Scouring the Text of Lamon’s
Recollections

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Ward Hill Lamon’s Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, 1847–1865 remains a popular source for Lincoln biographers despite charges that he relied on “reading rather than experience.” Douglas L. Wilson points out that as Lincoln’s early partner, self-anointed bodyguard, and secret agent Lamon was “one of the few people in the president’s circle” with access to Lincoln’s inner life. Lamon’s modern editor Rodney Davis credits him with transforming Lincoln biography from romance to realism. But the Recollections as edited by his daughter Dorothy Teillard continues to worry specialists like Harold Holzer who in Lincoln President-Elect (2008) puzzles over Teillard’s inconsistencies.

The cause of confusion must be the mistaken belief that Lamon himself composed the Recollections with a focused, preconceived design. Yet it was his daughter who compiled it largely from the flotsam and jetsam of his papers now at the Huntington Library. She confused matters by claiming to include fragments of what the preface said was, “a serious manuscript . . . intended for a work of history.” This was assumed to be a sequel to the notorious 1872 Lincoln biography that bore Lamon’s name, though it was written entirely by his partner Chauncey Black, who was no friend of Lincoln’s.

By “serious manuscript” Teillard apparently alluded to a bound folio volume of 450 pages in the Huntington’s Lamon Papers. The binder’s title, “Administration of Lincoln,” applied to only the first two of the fourteen chapters. Rodney Davis has shown that those


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chapters written by Chauncey Black had been rejected as a conclusion to the 1872 biography. They were less history of Lincoln’s administration than praise for Buchanan’s.

About one-third of the Recollections derives from the bound volume along with miscellaneous material from the Lamon Papers—sketches, anecdotes, reviews, and scraps meant for the newspaper press.7 Antiquarian interest aside, comparing the handwritten and typed texts against the Recollections reveals sins of omission and commission that account for Lamon’s reputation as a plagiarist.

Life is too short to pursue Rodney Davis through the thicket of plagiarisms. One problem is that Lamon himself did cite as sources such popular books as Edward McPherson’s serial almanacs, Political History of the Rebellion,8 and Frederick Phisterer’s Statistical Record.9 In deleting such references from her book, Dorothy Teillard suppressed evidence that not all the plagiarism was his.

The bulk of the plagiarism in the Recollections ought to be charged to her. The third chapter of her book, a clear example, is silently patched together from several different speeches printed in the popular Congressional Globe. Her tenth chapter and the statistics on the war come silently from McPherson’s almanac and Phisterer’s book and so on ad absurdum. It is easiest to imagine that the editor did not know what she was editing.

Born in 1858, the only child of Lamon and his first wife who died after giving birth, Dorothy (Dolly) was raised by his sister while Lamon sallied forth pursuing the law, liquor, high life, and a Springfield heiress for second wife. In time Dolly, as an abandoned single parent, joined her father in Boulder, Colorado, where he had a gold mine, a real-estate office, and influence enough to secure her government appointment for almost a quarter-century as a government stenographer and typist in Washington, D.C.

Evidence in paper and penmanship suggests that she typed for him long distance whether he was in Colorado, New York, or Bohemia and took dictation back at the ancestral home in West Virginia until he died in 1893. The Lamon Papers show that the pair was busiest after 1881

7. The typed “Administration of Lincoln” Huntington acquisition numbers in parentheses are: typed text, LN 2418 A & B; manuscripts LN 2405 with suffixes 1 to 16; a draft of Chapter Six, LN 2428; letters to the press, LN 1229 and LN 2425. Gracious permission to publish comes from curator Mary Robertson.


when Lamon spread rumors that he was writing a new biography (LN 1229). The news frightened Lincoln’s friends enough for them to enlist secretaries Nicolay and Hay to write an authentic biography serially for *Century Magazine*. His proposals were no match for the competition. As his health deteriorated, Lamon offered the projected biography to Philadelphia publisher George Barrie for two hundred copies plus “a box of cigars.”

At his death the project was left to Dolly. By 1895 she had found a publisher for *Recollections*, A. C. McClurg of Chicago. After the book failed to sell, she reissued a second edition, in 1911 at her own expense, with an added fifty-five pages of notes, photos, and appendices. Even with favorable notice, that edition could not avoid Lamon’s infamy for the 1872 biography, though he had not written a word of it.

