William H. Herndon on Lincoln’s Fatalism

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Abraham Lincoln’s fatalism has long been recognized in mainstream Lincoln biography, but until recently it has not been proposed as a major or determinative aspect of his way of thinking. It is well known, for example, that a rare instance of agreement between his law partner, William H. Herndon, and Mary Todd Lincoln, the president’s wife, was that, in her words, Lincoln’s “maxim and philosophy was—‘What is to be will be and no cares of ours can arrest the decree.’”¹ In his 1885 biography, Isaac N. Arnold reported Lincoln’s response when someone suggested that it was fortunate he had not accepted the governorship of Oregon territory when it was offered to him in 1849, for had he done so, he would never have become president. “‘Yes, you are probably right,’ said he, and then with a musing, dreamy look, he added: ‘I have all my life been a fatalist. What is to be will be, or rather, I have found all my life as Hamlet says: ‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will.’”²

Perhaps the earliest statement on record from Lincoln himself on the subject of his own fatalism is from an 1842 letter to Joshua Speed, undoubtedly the closest friend of his early years. Speed had written to thank Lincoln for helping him through the ordeal of his courtship and marriage, to which Lincoln candidly replied, “The truth is, I am not sure there was any merit, with me, in the part I took in your difficulty; I was drawn to it as by fate; if I would, I could not have done less than I did. I always was superstitious; and as part of my superstition, I believe God made me one of the instruments of bringing your Fanny and you together, which union, I have no doubt He

². Isaac N. Arnold, The Life of Abraham Lincoln (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg, 1885), 81.

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had fore-ordained.” Although this is rather unexpected reasoning from one religious skeptic to another, Lincoln’s plea, especially to an intimate, carries conviction.

Judge Joseph Gillespie, another longtime friend, testified that Lincoln had spoken to him of the philosophical and practical problems presented by his own fatalism. Writing cautiously not long after Lincoln’s assassination, so as not to raise questions about the martyred president’s religious orthodoxy, Gillespie wrote in 1866,

I am of opinion that there was a slight tinge of fatalism in Mr. Lincoln’s composition which would or might have led him to believe somewhat in destiny. Mr. Lincoln told me once that he could not avoid believing in predestination although he considered it a very unprofitable field of speculation because it was hard to reconcile that belief with responsibility for one’s act.4

In an 1875 interview conducted by Lincoln’s private secretary John G. Nicolay, another close friend of long standing, Orville H. Browning, related Lincoln’s disposition toward fatalistic thinking not only to his superstition (as Lincoln himself had done in his letter to Speed) but also to his ambition.

According to my observation Mr. Lincoln had a tolerably strong vein of superstition in his nature. I think he all his life more or less believed in presentiments. I have no doubt that this feeling had a most powerful influence in prompting him to make efforts for self-improvement. . . . I think his ambition was to fit himself properly for what he considered some important predestined labor or work.5

Leonard Swett, a leading lawyer on the Eighth Circuit, became a valuable political associate in Lincoln’s rise to the presidency and later a trusted emissary for sensitive presidential missions. Swett testified on more than one occasion that Lincoln’s political calculations were based on a fatalistic premise. “Lincoln’s whole life was a calculation of the law of forces, and ultimate results. The world to him was a question of cause and effect. He believed the results to which certain

causes tended, would surely follow; he did not believe that those results could be materially hastened, or impeded.”

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In spite of such indications that people close to Lincoln were well aware of his fatalism and regarded it as a noteworthy feature of who he was and what he became, his biographers, while frequently noting its existence, have been slow to pursue its effect and influence in Lincoln’s life. It was thus a notable departure when David Herbert Donald, one of the leading Lincoln scholars of his time, announced in the preface of his 1995 biography that his book “highlights a basic trait of character evident throughout Lincoln’s life: the essential passivity of his nature.” Donald leaves no doubt where this passivity comes from:

From his earliest days Lincoln had a sense that his destiny was controlled by some larger force, some Higher Power. Turning away from orthodox Christianity because of the emotional excesses of frontier evangelicalism, he found it easier as a young man to accept what was called the Doctrine of Necessity, which he defined as the belief “that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control.”

