

The Lincoln Legend¹

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In his oration on those Athenians who died in the first year of the Peloponnesian War, Pericles, according to Thucydides, led the thoughts of his audience from the sepulchre where lay the remains of the dead to the memory of them in the minds of men all over the world. This memory, he said, rather than the place of their burial, was their true sepulchre:

The sacrifice which they made is repaid to them; for they have received again each one for himself a praise which grows not old, and the noblest of all sepulchres—I speak not of that in which their remains are laid, but of that in which their glory survives, and is proclaimed always and on every fitting occasion both in word and deed. For the whole earth is the sepulchre of famous men; not only are they commemorated by columns and inscriptions in their own country, but in foreign lands there dwells also an unwritten memorial of them, graven not on stone but in the hearts of men.²

Of no man can it more truthfully be said than of Abraham Lincoln that not only in his own land, but in foreign lands, there dwells an unwritten memorial, graven in the hearts of men. Many are the monuments and statues which have commemorated him: at the place of his birth at Hodgenville, Kentucky; at this, his boyhood home; at Washington, where he carried the burden of a nation in civil war; and at Springfield, Illinois, the home of his maturity and the resting place of his mortal remains; in Fort Wayne and Wabash in our own state, in Louisville, in Cincinnati, in Chicago, in San Francisco, in Boston, in Detroit, in New York, in Brooklyn, in Buffalo, in Philadelphia, in Manchester and London, England, in Edinburgh, Scotland, and in countless other places. More numerous still are the books and pamphlets which have been written about him. In the Illinois State Historical Library, there is a Lincoln room in which more than 4,000 such items are catalogued. A weekly periodical, *Lincoln Lore*, is devoted wholly to him. The Abraham Lincoln Association is compiling a series of volumes entitled *Lincoln Day By Day*, in which it seeks to list his whereabouts and his activities every day during certain years of his life at Springfield. But more impressive than

¹ An address delivered at the annual memorial services of the Spencer County Historical Society at Nancy Hanks Lincoln Park, Lincoln City, Indiana, on May 28, 1933.

² Thucydides, II, 43.

all this array of stone and bronze and literature, is the unwritten memorial of him graven in the hearts of men.

He is known to those to whom the written word is a sealed book and to those who have never beheld any monument or statue of him. Not only the negroes redeemed from slavery, and their children, but the poor and oppressed of all lands carry his homely image in their hearts as a symbol of sympathy and encouragement. The rich and the powerful feel the sheer greatness of his character, unpretentious though he was and utterly alien to all pomp and circumstance. Statesmen call upon him as the sanction of their purposes and the pattern of their careers. The learned, also, look on him with unwonted reverence. The most authoritative historian of the Civil War period writes: "His truthfulness, honesty and self-abnegation make better men of the students of his words and deeds and we all experience a moral uplifting in the contemplation of his character."³

Thus Abraham Lincoln has become not merely a historical figure, recorded in the annals of the United States, but a universal hero. He has entered the realm of mythology, where the same mysterious workings of the human mind, which in olden times created the dim outlines of heroes and demigods, have made him a portent and an omen for the modern world. He has come to be the incarnation of a great human experience, the manifestation of a supreme power which exalts the lowly and strikes down the proud, the protagonist of the common man rising to his height as ruler and master of the world. As the Greek Prometheus was said to have brought down for the use of men fire from heaven, so this Prometheus of the valley of the Ohio and the prairies of Illinois has been made to kindle in the hearts of men the spark of a new destiny. His biography is not merely a narrative of facts and deeds; it is a legend of *the past which has become the symbol of a new world.*

The Lincoln legend, as it "dwells in the hearts of men" is molded into a pattern something like this: He sprang from an obscure ancestry, was born of poor, ignorant and illiterate parents" not much above the very bottom of existence in the pioneer settlements,"⁴ and grew to manhood among crude and backward associates. Some mysterious power, however, prevented him from succumbing to the inertness of his heredity

³ James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* (New York, 1904), II, 143.

⁴ John F. Morse, Jr., *Abraham Lincoln* (Boston, 1889), I, 10.

and the influence of his environment. He was the utmost contrast to both. Throughout his life he devoted himself ceaselessly to the pursuit of knowledge, justice, and the redress of wrong. His rugged honesty, his limitless sympathy and his prophetic insight finally won national recognition and election to the presidency. He conducted the great Civil War to redress the wrong of negro slavery and, just as the war was won, he died a martyr in the cause of the freedom of the oppressed. Poor heredity, adverse environment in his youth, and the iniquitous politics he confronted in his maturity were the foils against which his unique greatness and goodness shone. His homely face and gaunt figure were the very symbols of the eternal struggle of the lowly for existence and for justice.

