Why a New Biography of William Herndon Is Needed

MICHAEL BURLINGAME

In the interests of full disclosure, I should tell a bit about my relationship with David Herbert Donald, whose biography of Herndon is examined in this article. A brilliant teacher as well as a gifted writer and a diligent scholar, Donald mesmerized me with his scintillating lectures and lively preceptorials when I was a freshman at Princeton in 1961. Later that year he hired me as his research assistant, and we became quite close. When he left Princeton in 1962 to take a position at Johns Hopkins, I stayed in touch and, upon graduation, followed him to Baltimore and pursued my PhD under his direction. Toward the end of my graduate career, we—like many other mentors and protégés—had a falling out. Although thereafter we had little to do with each other, I will always be grateful to him for the exceptional kindness he showed me as an undergraduate and for the rigor of his pedagogy, from which I learned a great deal. He was a larger-than-life figure and a remarkable, if mercurial, mentor.¹

In 1988, forty years after the publication of Donald’s Lincoln’s Herndon: A Biography,² the author declared that his book “has held up surprisingly well.” Readers, he claimed, “have detected very few errors” and “my interpretation of Herndon . . . has been sufficiently persuasive that . . . nobody has attempted to write another life of Herndon.”³

3. Donald’s introduction to the paperback edition of Lincoln’s Herndon (New York: Da Capo, 1988), viii. Fifteen years later, Donald acknowledged that he had changed his mind about the relationship between Herndon and Lincoln: “I was very young when I wrote it [the biography of Herndon] and was readily persuaded by Herndon’s claim of great intimacy with Lincoln. Now—over half a century later—I have grown much more skeptical.” David Herbert Donald, “We Are Lincoln Men”: Abraham Lincoln and His Friends (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 232 (n. 1).

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While it is true to this day that no one has published another Herndon biography, it is not because Donald’s has been universally admired. Charles B. Strozier called it a “mean and nasty portrait,”4 James McPherson agreed that it “portrayed him [Herndon] in an unflattering light,”5 John Y. Simon found it a “merciless assault on Herndon’s faults and foibles,”6 and Douglas L. Wilson noted that Donald’s book “belittled” Herndon and that it presented “an extremely limited, tightly focused picture that concentrates on one aspect of a man’s life rather than being a full-scale biography. Wilson highlights the following passage as indicative of Donald’s omissions: “It was a busy time with him. Herndon was attending court, collecting his Lincoln records, leading a fight against Springfield’s flourishing houses of prostitution, and heading a committee which planned the removal of the county courthouse. There was a new and ailing baby at the Herndon house, who might, it was feared, die any moment. During all this confusion William Lloyd Garrison paid Springfield an unsolicited visit and was invited to stay with the Herndons.” Furthermore, Wilson lamented, “Few of these interesting topics are pursued further, and indeed there is very little about Herndon’s family or personal life in this biography and only a few provocative references to his active and extensive public life. With these critical dimensions of the man and his character almost entirely missing, Donald’s biography, to reverse one of his own figures, is something like a head without a body.”7

The full story of Herndon’s life deserves telling, for as Carl Sandburg wrote, he was “an extraordinarily picturesque individual, a man often lovable and not infrequently willful and cantankerous, who would have interest for us, even fascination, entirely aside from his close association with a titanic historical figure.” 8 In 1956 Donald

agreed, noting that Herndon “was in many ways as interesting as Lincoln himself.”

Donald did not agree, however, with Sandburg’s view that Herndon was “a man often lovable.” In 1988 Donald allowed that his biography of Herndon “was written by one who failed to understand the temperament of reformers . . . [T]hough I have spent much of my life studying the history of agitators, I have never grown to like them, or even particularly to sympathize with them. There is something about the reformist temperament, with its zealotry, its absolute certainty of goals and its indifference to means, that I have never found congenial. It is easier for me to understand a pragmatist like Lincoln than an ideologue like Charles Sumner.”

Donald wrote a two-volume biography of Sumner, the first installment of which (Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War, Knopf, 1960) won a Pulitzer Prize despite its hostile portrayal of that Massachusetts senator and, in the words of historian Louis Ruchames, its “almost willful lack of insight into Sumner’s character.” That same criticism can also be applied to Donald’s 1995 biography of Lincoln, which characterized the sixteenth president as a man with an “essentially passive personality.” Donald’s definition of “pragmatism” implies a lack of conviction, a willingness to bend to whatever political breeze is strongest—in short (as he put it in his 1955 book, Lincoln Reconsidered), a “fundamental opportunism” that characterized Lincoln as well as Thomas Jefferson and Franklin Roosevelt.

