Review Essay

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In this edition of *Herndon’s Lincoln*, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis make freshly available a basic text for the study of Lincoln that was first published in 1889. *Herndon’s Lincoln*—to put it simply—was written by Jesse W. Weik from material supplied by William H. Herndon. This new edition of their work splendidly complements the editors’ collection of that material in *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln*. The two books are a signal achievement in Lincoln scholarship.

Besieged by “enquiries & interrogations” regarding Lincoln in the wake of the assassination, and not a little annoyed by the ensuing panegyrics, Herndon undertook to prepare “a true biography,” not simply a personal memoir, of his law partner. He thus interviewed or corresponded with scores of others, who were able to expand immeasurably the range of his own recollections of Lincoln. The earliest document in *Herndon’s Informants*, which acknowledges Herndon’s plan to publish “something about Lincoln,” was written less than a week after Lincoln had been interred, and by the end of 1866, Herndon had collected so much material that it fills more than five hundred pages in the Herndon archive as published. To insure against the loss of this material, Herndon had it copied.

Having concluded the research for his biography, Herndon was ready to write it up. Alas, the project languished. Although able to maintain a voluminous correspondence and to prepare four lectures on Lincoln for a Springfield audience, Herndon was unable to organize, compress, and compose the book itself.

In 1869, Herndon, who was hard pressed financially, sold the copy of his “Lincoln Record” to Ward Hill Lamon, a Lincoln crony who had

known Lincoln on the circuit and in Washington, where he served as marshal of the District of Columbia. After the war, Lamon became a close friend of Chauncey F. Black, and the two soon planned a biography of Lincoln. Lamon would supply Herndon’s material while Black would prepare the manuscript. But the book had to be ghost-written, Black being the son of a prominent Democrat in President James Buchanan’s cabinet, a circumstance that, if known, would raise Republican suspicions. The Life of Abraham Lincoln from His Birth to His Inauguration as President thus appeared in 1872 over Lamon’s name alone.

Black wrote the text, as the contract between him and Lamon specified, but Lamon read through the material that he had bought from Herndon, took notes on it, and pointed out items for Black to use or to disregard. That Lamon was involved in the project in this way was recently documented by the discovery of a five-by-eight-inch leather-bound notebook containing some 133 pages of his “Memoranda for the Biography of A. Lincoln,” which he began on May 13, 1870. Two years later, when Black and Lamon quarreled over changes to the manuscript before it was finally printed, Black wrote the publisher that “Lamon did not prepare, arrange, or digest any part of the materials,” but Lamon’s notebook as well as his correspondence with Black and Herndon indicate that he contributed to Black’s work on the manuscript.

Wilson and Davis, in annotating their edition of Herndon’s Lincoln, take care to point out those parts of the text that are directly based on the Lamon-Black biography. In their studies of Herndon’s sources, however, the editors, while collating Herndon’s Lincoln and Herndon’s Informants, have not spelled out in the same way the connections between the Lamon-Black book and Herndon’s Informants. As Davis has noted, “There are long passages” in that book that “amount to direct quotations from Herndon’s collection.” Indeed, because the ghostwriter did not directly know Lincoln or anything about the places where Lincoln had lived before the presidency, he was “necessarily more dependent on and for that reason far more faithful to


[Herndon’s] sources than Herndon and Jesse Weik were” in their own biography. It is thus disappointing that Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s editors in this generation, have analyzed the use of his sources in the 1889 biography but not also in the 1872 biography. Lincoln studies would profit from close editorial scrutiny of the Lamon-Black book, including Lamon’s overlooked part in shaping the text.

Herndon neglected his Lincoln Record after 1866, although he was continually prompted to talk about Lincoln and to correspond with others about him. He wrote most often to Jesse Weik, with whom he became acquainted in the early 1880s when Weik, a native of Greencastle, Indiana, was posted in Springfield as a federal government pension examiner. In 1886, after Weik had returned home, Herndon agreed to collaborate with him on a biography of Lincoln. “You must write,” he declared to Weik, “& Ill give the facts” (xxv). The arrangement paralleled Lamon’s agreement with Black, but Herndon became a much more active partner in the enterprise than Lamon had been. Weik received a veritable avalanche of letters from Herndon, filled with recollections and ruminations for him to incorporate into the manuscript. Herndon also wrote up a string of memoranda on many topics for Weik to use. In preparing Herndon’s Lincoln, Weik thus melded Herndon’s recent writings with the information embedded in his Lincoln Record.