Donald was quick to relate this belief to Lincoln’s basic character and behavior:

From Lincoln’s fatalism derived some of his most lovable traits: his compassion, his tolerance, his willingness to overlook mistakes. That belief did not, of course, lead him to lethargy or dissipation. Like thousands of Calvinists who believed in predestination, he worked indefatigably for a better world—for himself, for his family, and for his nation. But it helped to buffer the many reverses that he experienced and enabled him to continue a strenuous life of aspiration.

Donald’s attempt to highlight Lincoln’s fatalism by focusing on his passivity seems to have met with little success, as an essentially

8. Ibid., 15.
9. Ibid.
passive Lincoln proved a hard sell with readers and reviewers alike. As Allen C. Guelzo observed a few years later, passivity invites a false impression of “the man who urged ‘work, work, work’ as the formula for professional success.” Moreover, he says, “Lincoln’s sharp denial of free will presents a disturbing picture . . . [which] at best fosters an image of a mind divided within itself and at worst whispers an underlying moral cynicism about the meaning of Lincoln’s most important deeds.”

No biographer has paid closer attention to Lincoln’s fatalism than Guelzo, most extensively in the 1997 article just quoted, “Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity.” “The persistence and depth of Lincoln’s comments on the subject of free will and determinism,” he suggests, “are too heavy and too complex to have emerged from nothing more than the romanticized psychological ills of ‘melancholy’ or ‘temperament.’” He argues that Lincoln’s fatalism, while it may owe something to his Calvinistic upbringing, ultimately followed the same path and employed the terminology of such leading nineteenth-century thinkers as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham.

Lincoln’s phrase “doctrine of necessity” appeared during his 1846 congressional race with the frontier evangelist Peter Cartwright, who, according to Lincoln, “was whispering the charge of infidelity against me.” Late in the campaign, Lincoln produced a handbill replying to the charge that he was an infidel, or unbeliever, that has often been regarded as deliberately equivocal and evasive, if not downright dishonorable. But Guelzo zeroes in on the significance of what he calls the handbill’s “one clear affirmation.” “Although it is routinely short-changed in virtually all accounts of Lincoln’s life,” Guelzo says, “it was an affirmation that plunged straight to the core of Lincoln’s own mind and character.” It was this:

It is true that in early life I was inclined to believe in what I understand is called the “Doctrine of Necessity”—that is, that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control; and I have sometimes (with one, two or three, but never publicly) tried to maintain this

12. AL to Allen N. Ford, August 11, 1846, Speeches and Writings 1832–1858, 140.
opinion in argument. The habit of arguing thus however, I have, entirely left off for more than five years. And I add here, I have always understood this same opinion to be held by several of the Christian denominations.14

Guelzo describes this as “probably as revealing a statement of what Herndon called Lincoln’s ‘philosophy’ as Lincoln was ever persuaded to give in public.”15 Despite his misgivings about “passivity,” this would seem to imply a basic agreement between Guelzo and Donald on the foundational character of Lincoln’s fatalism and the “doctrine of necessity” at its core. But unlike Donald, Guelzo is eager not only to analyze in depth but also to contextualize Lincoln’s fatalism and thus cast it in a different light. What Lincoln was describing in his “one clear affirmation,” according to Guelzo, “was, like J. S. Mill’s ‘philosophical necessity,’ a belief that human beings possess neither free will nor the moral responsibility for the right or wrong actions that is supposed to follow the exercise of free choices.”16

Guelzo’s analysis is incisive and deserves to be required reading on the subject, not least for its perspective on Lincoln’s strategic thinking and its relationship to nineteenth-century intellectual history. But as Guelzo himself acknowledges, “Herndon is the most important source for analyzing Lincoln’s fatalism,”17 and it is to Herndon’s letters that we now turn.18

