyes down on his old Holland linen suit which had no semblance of starch in it, and said: 'These clothes are dirty and unfit for a picture.' But I insisted and he finally went with me." (Lincoln in Photographs: An Album of Every Known Pose by Charles Hamilton and Lloyd Ostendorf; Morningside House; 1985; p.14. Photo used with permission from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

Let us think about young Abraham Lincoln, lying on his neck bone in the Indiana woods, reading books, and writing his name, as a moral man in the making.

Let us remind ourselves that he was not born, after all, on Mount Rushmore. He did not come into the world as a certified hero with his memorial already built on the Mall and his face already stamped on the penny. He did not know, that after he died an adoring public looking back would expect him to have been a full time, life-long saint. He did not know, as you and I do, that rich people would one day pay a king's ransom just to sleep in his White House bedroom; he did not know he would have a White House bedroom. He was a boy. He came into the world as you and I did, as a bare and gurgling bundle of possibilities.

He was, as you and I were, free to make of himself what he would. Free to some degree, free within some limits.

Young Lincoln himself, when he grew up and read some books and carried on arguments, would hold for a time to a kind of fatalism, a "doctrine of necessity," that denied this ultimate human freedom; but we may be permitted to say, since he was not gifted with omniscience, that he was, on this point, wrong. We might say that his own life, which would be shot through with choices that made a difference, would disprove his own youthful theory.

And now let us notice that this gangling, ill-clad teenager was in many ways a good boy — generous, conscientious, and honest to the point that would one day be famous. His stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln, who came into his life when he was ten, would when he was dead give one of the most impressive testimonies to this young lad's worthy conduct: "I can say what scarcely one woman — a mother — can say in a thousand and it is this — Abe never gave me a cross word or look and never refused in fact, or even in appearance, to do anything I requested him. I never gave him a cross word in all my life. He was kind to everybody and to everything..."¹

When the boys in your neighborhood put hot coals on the backs of turtles, to entertain themselves by watching the turtle's reaction, there are several courses of action open to you. As a good fellow, you can go along with the fun. As one who does feel the turtle's pain, but is intimidated, you can keep your objections to yourself. As one who has more important business elsewhere you could ignore the whole matter. As a budding representative of the relativisms of the century to come, you could shrug your shoulders and say: they like to put hot coals on turtles, I don't like to put hot coals on turtles — preferences differ. Who is to choose? Don't be "judgmental."

Or you can do what the ten-year-old Abraham Lincoln did: you can tell your companions that what they are doing is wrong. You may "chide" them, and say that it hurts the turtle, and that they ought not do what they are doing. And you may even, as young Lincoln did, draw out the larger moral principle, and write a composition: cruelty to animals is wrong — and argue publicly in its behalf in your one-room school. The boy has a moral backbone, and many admirable qualities.

But now let us notice another cluster of characteristics of this



"Young Dreamer" by Balfour Ker (TLM #317)

Hoosier lad, also admirable — indeed, perhaps the most remarkable qualities about him and one source of his eventual greatness — but at the same time, morally precarious.

He is discovering his superiority to those around him.

He is developing, from that discovery and from the world opened to him by the printed page, an intense desire to distinguish himself.

He is able to read that book — as not all his elders, in the small cluster of cabins called Little Pigeon Creek, would be able to do. He is also able to write — as even fewer adults around him could do.

He could write his own name in the firm clear hand the world will come to know. He writes his name, let us guess, as a million youngsters have done, over and over, partly as practice in penmanship and signature-signing, partly as reinforcement of his identity, partly in the self-indulgent fancy that that name will some day ring bells.

He writes his name in his copybook, with some familiar school-book doggerel of the sort that pupils in all ages seem to pass on from one generation to the next:

*Abraham Lincoln
his hand and pen
He will be good
But God knows when*

His angel mother, when she had been alive, had signed her name with an "X." His wonderful stepmother, whom his father brought to the squalid cabin a year after his mother's death, brought some books — but couldn't read them herself, or sign her name.

And his father? This boy when grown would have occasion to write a few lines about his father — nothing good. He never would write anything good about his father. After his writing, in an autobiographical sketch, that his father grew up without education, this Hoosier lad, now a grown man of fifty, would add this sentence: "He [his father] never did more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name."



"Lincoln The Circuit Rider" by Lloyd Ostendorf (TLM #325)

In the first place why add that sentence? He has already said his father was completely uneducated.

In the second place, why add that devastating adverb "bunglingly?" (It makes a split infinitive, by the way, although we are not supposed to care about that any more.) From a writer's point-of-view that word is quite effective. That other great humorist of Nineteenth Century America, the Lincoln of our literature, Mark Twain, said that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug. Well, this word is lightning, in that it certainly evokes the picture — if that is the picture you want to evoke. But why evoke that picture? Is there not in the whole passage about his father, along with whatever there was of sympathy for one who was made a penniless orphan at six, who grew up as a wandering laboring boy without any education — also, especially in that word bunglingly, just the faint hint of a sneer?

Maybe not: you insist that Abraham Lincoln does *not* sneer. However, the fact that he came up with that word does suggest to me a picture. There is the unusually bright and exceedingly diligent and ambitious young son, who would virtually teach himself to read and to write, who would practice his penmanship until he had a clear hand and while still a boy could write documents for illiterate adults, and who would practice and practice, writing and writing, along with much else, his own name. And there is the father, the son watching him, trying to get his wavering hand to form the unfamiliar magic markings that make the letters that made his name. Bunglingly.

What happened to poor Tom Lincoln, who appears to have been a limited man, but not a bad man, was that, somehow, he had the bad luck to have an impossibly bright son. Had that not happened his deficiencies, such as they may have been, would not have been spread across the pages of a thousand books for all the world to read.

