Review

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Although it cannot actually be counted as a crime against humanity, it is nevertheless true that Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis ruined the Christmas season for my family in 1997. This was because *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln*—their 864-page edition of interviews and letters William Henry Herndon had collected as the self-appointed Boswell of his one-time law partner, Abraham Lincoln, arrived in the mail a month after its publication that November. It absorbed me so thoroughly that, to admit a frank truth, it practically subtracted me from the Christmas celebrations in which I was supposed be the paterfamilias. I was instead the *nulla scholar*, sucking up the contents of *Herndon’s Informants* for what would, in another eighteen months’ time, become *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*. I was a bit smug that *Redeemer President* got to be the first Lincoln biography to use Wilson and Davis’s anthology.¹ The opinion of my wife, son, and daughters may, to this day, be understandably different.

It was not that the material in *Herndon’s Informants* was exactly unknown territory. I had used Herndon’s sprawling Lincoln Record through a microfilm of the Huntington Library’s copy (made from the record originally used by Ward Hill Lamon); and what was more, Wilson and Davis had actually been preceded by several decades in producing a printed edition of selections from the Record by Emmanuel Hertz in *The Hidden Lincoln*.² Hertz has been almost entirely forgotten in Lincoln circles today, but in the 1930s, the Austrian-born New York lawyer (and brother of the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom) was one of the most ambitious Lincoln collectors in the United States and


the author of the two-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A New Portrait*. His connection to the Herndon Record came through the legal work he did on behalf of the Jesse W. Weik estate. The jewel of that estate was Herndon’s own copy of the Record (which finally found its way to the Library of Congress as the core of the Herndon-Weik Collection), and that gave Hertz the opportunity to pour nearly 450 pages worth of Herndon’s letters and notes into *The Hidden Lincoln*.

*The Hidden Lincoln* was, for many of us, a convenient and stimulating way of meeting a Lincoln who looked very little like Carl Sandburg’s or Benjamin Thomas’s Lincoln. Nevertheless, anyone who had worked with the primary copies of the Record at either the Huntington or the Library of Congress soon noticed that Hertz’s transcriptions of Herndon’s materials were haphazard, clogged with middatings, and plagued by misidentifications. Those problems were not entirely Hertz’s fault, since Herndon’s orthography is well-nigh hieroglyphic even for the experienced Lincolnian, but the result was a number of howlers in Hertz’s texts (e.g., Joseph Gillespie’s rendering of Lincoln’s resentful summary of the influence of slaveholding on “thoughtless and giddy-headed young men” was originally based on Lincoln’s image of a show-off with “a darkey trudging at your heels”; this became, in Hertz’s transcription, “a donkey trudging at your heels”). And while James Garfield Randall was cruel to dismiss *The Hidden Lincoln* as “poorly selected and unskillfully edited,” anyone who was tempted to cite it for scholarly purposes learned to compare Hertz’s texts with the originals first.

*Herndon’s Informants* was not necessarily designed to replace Hertz. Wilson and Davis were mostly attracted to the vast bulk of informant interviews, depositions, and letter inquiries Herndon had conducted in 1865 and 1866 in Indiana and Illinois (and intermittently thereafter) and less with Herndon’s broader correspondence on Lincoln subjects. Hertz, on the other hand, was comparatively uninterested in Herndon’s interviews (he included only about fifty pages of them). He was drawn more to the correspondence Herndon conducted with Weik and some fifty others (from William Henry Seward to several whose identities defy tracking) about Lincoln biography, teeming with Herndon’s urge to correct every new Lincoln publication, large or small,

that appeared. As a result, there was actually a surprisingly small amount of overlap between the two volumes. Wilson and Davis then turned aside in 2006 to produce an edition of the Herndon-Weik Lincoln biography, *Herndon’s Lincoln*, which put in place a second piece of their project for restoring the visibility of Herndon’s labors, and an edition of the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 2008. (These volumes now collectively are restyled as the Knox College Lincoln Studies Center Series, in acknowledgement of the Illinois institution that had been the home of Wilson and Davis’s Lincoln labors.)

Between the interviews that made up the bulk of *Herndon’s Informants* and the correspondence that Hertz had transcribed for *The Hidden Lincoln*, however, there still remained substantial piles of Herndon letters on Lincolnian subjects that Hertz had had no room for or interest in—letters that passed into Jesse Weik’s hands after Herndon’s death in 1891. It is these Herndon letters, many of them unused or mistranscribed by Hertz, that Wilson and Davis have now given us as *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*.

