

*The Life of Abraham Lincoln: From His Birth to His Inauguration as President.* By Ward H. Lamon. Introduction to the Bison Books Edition by Rodney O. Davis. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Pp. xxviii, 547. \$22.00.)

On the evening of April 14, 1865, Abraham Lincoln attended the performance of "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater. In the play's third act, John Wilkes Booth entered the unguarded presidential box and fatally shot the president in the back of the head with a palm-size derringer. Laid out in a nearby home, Lincoln clung to life through the night, finally expiring early in the morning, attended by a crowd of shocked and horrified government officials. In the wake of Lincoln's death, Secretary of State William H. Seward mused that if Ward Hill Lamon had been present, the tragedy would never have occurred.

An old Illinois friend and fellow lawyer who had practiced law with Lincoln in the Eighth Judicial Circuit, "Hill" Lamon had personally assumed the role of protector of Lincoln's person upon his election as president. Lincoln in turn appointed Lamon marshal of the District of Columbia, where he promptly alienated congressional radicals by enforcing the fugitive slave act. An immense bear of a man, barrel-chested, with a stern visage that glares out from daguerreotypes as though about to reach out and throttle you, Lamon looked the part of the forbidding bodyguard. He is habitually described as bristling with weaponry: machete-like bowie knives, brass knuckles, pistols. He kept Lincoln safe throughout the war, repeatedly lecturing the fatalistic president on the necessity of precautions, warnings that Lincoln typically ignored. Lamon was in Richmond, Virginia on April 14 and thus was not on duty when most needed.

Having failed in the end to protect his friend's life, Lamon, in the eyes of many, had the further ill-grace to assassinate Lincoln's character by writing a critical biography of his deceased patron. Settling at the Washington law firm of Jeremiah Black, a former Buchanan administration cabinet member, Lamon struck up a friendship with Jeremiah's son Chauncey. The two young men decided to win fame and riches by writing a two volume Lincoln biography,

with Black doing the writing, and Lamon providing the Lincoln material. To better accomplish that purpose, Lamon acquired William Herndon's "Lincoln Record," a fund of Lincolniana he had elicited after the war.

Black took Herndon's material and molded it into the first volume, which takes Lincoln's life up to the presidency. A new paperback edition of this work has just been published by the University of Nebraska Press, with an introduction by Rodney O. Davis. Black had imbibed the Democratic partisanship of his father, and he eagerly seized upon the more controversial elements of Herndon's research. As Albert V. House, Jr. put it: "too much space was devoted to Lincoln's love affairs, questionable ancestry, and lack of conventional religious beliefs." Black wrote "in a belligerent fashion." Rodney Davis notes Black's "overdone realism" and tendency to "emphasize the unattractive and disreputable in Lincoln's early life."

Even today, a time of presidential trysts, of "Oval sex" to borrow Maureen Dowd's phrase, Black's blunt treatment of certain controversial segments of Lincoln's life strikes the reader at times with all the subtlety of a physical blow. On the very first page he suggests that Lincoln's ancestry was dubious. He relentlessly disparages Thomas Lincoln as a ne'er-do-well drifter, firmly concludes that Ann Rutledge was the great love of Lincoln's life, and that Lincoln went mad with grief upon her death and had to be placed under a suicide watch by friends. As for Lincoln's subsequent union with Mary Todd, it was motivated not by love but by the desire of a politically ambitious man of decidedly humble origins to unite with a socially prominent family. Each of these contentions had its origin in material Herndon supplied to Black, who of course personally knew nothing of Illinois or of the people about whom he was writing.

Black's work was eagerly seized upon by Lincoln haters. For example, Lyon Gardiner Tyler made something of a cottage industry out of attacking Lincoln as an uncouth oaf whose imbecility and lack of good breeding led to civil war. He drew directly on the Lamon-Black biography. For his contention that Lincoln was a coarse vulgarian unfit to occupy the presidency, Tyler could point to Lincoln's love for ribald humor as described in Black's biography. And of

course Tyler never failed to note Lamon's infamous anecdote on Lincoln's disrespectful behavior at the Antietam battlefield, which became campaign fodder during the election of 1864.

In a temperate and well-reasoned introduction, Rodney O. Davis catalogues the Lamon-Black biography's virtues. Black was a skillful writer who made better use of Herndon's material than did Herndon himself in his collaboration with Jesse Weik. Indeed, if one can filter out the polemics, Black draws a vivid picture of Lincoln's early life, an impressive achievement considering his absolute ignorance of New Salem and its environs. Davis argues that Lamon-Black had important effects on Lincoln biography. It incensed Robert Todd Lincoln and spurred the drive to produce a more sympathetic "court" biography, the eventual production of John Hay and John G. Nicolay. The Lamon-Black book might be termed the first critical look at Abraham Lincoln, and was the first work to use the remarkable material William Herndon had tirelessly gathered. Lamon was vilified, the book failed, and the second volume went unrealized. However flawed their effort, Lamon and Black demonstrated a laudable willingness to confront Lincoln for what he was—a fallible man, not a marble saint.

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