The student of history is familiar with the process by which the real Lincoln and the circumstances of his life developed into this legend. Memory is an automatically selective process; some things stay in our minds, and some things disappear from them. For the most part it is the salient, striking outlines which remain. These become, by elimination and by repetition, exaggerated in their proportions. On the earth's surface, as valleys and hills and mountains are formed, the process of erosion leaves rock crags and hilltops and mountains as outstanding features of the landscape. So in the speech and the writing of generation after generation, great men are left alone as the landmarks of history. They are stripped of their actual surroundings and of their minor qualities. They become the personification of the great movements of their time, mountain peaks with bold outlines against an empty sky.

Generally speaking, love of truth is an acquired trait. Most young children do not show any signs of it. Many never develop that eagerness to know the truth, that supreme devotion to the effort to see things as they really are which is the foundation of science and of history. Most men want to hear and to read that which pleases them; they like to tell that which interests their audiences. An early church father, glorifying his faith, exclaimed of a reported miracle: "Other men may not believe it, because it is improbable; I believe it because it is improbable." So the legend, starting about one man among many, and about one circumstance out of thousands, takes shape according to the inclination of those who cherish it.

Abraham Lincoln, and the circumstances of his life, fur-

nished material which readily lends itself to the molding influence of hero worship. The widest appeal of the Lincoln legend lies in the contrast between the lowliness of his origin and the power and triumph to which he attained. Naturally, his origin has become described as lowlier and lowlier until, inevitably, he is pictured as growing up in the depths of poverty in the midst of ignorant and shiftless people. His unaccountable greatness, on the other hand, has been exalted until he could scarce recognize himself in the picture legend has made of him. His first important biographer began the process.⁵ He admired, he almost worshipped Lincoln. He tried it seems, to tell the truth about him, but the mythological tendency was strong within him and he cast his material in a mold which magnified the genius of the mature Lincoln at the expense of his family and of his associates, until the only explanation of his greatness the reader could make was that a mysterious, divine inspiration possessed him.

The character and career of Abraham Lincoln as seen in the light of sixty and more years of historical study are quite different from the picture thus drawn. His ancestry on his father's side has been traced back through seven generations of sturdy, forward-looking American Lincolns, every one occupying a respectable position in his community. The most distinctive feature of the family was that it kept moving with the frontier—it was one of the families which made the United States a continental power by the development of new lands. His mother's ancestry was more uneven, but she was of good pioneer stock. Possibly she may have been of illegitimate birth, but her own character and conduct were above reproach. Scandal mongers and ransackers of political garbage have been busy, but they have found only the invention of their own malignant imaginations. Nancy Hanks Lincoln will stand forever as the finest type of motherhood in our pioneer days. The lonely grave on the hilltop beneath the oaks where her remains lie side by side with those of other women who succumbed to the sickness which ravaged this wilderness settlement, is a memorial of a life as pure and as beneficent as that of any mother to whom a great man owed his origin.

The boy, Lincoln, grew up in a family which was never in actual want and which always had property. He suffered the usual privations of pioneer life, remote from the wealth and

⁵ William H. Herndon.

the accumulated advantages of long developed lands. But his family and his neighbors were working upward toward those advantages. The atmosphere was that of progress. Within the circle of Lincoln's acquaintance were leaders in the march of the democracy in which America glories. The popular Lincoln legend, which has been reiterated by prominent historians, with its emphasis upon the unfavorable environment of his early years, is a distortion of his life. It is an injustice as well to a whole group of people to whom the world owes gratitude for their contribution to the development of Lincoln's character and talents.

Lincoln himself knew the calibre of his early associates. In the very first days of the War, in calling for four additional regiments, he wrote "Probably they should come from the triangular region between the Ohio and Wabash rivers, including my own old boyhood home."⁶ The study of Lincoln's own life and the study of the four generations of people who have lived in southwestern Indiana alike show that the fourteen years he spent in this neighborhood aided him in the path of leadership and achievement. His environment was one of helpfulness, not of adversity; it did not hold him back. It would not be the truth, but it would be nearer the truth to say that Abraham Lincoln became the man he was because of his dwelling here, than it would be to say that he achieved greatness in spite of the conditions under which he lived here. He not only shared the life of his neighbors, but their qualities as well. He was different from them only in his superiority of intellectual and spiritual power.