The son clearly learned to care deeply for books, writing, reading, education, for the world that opened up to him through the printed page; the father clearly did not. It is extraordinarily difficult when we value something very highly, and work for it mightily, not then to be disdainful of those who do not value it at all.

Young Lincoln, sitting under a tree with a book, not only *can* read; he *does* read, as not everyone who can read does. It would be quite a study to go through the available record to identify all the places, times, and postures in which those who had known Abraham in Indiana, and in New Salem, would remember him reading a book: reading while the horse rests at the end of a row, reading while walking on the street, reading under a tree, reading while others went to dances, reading with his legs up as high as his head, reading between customers in the Post Office, reading stretched at length on the counter of the store, reading whenever he had the opportunity, reading if he had but five minutes time. Reading when his father wanted him to be working. In Lord Charnwood's classic biography, an employer says: "I found him...cocked on a haystack with a book." "He read setting [sic] lying down & walking in the streets he was always [sic] reading." "His favorite way of reading when at home was lying down on the floor." "He would turn a Chair down on the floor and put a pillow on it and lie there [sic] for hours and read." "He was fond of . . . reading especially in warm weather by Laying down & putting his Feet a gainst [sic] a wall or if in the woods up a Tree." "He was a constant and I may Say Stubborn reader."²

In Indiana he would be said to have read, as the phrase regularly has it, "every book he could lay his hands on."

[At some point in later years the Lincoln legend would be carried away with this idea and would claim that young Abe had read every book he could find in a circuit of fifty miles. Louis Warren, the distinguished scholar who once headed this museum, knew too much about the actual territory, and also about what fifty miles meant when the only transportation was by horse, to let that pass. He wrote that within a fifty mile circuit from Little Pigeon Creek "were the Indiana towns of Boonville, Corydon, Evansville, New Harmony, Princeton, Rockport, Troy, and Vincennes, and across the Ohio in Kentucky, still within fifty miles, were Brandenburg, Calhoun, Cloverport, Hardinsburg, Hartford, Hawesville, Henderson, and Owensboro."³ All right, we may say, maybe not fifty miles. Would you believe twenty miles? How about five miles?]

Reading his books, from whatever distance they may have been, with some effort, obtained; joining in a conversation across the years and across the ocean with minds of distinction, this lad developed confidence in the powers of his mind. I can understand what this writer from another time is saying; I can remember it, I can respond. Young Lincoln developed a confidence in his own intellectual powers that would be a key to all his accomplishments. He developed confidence that he could take up a subject, read the

books about it, and acquire a mastery of it sufficient to his purpose — as he would do repeatedly throughout his life. Learned to read. Learned to write. Learned grammar. Memorized Shakespeare. Learned surveying. Learned geometry. Learned the law. At the age of forty took up Euclid and read systematically. As President of the United States, studied military science.

That he discovered in himself an unusually strong mind, superior to those around him, may be the meaning of the famous episode in which Lincoln told Herndon, as they rode in a buggy, perhaps in 1850, to the court in Menard County, where a case dealt with inherited characteristics, that his mother was the “bastard” child of a Virginia gentleman. Interpreters generally have been distracted by the issue of Nancy Hanks’s legitimacy. But there is another significance to Lincoln’s comments to Herndon. Lincoln needed to explain where his intellectual abilities came from. He looked at his sense of his own powers, and then he looked at his father Tom Lincoln, and he looked at his relatives among the Hanks, and — and he had to posit a Virginia gentleman.

In the version of the story that Herndon put into his biography Lincoln even specifies the abilities he has observed in himself: “his power of analysis, his logic, his mental activity, and all the qualities that distinguished him from the other members and descendants of the Hanks family.”⁴

Young Lincoln, sitting under the tree with his book, is not drawing his models for his own life’s expectations from Tom Lincoln. Nor from Andrew Crawford and James Swaney, the teachers in the one room schools, whom he soon outstripped. Nor from those preachers who would visit the Baptist Church — and whom he would imitate (maybe even mock) with his own sermons preached on a tree stump to the local youngsters. Nor even from Colonel William Jones, who had come from the big city of Vincennes to the store in Gentryville, and would loan him newspapers.

Where did young Lincoln get his models for living? I answer — from that book he is reading. From the printed page.

He reads William Grimshaw’s vigorous *History of the United States*, and he borrowed and read David Turnham’s copy of the *Revised Statutes of Indiana*, (which does not sound like what every young lad would go to some trouble to read) and he read, as he will tell the world when in an unimaginable future he is President-elect of the United States, Parson Weems’ biography of George Washington, and his models are George Washington and the Founding Fathers. And he reads Colonel Jones’ copies of *The Louisville Journal* — and his hero is Henry Clay. And he reads excerpts from Shakespeare and great drama and literature in his elocution books and imagines lives on the scale — shall we say? — of “the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle.”

Let us surmise that there were these three interconnected happenings in Abraham Lincoln’s young life, perhaps beginning while he was still a boy in Kentucky, but mostly in the fourteen years that he was growing up in Indiana: first, “somehow” (as he himself put it) he learned to read and to write; second, he discovered that the clarity and power of his mind was greater than those around him; and third, he developed an intense desire for personal distinction.



“Boy Lincoln Reading by Fire” by W. Harring from Eastman Johnson (TLM #4433)

An able youngster’s private imaginings often do take the form of — the hope that all the world will have cause to remember his name — and the fear that it won’t, that his name will be, as another ambitious young man, John Keats, would put it — written on water. Keats had fears that he would “cease to be” before his pen had “gleaned his teeming brain.” Young Lincoln feared that he would cease to be, before he brought off any great public accomplishment that would make his name known, in the way that those names in the books he is reading are now known. In his despondent state over his dealings with Mary Todd in March of 1841 he wrote Joshua Speed that he was willing to die — except for this one deterrent that “he had done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived.”

