
BOOKS

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BOOKS

A literary portrait of Lincoln
by his law partner, plus a
novel about the president.

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ISTOCK (ANATOMY); EVERETT COLLECTION (BOOKS)

Abraham Lincoln and Friends

Herndon on Lincoln: Letters

Edited by Douglas L. Wilson and
Rodney O. Davis

Illinois, 371 pages, \$35

A Friend of Mr. Lincoln

By Stephen Harrigan

Knopf, 415 pages, \$27.95

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S longtime law partner, William H. ("Billy") Herndon, claimed to know Lincoln more intimately than anyone else. "Lincoln to the world is a profound mystery—an enigma—a sphinx—a riddle," Herndon wrote. "And yet I think that I knew the man." Lincoln, for his part, declared that Herndon "was my man always above all other men on the globe." Herndon, who would write a pioneering biography of the president, had a front-row seat during Lincoln's formative period, from 1844 to 1860, when Lincoln rose from lawyer to congressman to America's 16th president. Not only did Herndon work closely in a Springfield, Ill., law office with Lincoln, but just after the president's death he interviewed scores of people who had known the president either as a child in Kentucky or as a youth in Indiana or as a man in Illinois. Herndon's interviews yielded a trove of documents without which our knowledge of Lincoln's early development would be slim.

Long stored in the Library of Congress and other collections, these illuminating papers were published in 1997 as "Herndon's Informants," edited by the prominent Lincoln scholars Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis. Now Messrs. Wilson and Davis have produced another valuable vol-

ume, "Herndon on Lincoln," a collection of letters about Lincoln that Herndon wrote to fellow authors and to former friends or associates of the president. Although many of these letters appeared in Emanuel Hertz's "The Hidden Lincoln" (1938), Messrs. Wilson and Davis have found important new letters and have brought to bear editing skills that Hertz lacked. The result is an eye-opening look at many facets of Lincoln: his parents (the father illiterate, the mother from what Herndon calls "a lecherous family"); his pastimes (he loved playing chess and handball); his lax parenting style (he was "a tool or a slave" to his young boys, letting them run wild in the law office); and his predictions (he

Lincoln loved chess, chewed apples from the top down and let his boys run wild in the law office.

foresaw his assassination, saying more than once, "Billy, I feel as if I shall meet with some terrible end").

Herndon retrieved Lincoln from the mists of hagiography that enveloped him after he was assassinated in Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865. While conventional biographers created an icon, Herndon sought the man. He reported that Lincoln chewed apples from the top down, ate whatever was served to him without comment, rarely praised or criticized anyone, and took mercury-based "blue mass" pills for chronic constipation (he reportedly averaged just one bowel movement a week).

Herndon's investigations reached some dead ends. He pursued a rumor

that Thomas Lincoln, the president's father, had been castrated either before or during his marriage and that Abraham Lincoln was actually sired by one Abraham Enloe. Although this story has never been substantiated, another of Herndon's findings—that Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks, was illegitimate—is now widely accepted.

Other Herndon claims are impossible to verify. Did Lincoln, whose "passion for women," Herndon tells us, was "terrible" in its intensity, contract

One can see from his letters why Herndon was such a controversial figure in his day. In a public letter, he noted that he had been called "a knave, a liar and a drunkard" who deserved to be in "the lunatic asylum, well chained." A year after Lincoln's death, just as the murdered president was rising to sainthood in the popular imagination, Herndon shocked the nation by revealing that Lincoln had always loved Ann Rutledge, a flame from his younger days, even during his 23-year

which, in Herndon's telling, he never fully emerged. For Herndon, Lincoln's marriage seven years later to the Kentucky socialite Mary Todd was purely a "policy marriage" between an ambitious man and an equally ambitious woman whose contrasting temperaments caused endless misery for both. The marriage, Herndon wrote, was "a domestic hell" that was "caused by Mrs. Lincoln's cognition that Lincoln did not love her and did love another."

In his letters to his Lincoln co-biographer, Jesse W. Weik, Herndon veers between savage indictment of Mary Todd Lincoln (he calls her "gross," "avaricious," "mean" and "imperious") and apologia ("I have always sympathized with Mrs. Lincoln. . . . [She] was not a she wolf—wild cat without a cause"). A more positive picture of Lincoln's wife has appeared in modern biographies, such as Jean H. Baker's "Mary Todd Lincoln" (1987) and Catherine Clinton's "Mrs. Lincoln" (2009). As for Ann Rutledge, the jury is still out. Many Lincoln specialists believe that Lincoln loved Ann but that they were never formally engaged. There's slender evidence—a memory he allegedly shared in 1860 with an old Illinois friend, Isaac Cogdal—that he recalled her fondly decades after her death, but Herndon's idea that Lincoln was long plagued by a morbid obsession with her is highly improbable.