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Lincoln’s 1846 handbill and its “one clear affirmation” were apparently unknown to Herndon and to every succeeding student of Lincoln, for that matter. They were first brought to public notice by Harry E. Pratt in 1942, a circumstance that obviously played a role in the “short-changing” of Lincoln’s fatalism by his biographers before that time.19 But if questions bearing on Lincoln’s religion had been a ticklish subject when he was standing for political office in the 1840s,

14. AL, “Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity,” July 31, 1846, Speeches and Writings 1832–1858, 139.
16. Ibid.
18. While virtually all that Herndon has to relate on the subject of Lincoln’s fatalism is covered in his correspondence, the account that follows makes no attempt to note every mention of the topic. Rather, it chiefly attempts to lay out the substance of Herndon’s views, as well as such growth and development as they seem to display.
they were especially delicate for his close friends and associates after his assassination. Lyman Trumbull told his son many years later that the period following Lincoln’s death was “not favorable to a candid and impartial review of his character. The temper of the public mind at that time would not tolerate anything but praise of the martyred President.”

Herndon himself, when questioned about Lincoln’s religion a few weeks after his death by the prospective biographer, Josiah G. Holland, admits he replied, “the less said, the better.”

But in 1870, disgusted with the wholesale mythmaking surrounding Lincoln and the whitewashing of his former partner’s views, especially on the subject of religion, Herndon sent a letter to Francis E. Abbot, the editor of a free-thought magazine, the *Index*, containing the first public disclosure of Herndon’s understanding of Lincoln’s religion. He there concentrated on his friend’s skepticism with regard to orthodox Christian beliefs but carefully avoided the issue of Lincoln’s fatalism. The reason for this seems to be, at least in part, that he had arrived at a distinction between Lincoln’s “religion” and what he termed his “philosophy,” with Lincoln’s fatalism being the prime feature of the latter. Less than two weeks after writing the Abbot letter, he wrote to another prospective biographer, Ward Hill Lamon, a letter that marks his first attempt to explain Lincoln’s fatalism apart from his religion, and in earnest. To emphasize his purpose, he gave this portion of his letter the heading “Lincoln’s Philosophy.”

Lincoln’s Philosophy bears on his Religion—explains its tendency: it may be that they both have the same root. Mr Lincoln believed in a law or laws special or general, that at once created and rules every thing. At the beginning of his young life here he believed that every thing was a preordained thing—springing and coming out of God’s for knowledge. Hence he was a fatalist—as much so as any Mahommedan. His notions of pre-ordination grew and developed into a blind irresistible fatalism. He subsequently climbed up to a contemplation & belief in a law of the universe.

Here, as elsewhere, it is difficult to discern how much of this formulation comes directly from Herndon’s recollection of what Lincoln

22. Ibid., 5–6.
told him, and how much is his own interpretation or extrapolation. He next attempts to show what logically followed.

To accept fate is to deny free will. Lincoln followed his logic—or the logic of his thoughts. As there was no free will there was no sin; and hence no punishment & no hell. As man was simply a child of Effects—a creature of circumstances, which he neither made nor controlled he was neither to be blamed nor Eulogized for what he did—he was neither a criminal nor a saint.24

Some of these assertions, such as Lincoln’s belief in predestination and his disbelief in divine punishment and hell, had been confirmed in Herndon’s interviews with others.25 Herndon then considers the political implications of Lincoln’s fatalism.

In the political world—“what was to be would be” was his belief: he never tried to guide men nor circumstances nor shape events because he verily believed that God through fate did it. Mr Lincoln waited patiently to discover the paths & currents things were taking; and when discovered he would aid the rush—never before.26

Like the earlier observation of Leonard Swett, which may well have influenced him, Herndon’s view seems at first to suggest that Lincoln never tried to persuade people or urge them to change their political behavior, which is patently not the case. But as with Swett, these remarks are surely meant to apply to Lincoln’s more strategic thinking that was focused on the larger ends toward which events were tending. What these were for Lincoln, both Herndon and Swett suggest, could only be fathomed by study and patience and could not be hastened or altered.