The purpose of *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters* is threefold: to reintroduce in a corrected edition the Herndon end of correspondence materials published three-quarters of a century ago by Hertz, to transcribe and annotate them according to current scholarly standards, and above all to include new and unpublished materials (and delete some others used by Hertz—more on that in a moment). It is especially in the category of new and unpublished that Wilson and Davis have scored their most palpable hits, since *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters* will now open up items that did not appear in *The Hidden Lincoln* or have been difficult to access. They include gems too rich not to itemize in delicious detail:

- Herndon to Francis B. Carpenter, the artist who painted the epic *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation* and published the first insider peek at the Lincoln White House, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln*. On December 19, 1866, Herndon sent to Carpenter “a precious present”—Lincoln’s own copy of Lord Byron—“given to him by his bro-in-law, N[inian] W. Edwards, in 1839–40,” full of Lincoln’s own notes “and his own column of figures.” This, Herndon adds, was one of a “box ful of his books—mostly political—such as patent office Rep[orts]—Congressional Globes &c—, and among them some valuable literary works—Byron—Goldsmith—Locke—Gibbon

&c.” This is the closest we come to an inventory of Lincoln’s personal book ownership, and it is enough to make students of Lincoln’s reading and ideas feel giddy (57).

- Herndon to Theodore F. Dwight on December 30, 1866, confirming to Dwight (the son of the Theodore Dwight who published a savage Federalist attack on Thomas Jefferson in 1839) that Lincoln had read the father’s work and saying “it had a powerful impression on his mind, as it did on mine.” Whatever Lincoln might write to Henry Pierce in 1859 about Jefferson’s “principles” composing “the definitions and axioms of free society,” Lincoln despised the Jefferson who thought agriculture the only virtuous republican pursuit but owned slaves to do the actual agricultural work, and the Jefferson who used his slaves as sexual play-toys.6 “Mr. Lincoln never liked Jeffersons moral character after that reading” (65).

- Herndon to Jesse Weik on January 2, 1882, and January 12, 1886, ramping up his contempt for Mary Todd Lincoln as “an unbalanced woman,” whose husband “held his wife partly insane for years” and who “loved woman & slopt over when he had no wife whom he loved” (124, 197). What Herndon meant by slopt makes the imagination burble through the tulgey wood.

- Herndon to Isaac Arnold on October 24 and December 27, 1882, riding one of his favorite sawhorses: the interview Newton Bateman gave to Josiah G. Holland, claiming that Lincoln had confessed to Christian conversion, and warning Arnold not to be lured into embracing Bateman or Holland in the forthcoming update of Arnold’s 1866 Lincoln biography. “I was determined to rip this great lie up by the roots” (139).

- Herndon to the editors of various radical religious publications—the Liberal Age, the Truth-Seeker, the Religio-Philosophical Journal—cantankerously asserting Lincoln’s utter absence of conventional religious belief (133, 142–49, 173).

And there are even letters to Weik, offering him essays and notes for Herndon’s Lincoln, which Weik clearly did not want and which Herndon had to warn him not to “get huffy about” (241).

One of the blessings in Herndon on Lincoln: Letters is the editors’ decision to arrange the correspondence in simple chronological order, as dated by Herndon, from 1844 until 1890, and with end tags to

identify each original letter’s location, since not all are drawn from the Herndon-Weik collection at the Library of Congress. It almost goes without saying, from the meticulous devisers of *Herndon’s Informants*, that the transcriptions of Herndon’s letters appear (by my comparison with Hertz and the Library of Congress microfilm of the Herndon-Weik correspondence) accurate.

What is more perplexing, however, is the rubric the editors must have adopted concerning which materials to include and which not. The preface makes it clear that Wilson and Davis have *not* squeezed all of Herndon’s correspondence into this book, nor even all of his correspondence that at some point mentions Lincoln. They also have deliberately set aside Herndon’s notorious 1865–66 lectures on Lincoln “and other writing about Lincoln” for a second volume of Herndon on Lincoln. The letters that do appear have had to earn their place because “they are believed to convey, with few exceptions, something actually indicative about Abraham Lincoln, whether information, anecdote, opinion, or speculation” (ix). Certainly this rule narrows a job that might otherwise prove similar to trying to plug holes in the Johnstown dam, but it does result in the exclusion of letters Hertz did include in *The Hidden Lincoln*, and which do seem significant for exactly the purpose Wilson and Davis state. Why, for instance, did Wilson and Davis choose not to use