Donald found Herndon unsympathetic for another reason: his mentor, James G. Randall, and his mentor’s wife, Ruth Painter Randall, were eager to discredit Herndon’s 1889 biography of Lincoln. Mrs. Randall, a strong defender of Mary Todd Lincoln, sought to perpetuate what the late John Y. Simon aptly called the “legend of Lincoln’s happy marriage.” Mrs. Randall also wished to prove that the only

woman Lincoln ever loved was Mary Todd and that Lincoln’s courtship of Ann Rutledge was a myth. To that end, Mrs. Randall wrote an essay, “Sifting the Ann Rutledge Evidence,” which cast unwarranted doubt not only on the Rutledge story but also on Herndon’s Record (the invaluable archive of letters, interviews, and reports about Lincoln, published in 1998 as Herndon’s Informants). She persuaded her husband, widely regarded as the premier Lincoln scholar of his generation, to include her essay in his multivolume opus, Lincoln the President, even though the Ann Rutledge story had nothing to do with Lincoln’s White House years. Because Professor Randall had enormous prestige, and since he did not reveal that “Sifting the Ann Rutledge Evidence” was “very largely” the work of his wife, it was regarded, when it appeared in 1945, as an irrefutable demolition of the Ann Rutledge story. It also went far to discredit the entire Herndon Record. Donald echoed those criticisms in Lincoln’s Herndon, which appeared three years later.

Mrs. Randall also disapproved of Herndon’s portrayal of the Lincolns’ woe-filled marriage. In her 1953 biography of Lincoln’s wife, she insisted that “Herndon wanted to believe the worst about Mrs. Lincoln” and that he maliciously sought to blacken her reputation. Since then, her view has gained wide currency, though Douglas Wilson convincingly refuted it in 2001.

Donald’s biography of Herndon blazed the trail for Mrs. Randall’s inaccurate depiction of the relationship between Mary Lincoln and Herndon. Donald flatly declared, “Mrs. Lincoln had always thoroughly disapproved of Herndon” and “there is no doubt that Herndon and

14. [Ruth Painter Randall,] “Sifting the Ann Rutledge Evidence,” in J. G. Randall, Lincoln the President: Springfield to Gettysburg, 2 vols. (New York: Dodd, Meade, 1945), 2:321–42. As the book neared publication, J. G. Randall acknowledged that his wife “helped me handsomely with the Ann Rutledge chapter. It is very largely her work.” Randall to Francis S. Reynolds, February 3, 1945, carbon copy, Randall Papers, Library of Congress. A typescript of the manuscript (now preserved at Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee) shows that Randall had originally included his wife’s essay on Ann Rutledge as a chapter of the book rather than an appendix, as it appears in the published version.


16. For evidence that Herndon’s unflattering portrayal of the marriage was accurate, see Michael Burlingame, The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), chap. 9.


Mary Lincoln cordially detested each other.” Donald went out of his way to emphasize “Herndon’s hatred” for Mary Lincoln and insisted that “Herndon had never liked” her. Mrs. Randall utilized Donald’s work to buttress her case.

As a graduate student at the University of Illinois, Donald was James G. Randall’s star pupil and enjoyed a close relationship with both him and Mrs. Randall. Professor Randall suggested that Donald write his dissertation on Herndon. Randall and his wife, the book’s dedicatees, read every page of the work. Donald called the Randalls “mental godparents” of the biography, which was a revised version of his dissertation.

By attacking Herndon’s biography of Lincoln and his archive of interviews and letters, Donald and the Randalls set Lincoln scholarship back fifty years. Thanks to their efforts, historians came to regard Herndon’s Record as a high-level nuclear waste dump rather than the gold mine that it truly is. Many years later, Donald continued to discredit the Herndon Record, recommending that the National Endowment for the Humanities deny a grant proposal submitted by scholars who planned to publish it. This attempt to sabotage what became *Herndon’s Informants* does little credit to Donald.