Next, Herndon turns to the implications of Lincoln’s fatalism for human behavior and his Bentham-like notions of punishment.

Mr Lincoln condemned no man and censured no man: he neither complimented nor eulogized man. I speak generally—for it is true that sometimes he did charily praise and did sometimes bitterly & hotly condemn. Mr Lincoln seemed Stolid—passive—deaf to suffering: it was fate & who could resist the decrees of the gods. If a man had to suffer he suffered. If a nation had to suffer it had

24. Ibid.
25. For example, see Herndon’s Informants for the testimony of Isaac Cogdal (441), William Hannah (458), and Jesse W. Fell (579).
26. WHH to Lamon, March 3, 1870.
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to suffer, & there was no help for it. Suffering was medicinal & educational—not punitive.27

Here the element of passivity enters explicitly into Herndon’s calculation, though he does not often return to it per se. He is keenly aware, as in this instance, that Lincoln’s fatalistic perspective can seem like indifference to human suffering.

Mr Lincoln was not emotional nor Sympathetic unless his eye could see it, and his heart catch a throb, through his senses, of the aches of the sufferer. Then he was deeply emotional & keenly & quickly Sympathetic—not otherwise. As a general rule Mr Lincoln seemed cold—passive—indifferent or what not. Mr Lincoln was cold, as opposed to heat; and that is what I mean in my lectures &c, as to Lincoln’s coldness. Mr Lincoln was not a positively cold or hot man: he was negative & passive.28

This judgment about Lincoln’s coldness is reminiscent of the view of his sister-in-law Elizabeth Todd Edwards, who candidly told Herndon some years earlier, “I Knew Mr L well—he was a cold Man—had no affection—was not Social—was abstracted—thoughtful.”29 Like Herndon, she was not so much trying to denigrate Lincoln as aptly to characterize the man she knew, as suggested by what she said next: “I Knew he was a great man long years Since.”30

Summing up for Lamon, Herndon allowed that if you “Apply this Philosophy & this nature, and show how it applies to Religion . . . The result is that Mr Lincoln was an infidel—denied Revelation—Inspiration &c. &c except under law. His mind was mathematical—logical—cautious—skeptical—causative.”31

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Herndon’s attempt to separate Lincoln’s fatalism from his religion, or to show how they are related, is presumably based on chronological development. The young Lincoln started out with a religious perspective, the idea of God’s foreknowledge. This implied that everything that happens is preordained, which developed into “a blind irresist-

27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Elizabeth Todd Edwards (WHH interview), [1865–66], Herndon’s Informants, 443.
30. Ibid.
31. WHH to Lamon, March 3, 1870.
able fatalism.” But subsequently this conception developed into a “belief in a law of the universe,” such that “Every thing is governed by law.” Presumably at this point, what started out as religious belief was transmuted into something else, namely fatalism, or the “doctrine of necessity.” God is understood strictly as the force that establishes or is the inalterable law of the universe, not the personal God who answers prayer and intervenes in human affairs. The importance of this development, according to Herndon, is the effect it had on Lincoln’s distinctive values and attitudes, taking account of which helps us understand his characteristic outlook and behavior, essentially the point that was urged by Donald.

Herndon’s letter to Lamon in 1870 had been private, and not until 1882 did he venture publicly to explain Lincoln’s fatalism and its effects in another sympathetic forum, the free-thought magazine *The Truth Seeker*. Forsaking the distinction between Lincoln’s religion and his philosophy propounded in the Lamon letter years earlier, Herndon here sought to combine an exposition of Lincoln’s fatalism with its practical application to his presidency. For example, Herndon illustrates one of Lincoln’s dictums from their philosophical conversations with a line from the famous Conkling letter defending the use of black troops: “Mr. Lincoln used to say to me that the great, leading law of human nature was motives, and that at the bottom was pure selfishness; that all human actions reflectively speaking, were moved by motives; ‘that negroes, like other people, act upon motives.’”