This incident was vivid enough for Lincoln as president to recall it to Speed when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation — now he had done something to make the world remember his name.

It was vivid enough for Speed to tell Herndon in 1866 that Lincoln had had the desire “to connect his name with the events transpiring in his day & generation” and that he would “so impress himself upon [those events] as to link his name with something that would redound to the interest of his fellow man.”⁵

Lincoln is consistently said to have been “ambitious.” There is, in fact, a quotation from Herndon that has become a cliché, about Lincoln’s ambition being a little engine working all the time. When you read a steady diet of Lincoln interpretations, and you



"Lincoln at His Mother's Knee" by M. Leone Bracker (TLM #975)

see on the page the word "ambition," you say, oh-oh, here comes that engine again, and sure enough, the quotation from Herndon comes chugging along soon thereafter.⁶

But there are many different expressions of "ambition," many meanings of the word, and a wide variation in its moral significance, from virtue to vice, from praiseworthy energy, persistence, resolution, and discipline, over to blameworthy selfishness, main-chance seeking, corner-cutting, self-promotion, killing Duncan while he sleeps in your own house as your guest (at your wife's prompting) in order that you may succeed to his throne. What we mean by the word ambition is morally ambiguous.

Lincoln's intense desire that he leave a scar upon the earth would be one source of his greatness — even, we might say, of his moral greatness. But it would also be — Lincoln being human — a root of deeds that may not be so worthy of praise.

I suggest that in each of the "unLincolnian"-instances I will now mention he was too eager to make his mark.

The Power to Hurt

Recent scholars — notably Robert Bray, Douglas Wilson, and Michael Burlingame — have exhumed instances in which young Lincoln would use his pen or tongue to wound adversaries.

In Indiana, when he was barely out of his teens, Lincoln wrote that pseudo-scriptural satire, mocking and getting even with the Grigsby clan, that he called: "The Chronicles of Reuben." Those who have tried to read it have called that production "scurrilous" (David Herbert Donald); "rude and coarse" (Herndon); "some bawdy doggerel" (Richard Luthin); and "out of [the] local Indiana context...so topical as to be neither funny nor comprehensible" (Robert Bray).⁷ Would you want your writings from just after you have turned twenty subjected to a hundred years and more of close scrutiny by sober professors and critics eager to score points on you?

Lincoln as a beginning politician and lawyer in Illinois engaged in anonymous attacks on political opponents in Illinois newspapers — on the evangelist and Democrat Peter Cartwright in 1834⁸; on a man named James Adams, who was also an opponent in a law case, in 1837; and on James Shields, in the "Lost Township" letters which almost led to Shields and Lincoln dueling with broad swords.⁹

And the young politician on the stump, is said to have gone too far, sometimes, against political opponents, notably a prominent Whig-turned-Democrat named George Forquer, owner of Springfield's first lightning rod, in 1836; a Democrat named Jesse Thomas in 1840; and another Whig-turned-Democrat named W. L. May, in 1844. Again, Lincoln is charged with having been too severe and personal — in Forquer's case by a climactic reference to that lightning rod. The attack on Thomas became famous as "the skinning of Thomas." Herndon, reporting the incident, wrote that Lincoln, "imitated Thomas in gesture and voice, at times caricaturing his walk and the very motion of his body. Thomas, like everybody else, had some peculiarities of expression and gesture, and these Lincoln succeeded in rendering more prominent than ever. The crowd yelled and cheered as he continued. Encouraged by these demonstrations, the ludicrous features of the speaker's performance gave way to intense and scathing ridicule."¹⁰

Thomas, sitting there listening — so the reports tells us, and witnesses remembered, although it may be a little hard to believe — was so torn up by Lincoln's attack that "he actually gave way to tears."

Why did Lincoln do these and other such deeds? Because he was young. Because he was eager to display his powers, eager to make his mark. Because he was smart (it takes a certain wit to compose those chronicles, and to seize on that lightning rod, and to do that mimicking, even though it be a dubious use of that wit.)

Because he was in adversarial situations. (Professors, preachers, and poets who write about Lincoln sometimes are rather too precious about the combat of politics; both Forquer and Thomas initiated the exchange by attacking Lincoln; both Forquer and May had switched parties from Whig to Democrat, which may appear to be no sin to a Twentieth Century researcher who does not care about parties or those old vanished Whigs, but to a devoted Whig in the 1840s, in a state in which it was a political advantage to be a Democrat, such opportunistic switching might be a legitimate basis for attack.)

Because he was endowed with a satirical bent, which in turn means he had the two ingredients of which satire is composed, a strong sense of humor and a strong moral sense.

A sense of humor? Of course the 20-year-old Lincoln chortled as he was composing his chronicles, and even the older satirist enjoyed his thrusts at Adams, Shields, and Forquer.

A moral sense? Yes, indeed. A moral sense — an inclination to the criticism of conduct — may notoriously be intrusive, officious, self-righteous, even cruel. In the long run, part of the mature Lincoln's genius would be that he would express powerful moral convictions without falling into those vices. He would be an unmoralistic moralist. But as a young man — maybe not quite.

The Grandiosity of His Youthful Speeches

A second set of examples is of rather a different kind: The grandiosity of the endings of his youthful speeches.