But Donald does deserve credit for writing a biography of Herndon that, in the words of Douglas Wilson, is a model “of skill and resourcefulness in research,” which has “enabled and enlightened all subsequent studies.” The book, Wilson noted, “is an extremely impressive piece of work; thoroughly—one might almost say massively—researched, richly informed, and written in a lively, engaging style. Donald strove to uncover the facts of Herndon’s life and career and tell his story with due regard for his subject’s virtues and vices, but

21. Decades later, Donald changed his tune somewhat, conceding that “during the years of the Lincoln-[Herndon law] partnership, there is no record that the two [Herndon and Mrs. Lincoln] exchanged harsh words.” Donald, “We Are Lincoln Men,” 90–91.
23. In 2001 this was revealed to me by a granting officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities.
he could not suppress a tendency to satirize his subject nor disguise his belief that Herndon was not quite worthy of our respect.”

A new biography can build on the firm foundation of research conducted by Donald two generations ago.

That new biography should avoid not only Mrs. Randall’s animus toward Herndon but also her husband’s long-since discredited view of the Civil War as a needless conflict brought about by a blundering generation of inept politicians. A leader of the so-called “Revisionist School” of Civil War historiography, Randall argued that the conflict “could have been avoided, supposing of course that something more of statesmanship, moderation, and understanding, and something less of professional patroiteering, slogan-making, face-saving, political clamoring, and propaganda, had existed on both sides.”

The more blameworthy of the two sides was that of the northern antislavery forces: “Reforming zeal, in those individual leaders in whom it became most vociferous and vocal, was often unrelieved by wisdom, toleration, tact, and the sense of human values. . . . It was a major cause of the conflict itself.”

In *Lincoln’s Herndon*, Donald parroted his mentor’s line. Writing about the uproar generated by the 1857 Supreme Court decision in the Dred Scott case, Donald asked, “Why all the excitement? Why all the noise and fireworks? Why wreck the Union because a repealed statute [the Missouri Compromise of 1820] was declared unconstitutional? Was anybody really serious in thinking that Illinois might be made a slave state? Why go about hearing ancestral voices prophesying war?”

Answering his own questions, Donald continued, “Surely everything fundamental and sane in American society demanded peace. There was work for Americans to do. Out on the prairies houses were rising, and farm lands were rich with wheat and corn. In the East the pulse beat of the future could be felt. The city was growing, the huge metropolis, with tower climbing on tower and factories pointing dirty fingers at the sky. The future was pregnant with illimitable promise. There was a great day coming. All that was needed was to work together, to cooperate, to leave aside petty bickering. That was the American way.”

The alternative, implicitly un-American outcome was a “stupid, suicidal war. Ambition and avarice, blundering and bungling, politics and discordant personalities all worked together


with the idiotic inanity of fate to make a needless war an irrepressible conflict.”

Donald chided Herndon for his antislavery activism, insisting that Lincoln’s partner “had the intolerance of a man whose knowledge comes entirely from books. He knew all about slavery—about the number of Negroes, and slave insurrections, and the value of Southern crops. He could give a disquisition on European forms of servitude and denounce the Inquisition and the Bastille. He could detail the legislative history of the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska bill. But did he really know slavery?” Herndon “left Kentucky as an infant, and, except for one hasty visit in 1858, probably never returned to a slave state.” Slavery “was a thing to be pointed at—from a distance—to be censured, to be feared. It never occurred to him that slavery was something more than organized oppression, that the plantation was a way of life” (here Donald clearly revealed what Louis Ruchames charitably called his “lack of sensitivity to the evils of slavery”). Donald sarcastically referred to other antislavery champions as “rabid Republicans bravely mouthing words of brotherly love.” The leading antislavery senator, Charles Sumner, was, in Donald’s view, an “arrogant Massachusetts solon,” a “pompous Massachusetts senator” whose “ornate oratory” formed part of “his affectation of grandeur.” Sumner’s 1856 speech “The Crime against Kansas,” Donald said, “reeked of the sewer.”

In *Lincoln’s Herndon*, Donald sneered at the Radical Republicans of the Civil War years; they were, he said, “peeved by the President’s disregard of their officious advice.” When discussing Reconstruction, Donald referred to Congress’s “harsh policy” and Andrew Johnson’s “mild program,” a view long since discarded by serious historians.