Here *motives* seems to mean self-interest, which Herndon presents here and elsewhere as part of Lincoln’s fatalism. Another example he offers from Lincoln’s presidency deals with the issue of necessity.

Mr. Lincoln used to say, “What is to be, will be; and what is, is right—if men could only see all the facts and consequences at one good broad look.” This was his fatalistic idea. In his last inaugural he said this: “Woe unto the world, for it must *needs* be that offenses come; but woe to the man by whom the offense cometh.” What is the meaning of the words *must needs*? Needs means *necessity*. Then offenses of *necessity* must come, and there is no hope that they will not come, and no human prayers can arrest

32. WHH to the editor of the *Truth Seeker*, [after December 4, 1882], *Truth Seeker*, February 24, 1883.
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their inevitable coming. No Greek ever held firmer to fatalism, substantially, than Mr. Lincoln.34

A critical example for Herndon is a passage from Lincoln’s letter of September 4, 1864, to the Quaker leader Eliza P. Gurney, a passage that clearly anticipates the Second Inaugural. “This extract,” Herndon says, “proves his fatalism—his philosophy—and all that I hav ever said about it.”

The purposes of the Almighty are perfect and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately see them in advance. We hoped for a happy termination of this terrible war long before this, but God knows best and has ruled otherwise. We yet shall acknowledge his wisdom and our errors therein; meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best light he givs us, trusting that so working still conduces to the great end he ordains. Surely he intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make and no mortal could stay.35

Herndon’s comment on this passage is, at first blush, quite unexpected:

Here then is the declaration of the perfect idea of God—that his ideas must prevail—that God knew best when the war should end—that he has ruled otherwise than men’s wishes—reason, not revelation, is the best light he givs us—that no mortal could make this mighty convulsion, and no mortal could stay the great end he ordains. I infer, only infer, that Mr. Lincoln means by the best light he givs is that of reason; he does not say revelation—he does not say has given us, but givs us.36

Having persistently urged that Lincoln’s theistic belief did not allow for God’s special or personal interventions in human affairs, Herndon here seems to embrace that very construction in Lincoln’s remarks to Eliza Gurney. But seen in the totality of what Herndon wrote on this subject, and his oft-expressed belief that Lincoln’s references to the Deity during his presidency were so much window dressing, it seems more likely that he meant only that here Lincoln’s fatalism—“the per-

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid. The minor errors in the text are in WHH’s source; Osborne H. Oldroyd, ed., The Lincoln Memorial: Album-Immortelles (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1882), 338. Only one is noted here: AL wrote “great ends” rather than “great end.”
36. Ibid.
fect idea of God”—is being offered to a pious Quaker expediently cast in language agreeable to her and the public that would shortly see it. It should come as no surprise that others, myself included, have given this passage a more literal interpretation, one that acknowledges Lincoln’s acceptance of the idea that God intends that “some great good” will come to mankind from “this mighty convulsion.” Nevertheless, Herndon’s point about Lincoln’s expression “best light”—that “he does not say has given us” (revelation), but rather gives us” (reason)—is an acute observation.

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Ward Hill Lamon and his ghost writer, Chauncey F. Black, made much of what they had learned from Herndon about Lincoln’s religious unorthodoxy in their ill-fated 1872 Life of Abraham Lincoln, but they paid little attention to his “philosophy” as characterized by Herndon’s 1870 letter. Where Herndon had urged the rationality of Lincoln’s fatalism, with its emphasis on logic and causality, Lamon and Black saw it as associated with, if not a by-product of, Lincoln’s notorious melancholy, even referring to his gloomy forebodings as “the delusion of the fatalist.”

Herndon, it must be noted, was sometimes capable of a similar perspective. In 1885 he published a letter in a spiritualist magazine in which he allowed that his former partner was “in some phases of his nature, very, very superstitious.”