Herndon and Weik envisioned their biography in different ways. Herndon contemplated a brief “inner” or “subjective” life of Lincoln (xxvii), based on his topical memoranda, but he stood aside as Weik developed a more conventional biography, chronologically arranged. Weik’s manuscript used Herndon’s memoranda extensively in only five of the book’s twenty chapters; he filtered Herndon’s wordy and rambling recollections into his text; and he selectively drew upon the Lincoln Record, much of it written by Herndon. At every step Weik tamed Herndon’s exuberant, Whitmanesque prose. He tightened up and smoothed out Herndon’s staccato utterances, and gave the book an admirable literary sheen. As Wilson and Davis put it (xxviii), he rendered Herndon’s “eccentric, nonlinear prose into a fluent narrative” of his own. In the process, as the editors note, Weik “transformed the book” (xxix) and “effectively elevated” himself “from editor to author” (xxx). Although it is inconceivable that Weik could have written the book without Herndon, it seems irrefutable that Herndon’s Lincoln might as readily and as fairly be known as Weik’s Lincoln.

“Don’t go into particulars,” Herndon twice admonished Weik when they differed over the text of the Preface. “Let the future” do that,

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“if it is fool enough [to] discuss what you did and what I did.” But Herndon’s injunction to “quit such follies” cannot lay to rest questions about his collaboration with Weik in creating the book. Without slighting in the least the credit due Herndon, the reader cannot but admire Weik’s role. He skillfully, and self-effacingly, kept the text in the first person, as if Herndon had written it. Manifestly a writer of unusual trenchancy and inventiveness, he brought grace and charm to every page.

The Herndon-Weik biography is most memorable for its description of Lincoln himself—his personal appearance, his manner of speaking in the courtroom and on the stump, his reading, his storytelling, his introspective moments. Even the most incidental details have shaped the popular image of Lincoln. For example, in plays and paintings, he is rarely shown sitting straight up at a desk and reading. Rather, he is lying on his back, his feet up a tree, or lying face down on the grass, or stretching out on a sofa, or paging through a book as he walks along (40, 65, 79, 207). And at night on the circuit, while others slept, he is up late, reading with a candle at the head of the bed, or waking early to study by the fire (194, 200).

The biography is also known for Herndon’s attention to matters which perplexed him, matters which take relatively few pages in the book but which offended the sensibilities of many readers when it was published and which have remained in contention ever since: Herndon’s assertion that Lincoln’s mother was illegitimate, his account of Lincoln’s attachment to Ann Rutledge and, after her death, his perception of its impact on Lincoln’s life, his understanding of Lincoln’s courtship of Mary Todd and their marriage, his representation of Lincoln’s unorthodox religious views. But it was Weik, not Herndon, who wrote the biography, who selected and sorted Herndon’s material, and who crafted the paragraphs that describe Lincoln and encapsulate Herndon’s fascination with Lincoln’s ancestry, his romantic and marital experiences, and his religion.

The joint work of Herndon and Weik did not produce an evenly balanced biography. Some topics are covered at great length, others are ignored. Here and there, the work lapses into the eulogistic mode of most earlier biographies. Conversely, it sometimes adopts the cynical, critical perspective of the Lamon–Black book. Moreover, Herndon and Weik frequently larded the text with letters and documents in their entirety, or appended them as notes, without any attempt to assimilate these sources into the narrative. They also took little time to edit the

manuscript. For example, at three points (100, 132, 263), they quoted Mary Owens’s reason for rejecting Lincoln’s proposal—she found him “deficient in those little links which make up the great chain of woman’s happiness.” Similarly, they thrice noted Lincoln’s view that office seekers want “a way to live without work” (184, 304, 360) and his reluctance to refuse any request, a habit that made him grateful that “he was not born a woman” (203n, 230, 360n).