Paul Goodman’s criticism of Donald’s biography of Sumner applies equally to his biography of Herndon: “While Donald has clearly tried

to be fair, thorough, and judicious, a revisionist bias seriously affects the quality of craftsmanship, for the use of evidence, inference, and logic fail to satisfy the canons of scholarship."

A new life of Herndon should also include information that was unavailable when Donald was writing *Lincoln’s Herndon*. One such source is the voluminous records that have been unearthed by the Lincoln Legal Papers project in Springfield. Only since 2000, when *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition* was published, has it been possible to examine the Lincoln-Herndon partnership in depth.

Thanks to searchable newspaper databases, it is much easier now than it was when Donald wrote to unearth fresh information about Herndon in the press. Good examples are a recently discovered interview with Herndon that the *Cincinnati Commercial* published in 1867 and another interview that appeared seven years later in the *Illinois State Journal*.

Fresh information about Herndon can also be found in manuscript collections that were unavailable in the 1940s, including those of his reformist friend, Caroline Healey Dall; of Herndon’s second law partner, Charles S. Zane; and of the abolitionist Wendell Phillips. When visiting Springfield in 1866, Mrs. Dall spent time with Herndon, who shared both his reminiscences and his Record with her. Her journal and letters shed light on one of the more curious chapters in the story of Lincoln’s relationship with Herndon: the former’s decision to choose the latter as his law partner. Contemporaries and historians


have wondered why Lincoln would select an inexperienced, erratic, impulsive attorney nearly ten years his junior. In 1858 Herndon described himself as “a young, undisciplined, uneducated, wild man” at the time Lincoln hired him. During an election campaign (perhaps in 1842), Lincoln heard him in Springfield urging a crowd of young men to vote for Whig candidates. Lincoln halted, called Herndon over, asked his name, and said, “So you are a good Whig, eh? How would you like to study law with me?” Thereafter Lincoln regularly discussed politics with Herndon and took him into the Logan-Lincoln law office to prepare for the bar. After a year and a half, Lincoln went a step further, asking his apprentice, “Billy do you want to enter into partnership with me in the law business?” Herndon, who at first thought Lincoln was joking, replied, “Mr Lincoln this is something unexpected by me—it is an undeserved honor; and yet I say I will gladly & thankfully accept the kind and generous offer.” He then broke down crying, for, as he later said, “I thought I was in Heaven.”

This curious choice puzzled Lincoln’s friends as well as his biographers, and even Herndon himself. Asked why Lincoln chose him, Herndon replied, “I don’t know and no one else does.” Residents of Springfield offered several different explanations. According to John W. Bunn, either John Todd Stuart or Joshua Speed had recommended Herndon to Lincoln, who accepted the suggestion “largely out of pity” for the young man. Herndon’s proslavery father, Archer G. Herndon, enraged by the antislavery enthusiasm that his son had acquired at Illinois College, withdrew him from school and for all intents and purposes abandoned him.

Another Springfielder reported that “Lincoln took Herndon as a partner to save him from ruin, drink & women.” That hypothesis

40. Herndon to Theodore Parker, November 24, 1858, Herndon-Parker Papers, University of Iowa.
41. Herndon to Caroline Dall, December 30, 1866, Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Herndon in conversation with Caroline Dall in the fall of 1866, recorded in Dall’s “Journal of a tour through Illinois, Wisconsin and Ohio, Oct. & Nov. 1866,” entry for October 29, 1866, Dall Papers, Bryn Mawr College.
42. Herndon to Jesse Weik, February 24, 1887, Herndon-Weik Papers, Library of Congress.
44. Mrs. William Bailhache, wife of the co-owner of the Illinois State Journal, told this to Truman H. Bartlett. Truman Bartlett to Charles L. McLellan, October 6, 1908, Lincoln Collection, Brown University.
seems confirmed by Herndon’s acknowledgment to Mrs. Dall that Lincoln “picked me out of the gutter and made a man of me. I was a drunkard till he took me in hand and kept me straight.”

Lincoln’s relationship with Herndon cries out for a psychological exploration, something Donald shied away from in his biography, arguing that to “attempt to psychoanalyze a man sixty years after his death by using a handful of manuscripts is a very dubious process indeed. A competent psychiatrist demands repeated interviews and prolonged personal contact before hazarding even a tentative diagnosis. Surely the historian should be at least as cautious in rendering his final verdict.” While there is much truth in that observation, there is equal truth in the admonition of a Lincoln biographer, Nathaniel Wright Stephenson, who wrote that “the biographer is a person who has through long and arduous concentration upon the particular subject put himself in a unique relation to it. His views ought to be more valuable than the views of other people. Of course, I don’t want him to dogmatize ever about anything he can’t prove; at the same time I do want him wherever the subject becomes obscure to give me tentatively his own views.”