Mr. Lincoln was a kind of fatalist in some aspects of his philosophy, and skeptical in his religion. He was a sad man, a terribly gloomy one—a man of sorrow, if not of agony. This, his state, may have arisen from a defective physical organization, or it may have arisen from some fatalistic idea, that he was to die a sudden and terrible death. . . . He has said to me more than once, “Billy, I feel as if I shall meet with some terrible end.” He did not know what would strike him, nor when, nor where, nor how hard; he was a blind intellectual Sampson, struggling and fighting in the dark against the fates.

37. Ward Hill Lamon, The Life of Abraham Lincoln from His Birth to His Inauguration as President, ed. Rodney O. Davis (1872; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 475.
38. WHH to the editor, December 4, 1885, Religio-philosophical Journal, December 12, 1885.
39. Ibid.
This image of Lincoln as a blind intellectual giant, struggling in darkness against the fates, was perhaps not strictly incompatible with the picture Herndon painted of Lincoln’s thinking for Lamon—“mathematical—logical—cautious—skeptical—causative”—but it gives a markedly different impression.

That Herndon had not really changed his thinking about the nature of Lincoln’s fatalism since his letter to Lamon in 1870 is borne out in subsequent letters that he wrote to various correspondents in the 1880s. To Joseph Fowler, a former U.S. senator from Tennessee and an old friend, he gave in 1886 as full and straightforward an account of Lincoln’s “philosophy” as he ever gave, including a noteworthy qualification. “Do not misunderstand me—Probably Lincoln did not believe that Brutus was specially made and ordered to kill Caesar with a dagger in the Senate chamber; and yet he fully believed that Brutus & Caesar stood in the line of the [rush?] of the forces of nature let loose millions of years ago and let go at full play.”

Herndon is here making a distinction that turns on the word “specially,” in the sense of a special intervention of providence. Lincoln, he is saying, probably did not believe that Brutus’s act was the result of a special intervention but would fully believe that it was ultimately an effect of irreversible universal law.

Later that same year, Herndon, who rarely found a way to describe anything succinctly, offered a correspondent perhaps his most elegant and concise formulation of the core of Lincoln’s fatalism:

Mr Lincoln to use a Christian word believed in preordination—that is that all things are preordained—decreed beforehand. To use a somewhat classical word, he believed that fate ruled and doomed everything: he has been heard to say, often and often that what is to be will be; and no supplications nor prayers of ours can change or reverse the decree: it is inevitable. An other part of his philosophy was that conditions make & rule the man & not the man make and rule the conditions. In short Mr Lincoln to use a scientific word, believed in laws—laws general universal and eternal—that they ruled and governed both matter and mind from the beginning if any to the very end if any.

40. WHH to Joseph Fowler, February 18, 1886, Lincoln Memorial University, photopy. WHH used this same example in a memorandum he wrote for the use of his collaborator, Jesse W. Weik (JWW). See “Lincoln’s Philosophy & Religion,” Herndon-Weik Collection, Library of Congress, microfilm exposure 4:11:3382, 3384.

A somewhat strange circumstance, especially in light of his writing to so many unfamiliar correspondents and magazine editors on Lincoln’s philosophy during these later years, is that he had been working with his collaborator, Jesse W. Weik, for nearly two years, sending him dozens and dozens of letters full of Lincoln anecdotes and data, before getting around to Lincoln’s fatalism. Finally, in February of 1887, he opened the subject by posing a question: “What was Lincoln’s philosophy?” The substance of his answer, point for point, has already been thoroughly covered above, except for one qualification at the end: “Lincoln in his younger days tended toward scientific materialism—that is, he believed that behind all these phenomenal manifestations of the universe there was a Power that worked for righteousness as seemed to us: he would not call that Power God: he called it Maker. In after life he used the familiar language of the day, and called it God: he did not use the word God in any religious sense—christian sense rather.”42 This doubtless reflects the impression made on him by Lincoln’s letter to Eliza P. Gurney and, of course, the Second Inaugural.