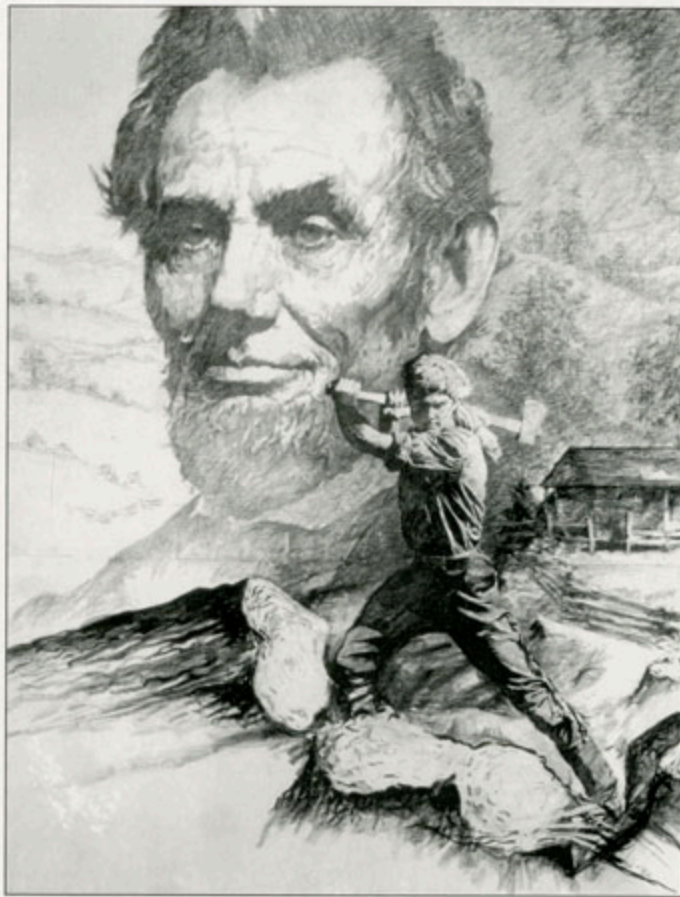
Those who know Lincoln's productions will think of the extravagant elements in the much discussed Lyceum Address that he would give in Springfield when he was twenty-eight, which in my opinion will not bear all the weight that interpreters have put upon one theme in it. Whichever of the theories one accepts about who or what Lincoln had in mind when he referred to a "towering genius belonging to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle" who would be "possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch," one certainly cannot deny that he was trying hard to make a striking speech, and if he did not succeed in Springfield in 1838 he certainly would succeed in Twentieth Century scholarship.

But I want to refer to another, much less examined speech of the young Lincoln, also grandiose, in which there is no ambiguity to whom he is referring when he takes off, toward the end, on the wings of inflated eloquence. This address dealt with a topic not every Lincoln devotee or even scholar particularly wants to hear about: banking.

He gave the speech on the day after Christmas in 1839, in the early stages of one of the most vigorously contested presidential elections of early American national history, the Harrison-Van Buren "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too," contest of 1840. Lincoln's address arose out of the long contest in the Illinois House over differing banking policies of Whigs and Jacksonians, but it was not delivered in a general session of the House; it was given as one side of a debate between House champions that was held in the evening, open to the public. After a long and rigorous argument that the Whig/Federalist National Bank had been and would be superior to the Jackson/Van Buren alternative, Lincoln, rounding into the home stretch, suddenly shifted into overdrive: "Mr. Lamborn [a Democratic opponent in the debate] refers to the late elections in the States [which then set their election times at various dates] and from their results, [in which the Democrats had done well] confidently predicts, that every State in the Union will vote for Mr. Van Buren at the next Presidential election [that is, the upcoming election of 1840]."

So now you expect that Lincoln is going to give some answer to that vastly inflated Democratic prediction, with some contrary prediction, perhaps equally inflated, from the Whig side — is it not so? But that is not what the eager young partisan says: "Address *that* argument [meaning the argument that Van Buren is going to sweep the election] to *cowards* and to *knaves*; with the *free* and the *brave* it will effect nothing. It *may* be true, if it *must*, let it. [So he is conceding the election, or dismissing its importance? Not exactly.] Many free countries have lost their liberty; and *ours may* lose hers; but if she shall, be it my proudest plume, not that I was the *last* to desert, but that I *never* deserted her."

Why this sudden, and extravagant, reference first of all to the overthrow of liberty, and then secondly to himself? The insistent italics, of course, are his; the young Lincoln was a great one for ital-



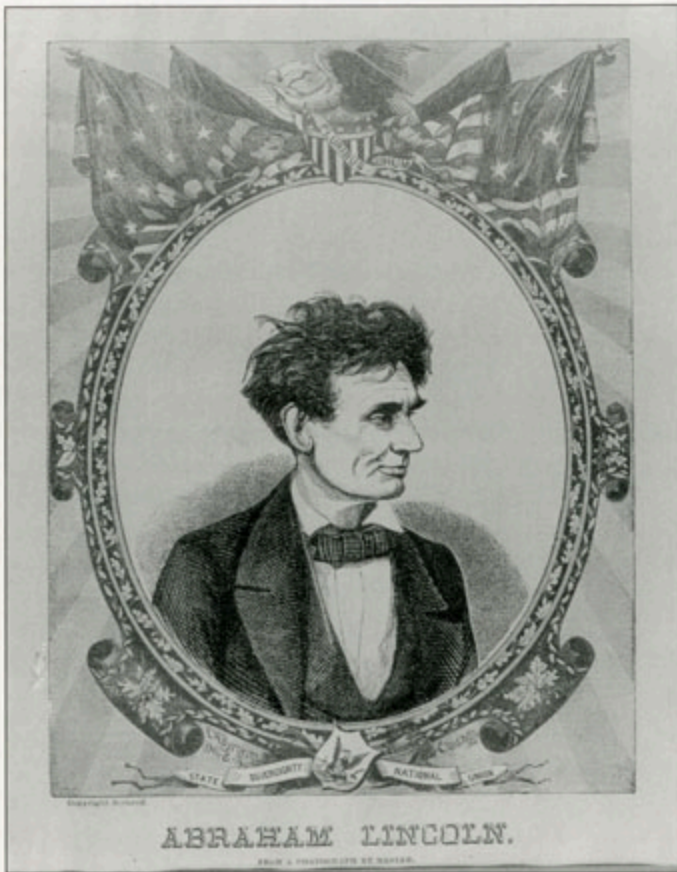
"The Railsplitter" by M. Leone Bracker (TLM # 1568a)

ics. Why do we suddenly jump from a debate about banking and assertions about the coming election — all the way to the loss of liberty? And why does this one young western state legislator cast himself as the last man on the bridge? "My proudest plume?" "I will be the *last* to desert?" "I *never* deserted her?"