We cannot ignore the fact that the life of Indiana pioneers in the early nineteenth century involved dangers and hardships. A well known genealogical work, commenting on the first winter of the Lincoln family in Indiana, in a half-faced log cabin, softened the picture by speaking of the mild climate of Spencer County and left the impression that such an exposed dwelling was not uncomfortable or even unpleasant.⁷ The diary of an Ohio River steamboat captain for that winter, however, records temperature below zero on the river near

⁶ Lincoln to the Secretary of War, Washington, June 17, 1861, in John G. Nicolay and John Hay (editors), *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1905), VI, 291-292. This letter is printed in *fac simile* in *Indiana Historical Society Publications*, VIII (Indianapolis, 1925), 3.

⁷ James Henry Lea and J. R. Hutchinson, *The Ancestry of Abraham Lincoln* (Boston, 1909).

this place. Even the best of log cabins was an undesirable residence. All that can be said in its favor was that it was the only kind the pioneers of the Ohio Valley could possibly erect. There were trials and hardships aplenty for the Lincoln family, as well as for its neighbors, but the necessities of life were present and the environment was a spur to ambition, and an incentive to progress.

It is doubtful whether the multiplying of advantages, which more recent years have given us, compensate for the dulling of the eagerness to learn and ambition to lead others forward which developed in the youthful Lincoln, who had only about a year's formal schooling and who walked miles to get books. It almost seems that by the law of diminishing returns improvement of educational facilities and increase in the ease and comfort of life deaden the eagerness for knowledge and the desire for mastery which are the only basis of education. In the case of Lincoln, the balance between opportunity and desire was such that it gave the greatest possible impetus to the development of his character and ability.

In tracing the outlines of Lincoln's career, we pass to Springfield, Illinois. Here the full grown man earned his living by the practice of law and found his chief interest in politics. As a lawyer, he was not a constant and profound student. He worked not so much on the plane of the principles of the prevailing legal system, nor of precedent, as on the particular facts in the case in which he engaged. He became one of the leading lawyers of central Illinois. His reputation as a lawyer, however, was almost confined to this region. In an important case conducted by counsel of national reputation, he was slighted to the point of insult. As a politician, he was a leading member of the Whig organization in the capital of his state. His political work in his precinct and ward and state was rewarded by one term in Congress. He sought federal appointments, but not receiving the ones he wanted he declined others.

Often disappointed with himself and his career, sometimes to the point of black melancholy, he was nevertheless accounted one of the most successful, one of the leading citizens of his section. He accumulated property and was able to send his oldest son to Harvard College for the completion of his edu-

cation, something not so common in those days in that part of the country as it now is.

When the extension of slavery became an acute question, it found Lincoln's party disorganized, divided and almost moribund. A new party, opposed to the admission of slavery into new territories, but not committed to its abolition in the states where it was already established, was talked of, and its organization begun. Far from being its leader, Lincoln at first held back. It was only when violent opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act had already assumed proportions which definitely assured the new Republican party the support of most of the northern Whigs and many of the Democrats, that he became one of its sponsors. Far from seeing the end from the beginning, he slowly worked his way to the center of the problem. He was as far as he could possibly be from the little group of crusaders whose lives were spent in agitation against slavery as wrong in principle and inhuman in practice. Only later, under the pressure of events and the responsibilities of government did he come to the program of abolition.

It was his intensive training in Illinois politics, as well as his reasoned convictions, which between 1854 and 1860 put him into the place of the logical leader of the Republican party. His marvelous ability to gauge public sentiment, his mastery of the essentials of political organization, the sureness of his judgment, made him the one man capable of crystallizing into action the confused opinions and fictions of the time. The fact that he did this was not so apparent at the time, even to his associates and to his most ardent supporters, as it is to us today. Had he been a crusader against slavery, he could never have been nominated for the presidency; had he been nominated, he would have been defeated; had he become president, the attempt to restore the southern states to the Union would have been foredoomed to failure from the first. The explanation of his success, the most striking element of his genius, was the accuracy of his knowledge of public opinion. His force of character, his intellectual grasp of problems, his power of perfect expression made him a leader; his sure judgment of his associates and of people generally made him a successful leader.