Years later, however, Donald showed no reluctance to offer psychological interpretations in his 1960 biography of Charles Sumner.

In the spirit of Stephenson, here is an attempt to understand the relations between Herndon and Lincoln. The senior partner viewed the junior partner as a surrogate son, a role for which the young man was well suited. Lincoln, Herndon said, was “truly paternal in every sense of the word” and was “the best friend I ever had or expect ever to have except my wife & mother.” Estranged from his hard-drinking, proslavery sire, Herndon went to live at the Springfield store of Joshua Speed, where Lincoln also roomed. In time, Herndon became a temperance zealot, perhaps as a gesture of rebellion against his sire, and later spoke of Lincoln as though he were a surrogate father, calling him “the great big man of our firm” and himself “the little one,” and remarking that the “little one looked naturally up to

46. Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon, 347.
47. Stephenson to Albert J. Beveridge, June 23, 1926, Beveridge Papers, Library of Congress.
the big one.” Herndon recalled that Lincoln “moved me by a shrug of the shoulder—by a nod of the head—by a flash of the eye and by the quiver of the whole man.”

Lincoln looked after Herndon as if he were his own son. Once, when his junior partner lay ill abed for three months, some of Lincoln’s friends urged him to end the partnership. Lincoln “exclaimed vehemently: ‘Desert Billy! No, never! If he is sick all the rest of his days, I will stand by him.’” Herndon, perhaps recalling this episode, said that at one point he “had become so dissipated that some of Lincoln’s friends thought proper to advise a separation, but Lincoln, with great dignity, declined their counsel, and the manner of the act so moved Herndon as to sober him and endeared him to Lincoln forever.” Lincoln stood by Herndon for sixteen years, dividing fees equally with him. Only after the election of 1860 did the partnership end. The firm of Lincoln and Herndon would handle approximately thirty-four hundred cases and argue on average fifteen cases annually before the Illinois Supreme Court. At first, Herndon was, as he later recalled, “inclined to lawyers tricks false pleas—and so on. Lincoln strictly forbade it.”

As a mentor, Lincoln offered Herndon sage advice. In 1848, when his partner complained that the older Whigs were discriminating against the younger ones, Lincoln responded with paternal wisdom, urging him not to wallow in jealousy, suspicion, or a feeling of victimhood: “The way for a young man to rise, is to improve himself every way he can, never suspecting that any body wishes to hinder him. Allow me to assure you, that suspicion and jealousy never did help any man in any situation. There may sometimes be ungenerous attempts to keep a young man down; and they will succeed too, if he allows his mind to be diverted from its true channel to brood over the attempted injury. Cast about, and see if this feeling has not injured every person you have ever known to fall into it.”

Lincoln’s strong paternal streak led him to mentor many other young men, as Herndon recorded: “Mr Lincoln was kind and tender to all members of the bar, especially the younger ones whom he always assisted.”55 Among the beneficiaries of his kindness were aspiring lawyers like Gibson Harris, John H. Littlefield, Joe Blackburn, James H. Hosmer, and William H. Somers, as well as his personal White House secretaries, John Hay and John G. Nicolay.56

William Herndon deserves a new biography, one that honors him as (to quote Douglas Wilson) “the man who interviewed and corresponded with scores of Abraham Lincoln’s friends and acquaintances, who carefully preserved the resulting documents and information for posterity, who freely shared with all comers his personal knowledge of his law partner in hundreds of letters and interviews, who fearlessly challenged the hagiographers attempting to transform a mortal politician into a martyred saint, and who, in the face of strong opposition and popular derision, championed veracity in all matters and insisted that the greatness of Abraham Lincoln could not be diminished by the truth.”57

Lincoln scholars are deeply indebted to Herndon and should acknowledge the need for a new biography of him, one that shows why he is eminently worthy of respect and why Sandburg called him a man who has “interest for us, even fascination, entirely aside from his close association with a titanic historical figure.”

57. Wilson, Lincoln before Washington, 21.