Lincoln was a man of a Romantic era, including its florid and individualistic qualities; one hears in this grandiloquent speech ending an echo of something like *Cyrano*, posturing around the stage with dramatic claims about his unsullied plume. This example differs from other gaudy endings to others of his speeches at that time in its self-dramatization, its use of the pronoun "I."

Lincoln went on to condemn the Van Buren (Jackson) Democratic administration then in Washington with the metaphor of a volcano — the "great volcano at Washington, aroused and directed by the evil spirit that reigns there." This evil-spirit-directed volcano "is belching forth the lava of political corruption in a current broad and deep, which is sweeping with frightful velocity over the whole length and breadth of the land, bidding fair to leave unscathed no green spot or living thing, while on its bosom are riding like demons on the waves of Hell, the imps of that evil spirit, and fiendishly taunting all those who dare resist its destroying course, with the hopelessness of their effort."

Is that not a little disproportionate, not to say goofy?



"Abraham Lincoln" E. H. Brown from a photograph by Hesler (This print was distributed at the 1860 Republican Convention.) (TLM #3419)

And now once more, Lincoln for his rhetorical purposes seems to concede a Democratic victory, in order that he may dramatize his own last stand against it: "and knowing this [all those imps and evil spurts and flowing lava I suppose] I cannot deny that all may be swept away."

This next passage, extracted from its context, would be quoted by Bishop Matthew Simpson at the funeral for Lincoln himself at the Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield in 1865: "Broken by it, I, too, may be; bow to it I never will. The probability that we may fall in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just; it shall not deter me."

Gabor S. Boritt begins his excellent book, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream*, on Lincoln's economics with Bishop Simpson's use of this quotation, and then remarks: "Bishop Simpson quoted Lincoln accurately. He had unearthed a long lost speech that would be soon lost again. But he did make one error. Lincoln's speech had said nothing about slavery. Its subject was banking."

There is still more. David Herbert Donald, quoting the next passage from this same Lincoln speech, makes a similar little joke in a paragraph about Lincoln's style; what follows next appears, he wryly observed, "in the unlikely context of defending the national bank." "If ever I feel the soul within me elevate and expand to

those dimensions not wholly unworthy of its Almighty Architect, it is when I contemplate the cause of my country, deserted by all the world beside, and I standing up boldly and alone and hurling defiance at her victorious oppressors. Here, without contemplating consequences, before High Heaven and in the face of the world, I swear eternal fidelity to the just cause, as I deem it, of the land of my life, my liberty and my love."

If one reads speeches by congressmen in this period one finds that these rhetorically overblown self-dramatizings are common; these speech-endings show that young Lincoln certainly did it, too.

Although that last certainly sounded like an ending, he still was not done. Here's the way he went on to finish his speech on the bank: "And who, that thinks with me, will not fearlessly adopt the oath that I take. Let none falter [sic], who thinks he is right, and we may succeed. But, if after all, we shall fail, be it so. We still shall have the proud consolation of saying to our consciences, and to the departed shade of our country's freedom, that the cause approved of our judgment, and adored of our hearts in disaster, in chains, in torture, in death we NEVER faulted [sic] in defending.

(Lincoln apparently felt that, because, as he knew, the word "fault" had a "u" in it, that it was only just that the word "falter," which sounds so much like it, should be given a "u" also.) Whatever one may think of the Van Buren administration and its position on banking, one would not realistically expect it to deal with its opponents by disaster, chains, torture and death.

Distinguishing Himself

I think something of the same happened to the still rather young Lincoln when he would first appear on the national political stage, as a new congressman, the lone Whig Congressman from Illinois, in the 30th Congress in December of 1847 — that he tried too hard to make his name ring from the rafters too fast.

Usually a new congressman, then and now, is a little diffident and deferential, and perhaps nervous, and waits and listens for a while — as thousands of Phineas Finns, coming shyly for the first time into a Parliament, have been and have done. There you would be, getting shakily up on your legs for the first time, with all of the — as it would seem to you then — so much more practiced legislators and confident orators than you would be, as they moved with easy confidence through the parliamentary round, turning now to look curiously at you, this new fellow. There would be these 200 pairs of eyes watching and of ears listening, as you made your maiden effort. Joshua Giddings, the great legislator from the Western Reserve of Ohio, now Lincoln's self-confident senior messmate and a great figure — the "Lion of Ashtabula" — in this congress — had not been such a lion ten years earlier, when he first spoke. He wrote in his journal that he had worried, when he finally made the attempt, that his voice would quaver.

But newcomer Lincoln does not seem to have suffered such freshman qualms and self-doubts. Lincoln wrote to Herndon back in Springfield that he was not more nervous than he had been on rising to speak in court in Illinois. And he also wrote, with a reveal-

ing jocular bravado, "As you are all so anxious for me to distinguish myself, I have concluded to do so, before long."

Perhaps he was at most only half-joking; he *did* try to distinguish himself, fast, by his speeches. But he didn't succeed. His attack on Polk's justification for the war included some nasty unLincolnian jabs that remind one of the instances of his "power to hurt" — except that he didn't lay a glove on Polk. Polk, who kept a meticulous diary of daily events, never mentions this obstreperous new Whig from Illinois, and the national newspapers also paid no attention.

