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## *How to Debunk Abraham Lincoln*

BY EDGAR LEE MASTERS

THE LINCOLN LEGEND, by Roy P. Basler. \$3.50. 5½ x 8½; 336 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

THIS book, first of the annual crop of Lincoln tributes, falls between the stools: it cannot be of serious interest to people informed in the Lincoln literature; and yet, because it accepts many deflations of the schoolbook myths, it will offend those who still believe that Lincoln's heart was broken by the death of Ann Rutledge, and that he cast himself upon her grave at midnight to weep and pray. Basler has been convinced by Beveridge's accurate researches that the Ann Rutledge idyll originated in the neighborhood prattling of old men and women around New Salem, and, having got into print through the grace of Herndon, became fixed in the uncritical mind. After all, it is to the honor of the common people that they often love what is beautiful: and this tale of the backwoodsman, who later became President, who loved the lovely daughter of the farmer-innkeeper and lamented her death always, has indisputable beauty. But at the same time that this invention got currency there was in Herndon's book ample evidence to show that it was fiction, *i.e.*, the letters which Lincoln wrote Mary Owens offering himself as her husband. For while Ann was alive at New Salem, Lincoln was looking with hopeful eyes upon Mary, the daughter of a Kentucky banker. (At the same time he didn't have

two pairs of trousers to his name.) Further, and as bearing upon the Lincoln nature, one may look at the long letter he wrote to Mrs. O. H. Browning in which he made boorish and cruel mockery of Mary Owens when she would not accept his tenders of affection. The truth is that Lincoln loved no woman.

Basler also spikes the Nancy Hanks myth; he accepts the fact that she was illiterate and could neither read nor write. But to this day, no one knows what Nancy Hanks, who died when Lincoln was nine years old, was really like. It is known that she was the daughter of a "fancy woman" of Kentucky, whose name was Lucy Hanks, and that Lucy was indicted by the grand jury of Mercer County, Kentucky, on November 24, 1789, for "unbecoming conduct." According to what Lincoln told Herndon in 1850, Nancy was Lucy's natural daughter by a Virginia planter, Lincoln supposing that it was from this planter that he inherited his mental activity and ambition. But, instead of looking back to his mother with affection, he was extraordinarily reticent about her. When his father died, Lincoln journeyed to Coles County and put up a monument at his grave: his treatment of his mother, however, was very different. Buried though she was in the woods of Indiana under circumstances that might have moved the heart of a boy with pondering pity forever, Lincoln paid no attention to her mem-

ory. When he went to Washington to take the oath of office, he stopped at Indianapolis to make a speech. He was then within a hundred miles of his mother's grave in the woods, yet he did not visit it. Nor did he put up a monument as he had to his father's memory. The myth of Lincoln's tenderness, his brooding pity, and his magnanimity, suffers by these facts, wherever there is a mind to weigh human character.

Basler also recognizes the fact that Lincoln was not an opponent of slavery from his youth up. He gives the evidence available to show that Lincoln did *not* say at New Orleans when he was about twenty-two, upon seeing the slaver's auction block, that if he ever got a chance to hit slavery a blow he would give it a deadly sock. He even goes on to show that Lincoln was the attorney for a slave-catcher in Illinois in a suit prosecuted to reclaim a runaway Negro at the very period of his life when he was taking up with the agitation against the extension of slavery, and doing that in a way to provoke war. For Lincoln was after a political office.

The myths which Basler does accept in his book are the myths of Lincoln's unselfishness, his kindness, his honesty, and his lack of vindictiveness. All this in the face of Lincoln's anonymous journalism in which he bitterly attacked men who stood in his political path; and in the face of Lincoln's hatred of Douglas and his slanders of him; and in the face of his stump speech at Bloomington in 1856, in which he savagely twitted the South by saying: "We won't go out of the Union, and you shan't." Later, on September 17, 1859, he made an elaborate speech at Cincinnati in which he mercilessly satirized Douglas, in which he told the South there were more soldiers in the North than in the South and more resources. He was