Although Lincoln scholars have often questioned Herndon’s claims to have influenced Lincoln at important moments in his political career, they have overlooked Herndon’s wry, self-deflating remarks at his own expense. For example, Lincoln’s election to Congress was “a great stimulus to my self-importance” (172). Also, Lincoln was careful not be as “bold and outspoken” as Herndon. “With him every word and sentence had to be weighed... before being uttered.” Herndon by contrast tended to speak first and think later (232). And again, Herndon, on the stump in October 1860, was “approaching an oratorical climax” when the crowd, hearing of Lincoln’s success in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, “forgot they had any speaker” and went “yelling and hurrahing out of the hall” (279–80).

The Wilson and Davis edition of the Herndon–Weik biography is particularly valuable for its annotations. Most frequently, the notes cite Herndon’s Informants. In fact, the one book is virtually a concordance for the other. Just as Wilson’s own Honor’s Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln examines anew the Herndon archive, so the new edition of the Herndon–Weik biography opens up Herndon’s Informants. Reading Herndon’s Lincoln is loosely analogous to reading Hamlet: one is repeatedly amazed to discover the source of so much that is familiar. Yet Hamlet cannot at all be connected to the lost text of the Ur-Hamlet with such striking results as Wilson and Davis achieve in connecting Herndon’s Lincoln to Herndon’s Informants. Their notes document in an astounding way how freely Weik adapted and embellished Herndon’s material. Time after time, Weik “expanded,” “recast,” “exaggerated,” or simply “fabricated” the testimony of Herndon’s informants. It was routine, not exceptional, for Weik to take liberties with his sources. Wilson and Davis refer so often to Weik’s “creative rewriting” and “creative editing” that their ironic terminology almost seems to be token an admiration for his inventiveness.

With the publication of Herndon’s Informants in 1998, Wilson and Davis not only made the Herndon archive easily accessible for scholarly study. Their volume also gave that “massive hodgepodge” a “substan-

7. Herndon’s Informants, 256.
tial and academically authoritative air” that enhanced its credibility. It
gave Herndon’s “haphazard interviews . . . a degree of authority they
do not deserve.” Now, in an inadvertent way, the editors’ annotations
in Herndon’s Lincoln undermine that biography as a faithful distillation
of Herndon’s sources, whatever the value of those sources.

Although, as the editors intended, Herndon’s Informants solved “the
problem of access” for the Herndon archive, Herndon’s own writings—
his lectures, memoranda, and correspondence—are not yet readily ac-
cessible in the same way. Wilson and Davis plan to publish the Herndon
manuscripts, which are “even more important than the Herndon biog-
raphy,” but they first edited Herndon’s Lincoln. As a consequence, they
were obliged in the biography to cite Herndon’s papers as scattered in
manuscript collections, and their references to the largest cache of those
manuscripts, the Herndon–Weik Collection of the Library of Congress,
are inconsistent, for they variously cite the collection as microfilmed,
the collection as it was subsequently arranged, and the collection with
no handle at all.

Herndon’s writings about Lincoln are voluminous, he often digresses,
and he repeats himself. For such reasons, Wilson and Davis contemplate
a selective edition of the Herndon corpus, even though a comprehensive
collection may better serve Lincoln scholarship in the long run. In any
event, the publication of Herndon’s papers is certainly needed. Not
only would it at last extricate Lincoln scholars from any need to use
Emanuel Hertz’s badly edited compilation, but it would also make
possible a fresh assessment of David Donald’s pervasively influential
portrait of Herndon, which for nearly sixty years has both shaped and
inhibited our understanding of him.

Although the Wilson and Davis edition of Herndon’s Lincoln now
takes precedence over Paul M. Angle’s edition of 1930, the earlier work,
reprinted many times, remains useful. Angle provided a full Preface
in which he discussed at some length the biography’s points of conten-
tion, while Wilson and Davis focus on the collaboration of Herndon and
Weik. Aiming to make the work more readable and complete, Angle