My comment has only to do with the tone and the timing which, after all, are important. Lincoln did much better in carefully arguing about the war in letters home to Herndon and to a Baptist pastor in his district than he did in his rather too relentless and vehement speeches on the floor, seeking too quickly and too eagerly to "distinguish" himself.

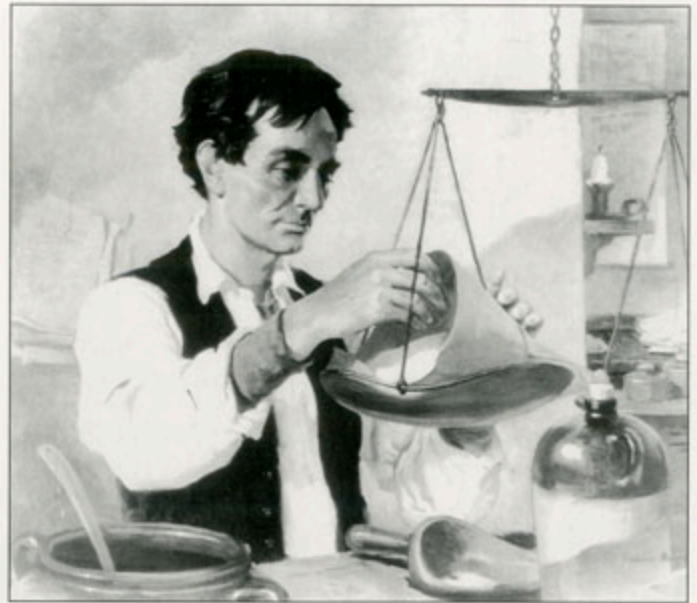
Envy

Lincoln underwent a major retooling in the summer and fall of 1854, in response to the new politics of slavery after the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and emerged as a more profound politician. Nevertheless, at some time in the middle 1850s,¹¹ at a low point in his fortunes, Lincoln would produce an extraordinary little private jotting that is evidence of another kind of that desire that the world would know his name.

The editors of the *Collected Works* did not know what to call this item, except "Fragment on Stephen A. Douglas." But I do not think it is a fragment; it seems complete as it stands to me. Don Fehrenbacher, in the Library of America volumes, called it simply "On Stephen Douglas." But I suggest that a title conveying the real subject might be: "On Stephen Douglas — and *me*."

Every clause in this remarkable document cries out for exegesis. Lincoln's rueful private rumination starts off in this revealing way:

"Twenty two years ago — [he remembers the starting date, with significant exactitude] Judge Douglas and I first became acquainted. We were both young then; [and now notice what he significantly remembers about the respective ages of these two young men] he a trifle younger than I. [So this younger man is going to pass him by] [He remembers that Douglas was certainly an ambitious young man, but, then, looking back across the twenty-two years at his youthful self, he makes a rueful acknowledgement.] Even then we were both ambitious; I, perhaps, quite as much as he. [And so what has happened in twenty-two years to these two ambitious young men? The contrast is stark.] With me the race of ambition has been a failure - a flat failure; with him it has been one of splendid success. [Notice that there has been a *race* — a competition. And the result? Not just failure but "flat" failure for Lincoln; not just success but "splendid" success for Douglas. And how is the splendid success of Douglas measured — the only measure Lincoln mentions?] His name fills the nation; and is not unknown, even, in foreign lands." [And mine, by implied contrast, is scarcely known beyond Peoria].



"Abraham Lincoln: Honest Clerk" by Frederick Mizen (TLM #982)

Although most of us have jealous feelings like these, few of us admit it plainly to ourselves, or put it into words, or certainly we do not write it out so that it would be included in our papers, in the unlikely event that we should have papers. But Lincoln in some rueful moment did.

Moralists often observe that *envy* is the vice we are *least* likely to admit, and the vice that does not have any compensating "gain," as it were (as gluttony, lust, pride, avarice, wrath and sloth, may in their various perverse ways, have). It was not by any means true that Lincoln at that point in his middle forties was a flat failure; he had been for three terms a member of the state legislature, and his party's candidate for Speaker; he had been a member of the United States Congress; he was a successful, and rising, lawyer; he had narrowly missed being chosen United States Senator in 1855; he was becoming the state-wide leader of a new party; his name was known from Galena to Vandalia, from Alton to Peoria. That this would still count as flat failure to him, that he would take for granted that he should compare himself with one of the handful of best known and most powerful persons in the entire country (whose name was not unknown even in foreign lands!) tells us about the reach of the pride and ambition of the young boy writing his name in copy books in Little Pigeon Creek.

But where is the ineluctable necessity that Abraham Lincoln's name, or Stephen Douglas's name, or John Keats's name, shall be written not on water but on stone, to be read "to the last generation," as Lincoln might say? The names of the great bulk of mankind, presumably including some with as great ability, and even as great merit as Lincoln (or Douglas or Keats), while usually not exactly written on water — remembered in some circle of kinship and acquaintance — cannot, by the sheer finitude of human memory and the capriciousness of history, be known to the great world public. The knowledge and memory of humankind is necessarily severely limited. "History" and fate are volatile and fickle.



"Lincoln The Surveyor" by Lloyd Ostendorf (TLM #4369)

Think of the role of what Machiavelli would call Fortuna. If you plan to be a rail-splitter who becomes a world class hero, be sure you split those rails not only in a nation that can plausibly (at least to itself) be described as "the last, best hope of earth"—but also in an important swing state that the Republicans will need to carry to win in 1860. If Tom Lincoln had kept his family in Kentucky, or somehow been transported to, say Vermont — a safely Republican state with only a pinch of electoral votes — Abraham Lincoln would not have been nominated in Chicago in May of 1860, and we would not be sitting here in a Lincoln Museum and listening to a lecture on Lincoln.

The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, but time and chance happeneth to them all. And, in any event: Oh, why should the Spirit of Mortal be Proud?