More suggestive are Herndon's remarks about Lincoln's religious views. Americans were outraged when Herndon, in a widely reprinted 1873 lecture, announced that Lincoln died "an unbeliever in Christianity . . . an infidel"—a point he amplified in a magazine piece in 1882, in which he called Lincoln "an out-and-out Agnostic" who "bordered on atheism." Herndon pointed out that Lincoln, while religious in his own

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GRANGER, NYC / THE GRANGER COLLECTION

CORNER BAR A view of Springfield, Ill., ca. 1850. Lincoln and Herndon's office was in a building at back right, at the intersection of Adams and Sixth Streets.

syphilis from an Illinois prostitute when he was 25? Did Lincoln's lifelong melancholy stem from shame over his lowly origins? Was the suicidal depression he experienced around the time of his marriage to Mary Todd linked to his infatuation with another woman? In his letters, Herndon offers scraps of evidence related to these and other lacunae.

marriage. The intelligent, comely Ann, so Herndon's story went, had been engaged to another man, John MacNamar, who had once left Illinois on a visit to New York. During MacNamar's absence, Lincoln made advances; Ann reciprocated. She promised to break it off with MacNamar and wed Lincoln, but she died suddenly of typhoid. Lincoln sank to depths of gloom from

Lincoln's Partner

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way, never joined a church, rejected all creeds and did not consider the Bible divinely inspired. (The first two points are accurate; the latter is subject to debate.) From this vantage point, Lincoln's conviction that no single religion or philosophy held all the answers produced a unique compassion that lay behind his announcements of malice toward none and charity for all.

Herndon's letters are moving reminders that Lincoln, whom Tolstoy called "the only real giant" among statesmen, achieved greatness precisely because he was principled while possessing the wisdom of uncertainty. This uncertainty provides much of the drama of Stephen Harrigan's engaging novel "A Friend of Mr. Lincoln." The author of previous historical novels, Mr. Harrigan in his new book conjures up a fictional friend for the Lincoln of the early Illinois years. The friend, Cage Weatherby, is a businessman and poet who has left his native New England and moved to Illinois, where he sees Lincoln in various roles: as militia captain, storekeeper, postmaster, surveyor, lawyer and state politician. Cage witnesses Lincoln bravely collecting body parts after a Black Hawk War battle, weeping uncontrollably over the lost Ann Rutledge, lambasting political opponents, visiting a prostitute and lapsing into temporary insanity because of doubts over the charismatic but erratic Mary Todd.

Deftly interweaving fictional and fact-based episodes, Mr. Harrigan sustains a brisk narrative filled with adventure, romance, sex and political high jinks. The Lincoln he limns, based on reliable biographies like Douglas O. Wilson's "Honor's Voice" (1998) and Richard Lawrence Miller's "Lincoln and His World" (2006), is close to life. Long-limbed and ungainly-looking in his ill-fitting clothes, Mr. Harrigan's Lincoln nonetheless has an innate grace and dignity. He mixes frontier slang with snippets from Byron and Shakespeare in his daily conversation. Driven by an ambition to make a mark on the world, Lincoln knows how to manipulate people to his advantage, though he never loses a sense of honor. It is honor, Mr. Harrigan shows, that leads Lincoln to marry Mary Todd once he has committed himself to her, despite his reservations.

Like the Lincoln of Herndon's letters, Mr. Harrigan's Lincoln is skeptical and temperamental. He has a sour view of organized religion and considers the Bible an agreeable fiction. He loathes slavery but avoids open abolitionism for fear of hurting his political prospects. He shifts between exuberant sociability and paralyzing despair. At one point, Cage and others remove knives and razors from his presence for fear that he will commit suicide. This dark side of Lincoln, sensitively portrayed in the novel, fits with the facts as we know them. During one particularly blue spell, in January 1841, Lincoln wrote to a friend: "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth."

Only at one point does Mr. Harrigan's portrait of Lincoln strike me as off the mark. He concocts a fictional episode in which Cage, defrauded in business, asks Lincoln for legal help only to meet cold rejection, since Lincoln feels obliged to represent Cage's opponent, who had approached Lincoln first. As a result, Cage distances himself from the future president. This conflict between the two leaves the reader with the impression that Lincoln was a stiff pragmatist with a devotion to legal forms to the exclusion of personal or ethical considerations. Actually, several of Lincoln's contemporaries reported that he strongly preferred to represent plaintiffs whose cases seemed just to him.

More in the spirit of Lincoln, then, is an imagined courtroom scene in Mr. Harrigan's novel in which Lincoln defends Cordelia, a runaway slave who is under threat of being returned to her owner. Through smart, passionate argumentation, Lincoln wins Cordelia's freedom—an exhilarating, if fictional, *Lincolnesque* victory.

Taken together, Mr. Harrigan's novel and Herndon's letters bring us closer than ever to the human Abraham Lincoln—struggling, reflective, fundamentally noble and so much more appealing than the pasteboard deity of popular myth.

Mr. Reynolds is a distinguished professor at the CUNY Graduate Center. His most recent book is "Lincoln's Selected Writings: A Norton Critical Edition."