Lincoln Association 21 (Summer 2000): 48, 50; Charles B. Strozier, review of Herndon’s
10. Wilson, quoted in an interview with Rhoda Sneller, Abraham Lincoln Online (Au-
gust 2000).
11. The Hidden Lincoln: From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon (New York:
Viking Press, 1938).
(Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications), Angle slightly modified his Preface and
updated his notes, partly to take Donald’s findings into account.
pulled most of the footnotes into the text and inserted paragraphs of his own about phases of Lincoln’s life to which Herndon and Weik gave little or no attention. Wilson and Davis interpolate nothing, but, in their annotations, concentrate on specific sources used by the authors, most of which were unavailable to Angle in 1930. Angle introduced a wide range of material both in the text and in his footnotes. Wilson and Davis limit the scope of their addenda.13

Readers of Herndon’s Lincoln will surely find points of interest which are not annotated as they would wish. Not infrequently, someone is mentioned whom Wilson and Davis do not (or cannot) identify, although some identifications are handled in the Index or in Herndon’s Informants. They do not annotate “Zebedee’s children” (29), “the gallows of Haman” (178), and a host of other incidental references. Except for the Peachy Quinn Harrison trial, they do not connect the many cases discussed in Herndon’s Lincoln to The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition.14 They do not use Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln,15 in which the entries for Herndon, for instance, thoroughly trace remarks in the biography and carefully judge their Lincolnian or Herndonian quality. More generally, they cite only a fraction of the secondary literature on topics in the biography, and they seldom correct a misstatement. And, most notably, whether or not Weik accurately quotes or paraphrases Herndon’s informants, they rarely question their reliability. In short, despite a lengthy collection of notes, Wilson and Davis are rather sparing in their annotation. It almost seems that for every note that they provide, another could be added.

Yet nothing can slight the success of the editors and the University of Illinois Press in replicating exactly the first edition of Herndon’s Lincoln. Wilson and Davis retain exactly every exclamation point, every umlaut, every circumflex accent, every archaic spelling in the 1889 text. Rather than silently correcting “typographical and proofing errors” (the usual practice when type is reset), they collect the “corrigenda” at the back of the book. These errors mostly involve minuscule irregularities in using quotation marks, commas, and the like, but the list also corrects a single letter in six proper names, half of which, incidentally, are not indexed.


The original text is so faithfully duplicated that the editors seem to have impishly changed “20,000” to “10,000” as a partisan’s hoped-for Republican majority in Illinois in 1856, so as to satisfy anyone pedantic enough to look for errors in the transcription.  

While taking pains to reproduce the exact text of the first edition, Wilson and Davis omitted about two-thirds of the illustrations, but the twenty-one images that they kept are well chosen and convey some of the feeling of the original plates. Several engravings in 1889 were based on recent photographs, not on Lincoln-era images, yet the full portfolio retains its interest.

*Herndon’s Lincoln*, as first published in 1889 by Belford, Clarke, & Company of Chicago, was a typical production of the period, although subsequent readers have sneered at the “three ridiculous little volumes” of that edition.  

In 1892, after Herndon died, D. Appleton and Company of New York republished the book in two somewhat larger and better bound volumes, which Weik retitled *Abraham Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*, while keeping both Herndon’s name and his own on the title page, and Herndon’s picture alone in the book. The 1892 edition included two new chapters, which Wilson and Davis append to their edition. And in place of the original index, they substitute a much more detailed and useful one.

Evidently because the one-volume Wilson and Davis edition of *Herndon’s Lincoln* was supported by a grant from the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, it is repeatedly declared to be the “inaugural” or “first” volume of the Publication Series of the Lincoln Studies Center of Knox College, the editors’ home base. The biography, however, is bound and presented as a twin of *Herndon’s Informants*, and depends upon the earlier volume for its most outstanding accomplishment as a work of documentary editing. Had Wilson and Davis tackled first the publication of Herndon’s own writings and used it in their citations, and had they extended their annotations to take into account a larger range of primary and secondary sources, their splendid edition of *Herndon’s Lincoln* would be absolutely superb. Yet by any test, their work is an exemplary and enduring contribution to Lincoln scholarship.

16. Compare the two editions, 2006 (237) and 1889 (387), and, for “20,000,” see John S. Wilson to Abraham Lincoln, September 11, 1856, Herndon-Weik Collection, Microfilm Edition, Reel 1, Group II, Frame 335. As it happened, William H. Bissell was elected governor by a plurality of less than 5,000.