And so what would happen to that Hoosier lad with his book? That name he had written in his copy book would become known to an extent beyond his gaudiest youthful imagining, not only in his own country, but, as he had ruefully said about Douglas, "even in foreign lands."

Considered only in terms of competitive personal ambition, he would go on to triumphs that would dwarf those of Stephen A. Douglas. Indeed, ironically, although in the 1850s Lincoln had profited from Douglas's fame, in the long stretch of history Douglas would profit from Lincoln's fame; Douglas would have a larger place in history than he would otherwise have had, because he had debated Abraham Lincoln.

But by the time Lincoln's name would become so widely known, and his triumphs over Douglas so clear, his personal ambition would have been swallowed up in the events for his nation "of highest consequence," as Roger Williams used to say. And Lincoln's moral depth would match the profound seriousness of the events with which it fell to him to deal.

Lincoln's rise to eminence, and the power that he held when he got there, did not corrupt him, but something like the reverse.

Edgar Lee Masters had one of his Spoon River characters warn against "the man who rose to the top from one suspender." Lincoln could have been like that — an arrogant and disdainful one to be warned against, because he rose to the top from a one-room dirt-floor cabin.

And Lord Acton notoriously said — indeed a cliché — that power tends to corrupt. Lincoln could have been an epitome of that famous warning, for as War President he held and exercised power far beyond that of previous presidents — enough to generate in one older branch of Lincoln criticism a little sub theme about his being a "dictator."

Put those two together and you could have had a moral monster: an ambitious man, arrogant because he had made his way, as others had not, from darkest obscurity to the supreme position, and ruthless because he held in his hands the war power of a great nation in a Civil War. But that did not happen. His ego was not stoked and enlarged by his rise from nowhere all the way to high position, or by the immense power he then held in his hands.

On the contrary. The higher he went and the greater his power the worthier his conduct became — something like the opposite of Lord Acton's dictum.

As he would write, in one of his great sentences when he was president, "what I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing," so he would be aware that what he dealt with was too vast for merely personal ambition.

The story of his life, morally considered, is the increasing development of his original worthiness, corresponding to the increasing "vastness" of the political field with which he acted.

It is a cliché, and a somewhat misleading one, to say that he

“grew.” Plants and animals and human beings grow without effort or thought; suddenly in one’s middle teens one shoots up to six-foot four. But Lincoln’s important changes came by his own intent, through thinking. This Lincoln was a *learner*. He was in particular a *moral learner*. He learned what it took for his ambition to serve his virtue: it took subordination to a worthy end, and self-restraining generosity in seeking it.

The materials for these worthy developments had been present in the Young Lincoln. It is not true that Lincoln even as a young politician was characteristically unfair, or had that reputation.

In the case, for example, of Thomas, whom Lincoln “skinned” with his mimicry, Herndon notes that “the whole thing was...unlike Lincoln” and that Lincoln himself recognized that his mimicry and ridicule (reducing his adversary to tears!) had gone too far. Herndon said that “his conduct that evening filled him with deepest chagrin” and that he “hunted up” Thomas to make “ample apology” — showing himself, having made his mistake, to be, in Herndon’s old-fashioned word, “manly” in admitting it and making amends.

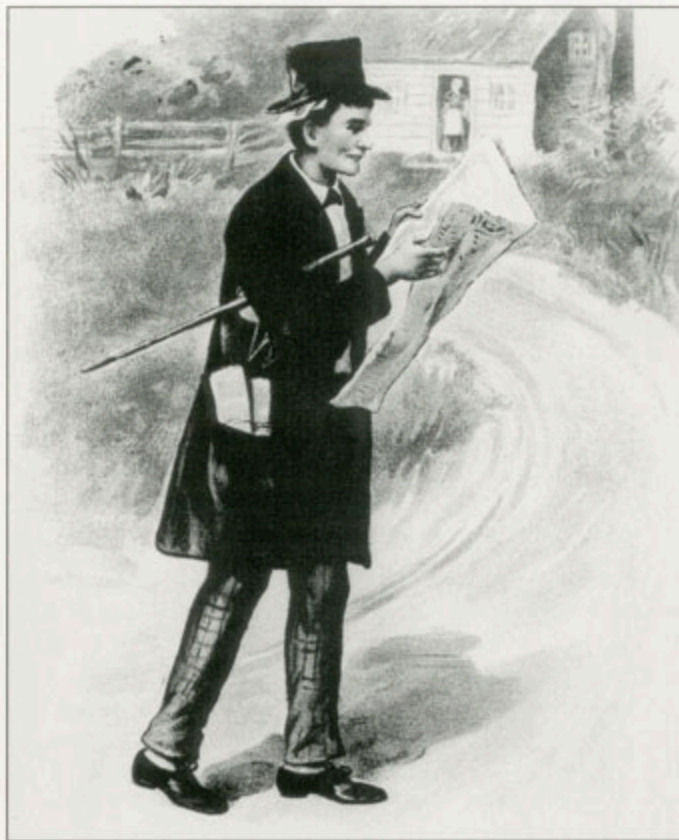
After the enlargement of his purpose in 1854, even though the stakes were higher and the conflict fiercer, Lincoln was more disciplined in his civility, his generosity.

Don Fehrenbacher, in the leading study of this prelude-to-greatness period 1854 - 1860, put it gracefully: Lincoln’s ambition in that effort was “notably free of pettiness, malice, and overindulgence.”

And then to read in bulk the words and deeds of the Presidential Lincoln is to realize again how explicit and continual are his resolves to plant no thorns, to hold no grudges, to engage in no malicious dealing, to undertake no revenge, to pardon and forgive, to treat the world with malice toward none and with charity for all. He would, as a mature politician, show a rare generosity. And he would also subordinate his ambition to a worthy end.