In his debates with Stephen A. Douglas, he made the most of the break between Douglas and the administration. He

tried to fasten on his opponent the stigma of opening the northern territories to slavery while at the same time he took advantage of the opposition of the proslavery Democrats to Douglas on account of his denunciation of the effort to force slavery upon Kansas. Lincoln himself at times during the debates was on the defensive because in his "House Divided" speech at the opening of the campaign he had gone beyond public opinion in hinting at the ultimate extinction of slavery. He was greatly concerned to show that he was not an anti-slavery radical; that he tried only to prove that there was a legitimate place under the constitution for the half-way measure of keeping slavery out of the territories. Only incidentally, almost casually, did he allude to the ideal of an organization of society in which every man should enjoy the results of his own labor.

In spite of the opposition of the national administration, Douglas won the election, but his own party made his position of 1858 untenable in 1860. Lincoln's position, difficult as it was to maintain in 1858, was chosen not only as his solution of the crisis precipitated by the Kansas-Nebraska trouble and the Dred Scott decision, but as the strategic rallying point of public opinion in the north. His strength lay not less in his judgement of the latter than of the former.

After his nomination and election as President came the crisis of secession. Again he proved his marvellous command of the currents of popular opinion in standing firm against any compromise which would extend slavery and in holding the border states, save Virginia, in support of the Union. Then and later, when the magnitude of the Civil War became apparent, he spoke of slavery in the southern states in language strangely reminiscent of Douglas in 1858. He would not attack slavery there if such an attack would make it more difficult to restore the Union, but save the Union he would, with or without slavery. Douglas, however, in 1858 would have preserved the Union by yielding ground, not beyond a certain limit it is true, to a minority and to a disruptive force. Lincoln in 1861 and 1862 would save the Union as a national government expressive of the will of the whole people.

He finally took action against slavery in the seceded states. His action then was based, not so much on principle, as on his judgement of public opinion. It was not an end in itself, but

only the means to the larger end of national unity under the rule of the majority. The Emancipation Proclamation, by its very terms, applied only to those parts of the country still in the possession of the Confederates; generally speaking, only to those regions where it could not at the time be enforced. Public sentiment then supported it; its influence was as timely as it was powerful, not only in this country, but also in England.

Lincoln believed that secession and the Civil War involved more than slavery; that they involved the existence, even the possibility, of democracy. If the majority of the people could not enforce its law upon a minority, however powerful, "government of the people, by the people, for the people" could not endure. It was as the prophet and the statesman of democratic nationalism, rather than as an emancipator or as an inspired hero of social justice, that he became the "first American."

Both Lincoln's political principles and his unequalled ability to apply them to each crisis in the measure that public opinion could be brought to their support were the result of his experiences and his associations in Indiana and Illinois. His democratic nationalism he absorbed here in Spencer County and over in Sangamon County. His sensitive accuracy in gauging public opinion came from his intimate contact with the boys and the men of his neighborhood. He was not the abstract genius that legend has made him, aloof from the crowd and distinguished from it by an unique divine endowment. He was in every sense one of the people, one of the people of the pioneer west of the first half of the nineteenth century. Every quality he had he shared with friends and models of his boyhood. His environment emphasized human equality, ambition, nationalism, shrewdness and native wit.

Legend says, and not a few biographers have patterned their work upon it: See from what unfavorable surroundings the great man arose; see how inexplicably great he was in the contrast he presents to his family and his environment! We can say with much more truthfulness: See what qualities the pioneers of the Middle West possessed, see the product of American ancestors and the Old Northwest! If we lessen the contrast which legend draws between an adverse environment and a supreme achievement, we do not lessen the greatness of

Abraham Lincoln. If we draw the picture of a man who developed gradually under the influence of an invigorating environment and a democratic frontier, a man who joined in movements rather than creating them, we disclose his power of seeing far more clearly than his neighbors into the heart and the meaning of those movements. He towered above his fellows, but he never ceased to be one of them.

The people who lived here in his boyhood, our own forefathers, cannot be represented as the uncouth, unpromising figures of the Lincoln legend, standing for the depths from which he rose. They were the sturdy, capable builders of American democracy. They leveled the wilderness, they tilled the land, they mastered the mighty rivers,⁸ they built a new world in the heart of the continent. These plains, hills and valleys, whose primeval forests Lincoln helped to fell, are not alone reminders of his early hardships, they are the more pleasant to look upon because they nurtured the greatness which the world afterwards saw in him.

⁸ Stephen Beck Hanks, first cousin of Abraham Lincoln, was one of the most famous of Mississippi River pilots.