In the last ten years of his life, Herndon continued to emphasize Lincoln’s fatalism with his most sophisticated correspondents, occasionally giving his expression a somewhat different turn. To the free-thought writer J. E. Remsburg, he wrote, “Mr. Lincoln told me, over and over, that man has no freedom of will, or, as he termed it, ‘No man has a freedom of mind.’”43

Herndon’s letters show in abundance that the subject of Lincoln’s fatalism occupied a place of prime importance from the time he started thinking seriously about how to explain his famous partner’s character and makeup, and, if anything, only increased in importance as the years passed. It remained for him the most important thing about Lincoln that people didn’t know, and something that only he and a small handful of others were in a position to shed light on. This makes it all the more ironic that his own biography, Herndon’s Lincoln, gave it only a passing mention. How did this happen?

The Herndon-Weik collaboration went through a series of transformations, but a basic understanding from the outset was that Herndon

42. WHH to JWW, February 6, 1887, Herndon-Weik Collection, fol. 3347–48, microfilm exposure, 4:10:2092-95.
would provide the matter and Weik would edit or compose the text.\textsuperscript{44} While it was understood that in addition to his massive archive of “Lincoln Records,” Herndon would supply descriptive letters and monographs on selected subjects from his own hand, it was also understood that Weik would compose the biographical narrative and edit Herndon’s documents to give them a more finished form. As the work progressed, Weik found both the initial plan and Herndon’s drafts difficult to work with, and gradually adopted a plan of his own device that ignored much of what Herndon had written and, increasingly, Herndon’s wishes.

Late in the process, Herndon wrote to ask Weik that he make a certain insertion “when you come to the Chapter on Lincoln’s Fatalism.”\textsuperscript{45} There was, by this time, no chapter that dealt with Lincoln’s fatalism, as Herndon supposed, because Weik, who worked independently, had heavily revised the original plan. Moreover, he had followed Lamon and Black in treating fatalism as not much more than a curiosity or quirk of Lincoln’s mentality. In the finished biography, \textit{Herndon’s Lincoln}, it is first reported in the same paragraph with Lincoln’s other “absurd superstitions,” such as consulting a “Voodoo fortune-teller,” his “faith in the virtues of the mad-stone,” and his mystifying belief in paranormal apparitions. In a crowning irony, Weik managed to twist Herndon’s Brutus and Caesar example beyond recognition, saying Lincoln argued that “the former was forced by laws and conditions over which he had no control to kill the latter, and, \textit{vice versà}, that the latter was specially created to be disposed of by the former.”\textsuperscript{46}

Herndon was no doubt greatly disappointed, but he did not give up. Though increasingly infirm and bed-ridden, he continued, after the biography was published, to write his collaborator regularly in anticipation of additions and changes that could be made in a second edition. In one of his last letters to Weik, written three weeks before his death, Herndon again summarized what he seems to have regarded as the essentials of Lincoln’s fatalism.


\textsuperscript{45} WHH to JWW, January 6, 1888, Herndon-Weik Collection, fol. 3437, microfilm exposure 4:10:2254-55.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Herndon’s Lincoln}, 264. Weik’s paragraph on Lincoln’s superstitions segues into one that takes up his fascination with the theory that would become known as “evolution,” which in turn is followed by a consideration of his belief in the law of causation. Most of that is adapted from a memorandum WHH wrote out for the use of JWW titled “Lincoln’s Philosophy & Religion,” Herndon-Weik Collection, microfilm exposures 00:00:3368–89. But some parts of Weik’s redaction may be fictionalized. Ibid., 265.
I wish to say a word or two about Mr. Lincoln's fatalism—First he believed that both matter & mind are governed by certain irrefragable & irresistible laws, & that no prayers of ours could arrest their operation in the least—2dly That what was to be would be inevitably—3dly That the laws of human nature are persistent & permanent and could not be reversed: he said this in his printed speech in '42, & 4thly he said, while he was president, that he did not rule events, during any time in his administration, but that events ruled him.

But possibly thinking that Weik and others would find this too rigid and restrictive for practical application, he added a dimension that he had only hinted at previously.