Clear back in his first offering of himself to the “People of Sangamon County” as a candidate for representative he stated — rather touchingly, at age twenty-three, penniless, uneducated, unknown, a total novice — his personal ambition, in its respectable subordination: “I have no other [ambition] so great,” he wrote, at the end of his long announcement, “as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, *by rendering myself worthy of their esteem.*” Notice the last phrase: The esteem that is sought was properly subordinated to the worthiness of its foundation.

It is not every ambitious forty-six year old politician, who when he almost has in his hand the highest desire of his heart, to be chosen a United States Senator, having 45 votes in a legislature of 100 votes, the most of anyone, would then as the balloting proceeded, tell his supporters to shift their votes to another who initially had only 5, in order that his cause (the anti-slavery cause) might win, even though he himself might now have missed his last chance at high office. As Lincoln did in 1855. One of his supporters would put it: “this I think shows that Mr. Lincoln was capable of sinking himself for the cause in which he was engaged.”



“Lincoln The Postmaster” by Lloyd Ostendorf (TLM #324)

Now let us return to that fragment on Stephen Douglas and me. It included some last sentences that I have not yet quoted. After writing that he was a flat failure and Douglas a splendid success, Lincoln wrote: “I affect no contempt for the high eminence he [Douglas] has reached.”

He is not going to do, what we sometimes do in our jealousy — to deny the importance of that which the envied one has attained — it really isn’t anything to be this, to be that, I really don’t care — no, Lincoln in this revealing little note is not going to deny how much he himself would like to be, what Douglas is: *a United States Senator*, the most eminent among United States Senators.

But now he states his own relationship to the high eminence Douglas has attained: “So reached, that the oppressed of my species, might have shared with me in the elevation. I would rather stand on that eminence, than wear the richest crown that ever pressed a monarch’s brow.” He would rather stand on that eminence than be a king — but wait. There is a condition attached: “So reached that the oppressed of my species, might have shared with me in the elevation.”

Well, now, that is rather a far-reaching restriction. It is interesting that even in a private musing Lincoln would make such a requirement, and that he would state it in that way. We catch a glimpse of the maturing of Lincoln’s life purposes.

The time would come when Lincoln would reach an eminence higher even than United States Senator — and higher than that of

Douglas — and, indeed, by defeating Douglas. But by the time that happened events would have brought issues so vast as to dwarf their individual ambitions. Lincoln would be the only President-elect of this country who would see the country of which he was to be President begin to fall apart immediately upon his election, and who would spend every day of his presidency holding it together, and be shot by a countryman in the moment of success.

But his reaching that eminence would indeed be such that the “oppressed of his species” (as he rather curiously put it) would share with him in the elevation.

And then he would belong to the ages. I think it would be widely agreed that the distinctive element in Lincoln’s immense reputation, and in the affection in which he is held, arise, in the end, not only from his remarkable ascent from the actual log cabin to the actual White House, and his deeds and accomplishments when he got there (his being the Great Emancipator, Savior of the Union) but also from certain virtues that were displayed in accomplishing that rise and bringing about these accomplishments. He was not merely a “great” man as Napoleon, Caesar and Alexander, or Churchill and Roosevelt (or a great person such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, Catherine the Great, Queen Elizabeth I) and maybe even Hitler and Stalin were “great” in the magnitude of the impact of their deeds, and in certain high-level, non-moral skills that magnified that impact. Lincoln was that much rarer bird, a great man who became also, while becoming great, a good man.



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Notes

- ¹ *Herndon’s Informants*, Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis, Editors, 107.
- ² With the exception of the haystack from Lord Charnwood, all of Lincoln’s reading postures quoted here come from *Herndon’s Informants*: from Caleb Carivan, p. 430; from Harriet Chapman, p. 407 and p. 512; from William Greene, p. 142; and from Dennis Hanks, p. 41.
- ³ Louis Warren, *Lincoln’s Parentage and Childhood*, p. 164
- ⁴ Herndon, *Life of Lincoln*, pp. 2–3
- ⁵ Douglas Wilson, *Honor’s Voice*, page 241; *Herndon’s Informants* page 197.
- ⁶ “His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest.” Herndon, p. 304. The indefatigable Lincoln researcher Michael Burlingame has assembled a whole chapter swarming with quotations from Lincoln and from others attesting to his ambition. Michael Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, Chapter 8
- ⁷ Comments on “The Chronicles of Reuben” from Donald, *Lincoln*, p.35; Herndon, *Life of Lincoln*, p. 48; Reinhold H. Luthin, *The Real Abraham Lincoln*, page 14; Robert Bray, “The Power To Hurt,” p. 41 *JALA* Vol. 16, no.1 , (winter 1995).
- ⁸ There is a close analysis of this episode in Wilson, *Honor’s Voice*, pages 298-301.
- ⁹ Douglas Wilson has shown, by carefully reconstructing the chronology, that there probably was no act of gallantry involved—Lincoln taking the blame for all the letters, including ones Mary Todd and Julia Jayne had written, when he himself had written only one of them.
- ¹⁰ Herndon, *Life of Lincoln*, p. 159.
- ¹¹ The editors of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Roy P. Bassler, guess the date of this item to be December, 1856, because Lincoln says “twenty-two years ago” and elsewhere says that he first met Douglas at the Illinois General Assembly in December, 1834. But one would have thought that Lincoln would have been more likely to have written it in the year 1855, a down year after he was defeated in his bid for the Senate and treated with contempt in Cincinnati by Stanton and others; in 1856, with his central role in forming the Illinois Republican Party, his 110 votes for the Vice-Presidential nomination, and his emerging role as the leading Republican in the state, his fortunes improved. But our secret personal emotions do not always correlate perfectly with objective conditions. We do not know exactly when he wrote it.