- Herndon’s letter to Ward Hill Lamon (February 24, 1869) on “the general lechery of the Hanks and Lincoln family” (*THL*, 59)?
- Herndon’s dismissal, to Jesse Weik on January 7, 1887, of Robert Todd Lincoln as “Bob’s a Todd, not a Lincoln; he’s a little man with good intentions probably,” but he “hates me because I tell the truth, have told the truth about his mother and father” (*THL*, 154–55)? Wilson and Davis also omit an unflattering letter Herndon wrote about Robert to Truman Bartlett in 1889 (*THL*, 244) and two letters to Henry Clay Whitney about David Davis in 1887 (*THL*, 200, 202).
- Herndon’s revelation to Weik on August 13, 1888, that he had originally yielded to an entreaty from Joshua Speed not to mention Lincoln’s passion for Sarah Rickards (*THL*, 216)?
- Herndon’s relation to Weik (December 1, 1888) of the story of Lincoln’s rescue of the family dog while crossing the Wabash in 1830 (*THL*, 227)?

It is also puzzling that Wilson and Davis chose not to use the entirety of Herndon’s January 22, 1887, letter to Weik (*THL*, 156–60), deleting
a paragraph in which Herndon applauds E. L. Godkin’s *The Nation* for “giving” Hay and Nicolay “a considerable lashing” for their *Century Magazine* Lincoln biographical articles, or a letter to Weik on September 27, 1888, in which Herndon actually defends Stephen A. Douglas from Hay and Nicolay’s charge that he was a “shyster” (223; *THL*, 218). Granted, no compilers are obligated to use every scrap of documentation that comes their way, especially in a single-volume anthology that makes no pretense to be any sort of “collected works,” but it is not entirely the case, either, that these letters (which Hertz included) fail to “concern Lincoln” or “impart information or opinion about Lincoln.” I will concede that a letter’s mere appearance in *The Hidden Lincoln* is not a stand-alone criterion for inclusion. Yet Wilson and Davis do not really present a clear editorial philosophy for what is, and isn’t, included in *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*.

This lack may not be nearly as serious as it sounds, especially as we watch scholarly editions of the writings of one American political, military, and literary figure after another sag under the dead weight of lifeless editorial essays and metastatic footnoting. Even so, Wilson and Davis may have erred too much on the side of sparseness in identifying correspondents and in citing secondary sources immediately pertinent to some of the materials. It would not have been unhelpful, for instance, to have seen more cross-referencing in *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters* with materials from *Herndon’s Informants*. Readers of Herndon’s letter to Weik of January 27, 1886, with the account of Stephen Whitehurst, should be directed to Herndon’s interview with Whitehurst in *Herndon’s Informants*, rather than just identifying Whitehurst as “a Springfield editor and politician.” Furthermore, it would certainly have been appropriate to have footnoted Herndon’s description of the Freeport Question (in a letter written to Weik on October 2, 1890) with a correction of Herndon’s notion that the Freeport Question was a sign that Lincoln was already playing for the presidency—an idea Herndon obtained not from Lincoln but from Isaac Arnold and Josiah Holland. As much as modest stillness and humility become a scholar, Douglas Wilson should really have allowed himself some reference to his marvelous article on Caroline Dall, in connection with Herndon’s correspondence with Dall.

These are arguments toward perfection, and it is well to remember that imperfection does not mean that this is not a sensationally good book, which no serious Lincolnite should lack within arm’s reach and

in which even semiserious (and unserious) Lincolnites will find great pleasure and learning. That great arbiter of Enlightenment literary taste, Samuel Johnson, once remarked, “They only who live with a man can write his life with any genuine exactness and discrimination; and few people who have lived with a man know what to remark about him.” Herndon certainly filled that bill, and nearly as well as Boswell did for Johnson.

There are 289 Herndon letters in this collection, and as we might expect, Mary Todd Lincoln features in no less than eighteen—in all of them badly. In fact, women in general suffer at Herndon’s hands, whether Herndon is talking about Sarah Rickards or Lincoln’s mother and grandmother (whom Herndon implies were whores). Lincoln’s religion, superstition, and fatalism figure in another twenty-seven, and Herndon’s quirky but admiring analyses of Lincoln’s character—his ambition, his shrewdness, his depression, his honesty, and his avarice—move through forty-three more. The Lincoln-Douglas campaign of 1858 appears in seven of the letters, along with bits of early Lincoln biography that include his early legislative terms in Vandalia, his first flatboat trip to New Orleans, the near-duel with James Shields, and the Manny reaper case. There is surprisingly little in these letters on Lincoln as a lawyer (only eight of them really speak in detail about Lincoln in court and on the circuit) or even his fabled storytelling. Also, Herndon has no good word to say about either Newton Bateman or Josiah Holland. There is much to learn, however, about Lincoln’s reading and thinking, his dreams and his sense of destiny. It is a wonderful collection, and my family is so grateful that, this time, it appeared a month after Christmas.