In editing the *Recollections*, Teillard gave it shape and style, as in dramatizing the scene in which Lincoln reacts to signing death warrants: “General, . . there are too many weeping widows in the United States. For God’ sake, don’t ask me to add to the number, for I tell you plainly, I won’t do it!” (103). She also dramatized the oft quoted scene in which Lincoln has a spiritual experience upon seeing himself in a mirror of beveled glass, adding Lamon’s reaction as cynic and Mary Lincoln’s role as Greek chorus.

Such improvements are sad compensation for sins of omission. A clear instance lies in the anecdote about how Lincoln died laughing at a pun in *Our American Cousin*. Lamon’s draft had prefaced it with a disclaimer that he had not been present (LN 2405.10). The first edition of the *Recollections* did not include the anecdote at all. The 1911 reissue printed it as an appendix but with no disclaimer (282–83).

The deadliest omission from the miscellaneous scraps is a remarkable passage in Lamon’s hand describing Lincoln pacing the floor, meditating on the divine will:

I have seen Mr Lincoln walk the floor and soliloquise, rather than address me or anyone present—muttering—something like this—I do wonder if our troubles will ever cease—when this fight over slavery or freedom is over—and the house that is divided against itself shall cease to be divided—[deleted: will the irrepressible conflict between the enduring forces?] will that be the end? (LN 2405.9)

10. Lamon to George Barrie, March 1, 1882; LN 2448.
This egregious omission hid a milestone in Lincoln’s progress to the Second Inaugural Address. Here, as elsewhere, is evidence that Dorothy Lamon Teillard did not understand her material.

Lamon himself appears to have been uncertain, too. This may be seen in the evolution of the well-known scene about singing at Antietam. The plot is about the visit when Lamon was supposed to have sung bawdy ballads on the bloodied battlefield. In manuscript rough-draft the story focuses on the public letter Lincoln wrote for Lamon’s signature denying the rumors. In the much longer typescript version the focus shifts to the highjinks of a marshal who remains unnamed. After the visitors’ wagon overturns, he refreshes their spirits by singing “Picayune Butler” and is properly rebuked for exuberance unbecoming a battlefield. “To make amends,” the story goes on, he sings “an original hymn by Dr. Watts”—“Come hungry, come thirsty, Come naked, come bare, Come filthy, come lousey, Come just as you are”—for which he “was in great danger of being thrown out of the wagon” until “restored to favor by Mr. Lincoln saying to him, ‘Now, sir, we want nothing more from you but silence and very little of that.’”

As printed in Recollections the final version is something new in a separate chapter. The highjinks are replaced by remarks on Lincoln’s love for Lamon and their mutual affection for old tunes—so deep that now lyrics to the old songs are printed at length. The chapter heading reads, “The Antietam Episode.—Lincoln’s Love of Song,” doubtlessly to focus on Lincoln’s common taste for comic song.

An egregious error for which Teillard may be blamed is perpetuating the word choice in Lincoln’s oft-quoted remark after delivering the Gettysburg Address—“Lamon, that speech won’t scour!” In the draft and print, Lamon followed with a parenthetical explanation: “The word ‘scour’ he often used in expressing his positive conviction that a thing lacked merit . . .” (LN 2405.8; Teillard, 173). The Abraham Lincoln Association on-line concordance shows Lincoln did not use “scour” in that sense. But Lamon himself used it twice in a contemporaneous anecdote: Lamon teases the President about growing a new beard, saying, “It won’t scour.” Lamon later grows a mustache and Lincoln teases him with a different term saying, “That won’t work.” Lamon retorts, “Shoot that beard, Lincoln—it won’t scour” (LN 2405.13).

Retaining an unlikely Lincoln remark has created no end of puzzle-ment. The artistic purpose must have been to polish certain facets of Lamon’s Lincoln image as demigod with one boot on native ground. There are similar instances sometimes with editorial assists. The typescript introduces his classic letter to General Hooker as “a copy in substance if not in totidem verbis,” but the Recollections (192–93) omits...
the erudite “totidem verbis,” perhaps as out of character for a first-grade-dropout demigod.

It would be supposed that in polishing her feckless father’s legacy Dorothy Lamon Teillard burnished her own. Proceeds from sale of his papers in 1922 provided some luster to her long life. She traveled abroad, especially to France where at forty-nine she wed Xavier Teillard, her French tutor. Widowed, she remained in France until World War II drove her home to West Virginia where, at ninety, she published a book of rules for living long, *By These Things I Have Lived* (1948). When she died at ninety-five, neighbors recollected her only as a little girl who once rode a carriage lined in red velvet with Lincoln at her side.12