It follows that Mr Lincoln was a fatalist, as he himself has said, though his fatalism was not of the extreme order like the Mahometan idea of fate, because he believed firmly in the power of human effort to modify the environments which surround us. He made efforts at all times to modify & change public opinion and to climb to the presidential heights: he toiled & struggled in this line as scarcely any man ever did. As to free will, he said that that which was governed by a power outside itself was not self governed & that which was not self governed was not free, though he admitted that the will to a very limited extent, in some fields of operation, was somewhat free.

Herndon had here come a long way since he wrote Lamon in 1870 that Lincoln “was a fatalist—as much so as any Mahommedan.” In a way, however, it parallels what many have seen as Lincoln’s own shift on this same issue after he settled into the unremitting pressures and responsibilities of a Civil War presidency. It is possible that seeing the thematic connection between the letter to Eliza P. Gurney and the Second Inaugural through the lens of Lincoln’s fatalism revealed to Herndon a dimension of that absorbing phenomenon he had neglected to consider. He certainly seems to have studied the Gurney letter with care: “... meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best light he givs

47. “Temperance Address,” February 22, 1842, Speeches and Writings 1832–1858, 83. Human nature, Lincoln says, “is God’s decree, and never can be reversed.”
48. WHH to JWW, February 26, 1891. “... events ruled him”: AL to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, Speeches and Writings 1859–1865, 586.
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us, trusting that so working still conduces to the great end he ordains.” Lincoln’s words are, on the surface, a practical recipe for dealing with a crisis, but as Herndon perhaps realized, no one but a fatalist would put it quite this way. Working earnestly and believing that your work counts toward the goal are surely not surprising elements of such a recipe but concern for what is the “best light,” and that one’s effort “still conduces” to a predetermined but unknown end are nuances that suggest at least a modicum of room for human agency in the calculations of a fatalist.

In a letter cited earlier, Herndon wrote, “A man’s philosophy, when well known to the world, leads the world to a full knowledge of his life and explains many acts of it, otherwise inexplicable: it is something that can be appealed to in case of doubt as evidence of an act or a system of acts or a method of life.”51 Lincoln’s fatalism, Herndon strongly believed, constituted the most important feature of his philosophy. Admittedly, many invaluable studies of Lincoln have been written with little or no serious consideration of the subject, but the examples of David Herbert Donald and Allen C. Guelzo are apt. Both have made differing but useful attempts to relate Lincoln’s fatalism to some of his most distinctive personal traits, and both attempts are indebted to Herndon’s disclosures and rationale.

Donald, of course, was the author of the 1948 biography that helped to undermine Herndon’s standing in Lincoln scholarship for a generation, but there are indications that he was open in later years to a reconsideration of some of the harsh judgments he had rendered. In a reprinting of Lincoln’s Herndon in 1988, he acknowledged as much and noted that Lincoln experts who may disagree on other matters, agree “that—for better or worse—our picture of Lincoln is one that largely derives from Herndon’s recollections and the sources he collected.”52 This is clearly the case with Donald’s depiction of Lincoln’s fatalism and its effects in his Lincoln biography, as can be seen from Herndon’s many letters on the subject, the substance of which is presented above. It is also the case with Guelzo’s more ambitious analysis, where the authority of Herndon’s material is explicitly acknowledged. Donald, as we have seen, comes down on the element of “passivity” as the most noteworthy effect of Lincoln’s fatalism. Guelzo seems closer to Herndon, whose death-bed attempt to characterize Lincoln’s fatal-

51. WHH to John J. Lindman, December 3, 1886.
ism concludes with a kind of benediction in his inimitable style that envisions three things it might lead to, if generally adopted: the “banishment of malice,” “charity for the foibles of his fellow man,” and “general love for all men of all races & all religions.” In this spirit, Guelzo’s answer to Donald is that “it was not passivity but charity that was the last fruit of Lincoln’s ‘Doctrine of Necessity.’”

53. WHH to JWW, February 26, 1891.
54. Guelzo, Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President, 120.