getting ready for war, he was feeding the "irrepressible conflict" which would have pinned to death save for such words. When he became President, twenty-one states attended a peace congress and tried to prevent war. The new Republican party wanted war. Its leaders knew that war meant offices and money. The wiser ones knew that the time had arrived to destroy state sovereignty and thus realize the hope of Alexander Hamilton. Lincoln himself said that the states were nothing but counties. Later he formally denied that the states had ever been sovereign. And so Lincoln and Chase broke up the peace congress. Lincoln made war. He sent armed ships against Charleston to feed soldiers in Fort Sumter who were already being fed by the citizens of Charleston. The war cost billions of dollars, and 700,000 lives. There never was a more unjust, a more needless war. Sweden and Norway wisely demonstrated a few years ago how needless and foolish the Lincoln war was. We are living now amid its miseries and its ineradicable evils. That the war had to be, that Lincoln prosecuted it justly and is to be given eternal thanks for it, is one of the main myths that needs to be exploded. The truth is that Lincoln acted as he did because he was not fitted to lead the people of the Republic. He didn't know the history of his country, he didn't know the Constitution and the institutions of his country. He was an ignorant man and, as George Bernard Shaw recently said, he didn't know what he was talking about very much of the time.

As to Lincoln's honesty, Beveridge's work tells the story. By remitting promptly any money he collected for clients, he got the name of "Honest Abe": but as an honest intellectual, enlightened and capable of thinking, his second inaugural furnishes the material for a judgment. Yet

Basler thinks that the second inaugural allies Lincoln with God! I should say that it allies Lincoln with the desert Yahweh who set bears on the children and butchered the first-born of the Egyptians. For the implication of the second inaugural is the myth that the war between the North and the South was unavoidable, that God sent it upon America as a punishment for sin. Lincoln did not bear with the wrongs of the South with a sad, beautiful patience; he did not have to make war; his freeing of the slaves was a war measure and was intended to terrify the South into capitulation by turning loose among its people Negroes who would enter upon race butchery. These are the myths that need laying to rest.

The truth is that Lincoln was sprung from the bitterest Puritan roots of New England. He was not a "good old feller" from whom anyone could borrow a dollar. When the delegates got to Chicago and looked Lincoln over they learned that he was as good a tariff man as Seward, and as sound on the banks as Seward, and as to slavery he had never used the disturbing term "the irrepressible conflict," but had quoted Jesus Christ instead. The convention therefore acted with great shrewdness in nominating Lincoln. In him they had a candidate who could appeal to the Pennsylvania iron men, to the New York bankers, and to the Christian community.

Lincoln's works are full of letters and speeches advocating law observance and the support of the Constitution; and one of the myths concerning him is that he upheld the law and saved the Constitution. He thus furnishes an exemplar for breaking the law and destroying the Constitution, while the pretense is advanced that both are being sacredly respected. Lincoln attacked the Supreme Court for the Dred Scott decision, not in legal forums,

but on the stump, and to miscellaneous audiences. His crafty way of stating the matter was that he was not saying aught to overthrow the Constitution, he was only trying to overthrow those who had perverted the Constitution. Lincoln went farther: he said that if he were in Congress he would vote for a bill which was in the teeth of the Court's decision. That is, such a law having been declared unconstitutional by the Court, he would vote as a congressman to reenact it. And this is not all. When he became President and the Chief Justice held that the executive under the Constitution had no power to suspend the writ of habeas corpus, he rode right over the decision, thus following Seward's "higher law" with arbitrary vengeance. In these days when some people are appealing to the shades of Lincoln to save the Constitution and its orderly processes of liberty, they need to be told that they are appealing to an apostolic myth. If this country accepts monopoly and war, and all sorts of "higher laws," as it has accepted them for seventy years, then it accepts that myth in its most deadly form.

Basler's book speaks of Lincoln as a mystery, and he was that. His friends in Illinois did not know him. His homely face masked a reticent, a devious, and a self-contradictory mind. His religious convictions were not known definitely. Some who knew him called him an atheist or an infidel; some said that he was really a Christian; some, like the sentimental Newton Bateman, reported that Lincoln wept and confessed in their presence that he accepted Jesus as God and as his savior. We have his inaugurals, however, in which he sounded the vengeance of Yahweh, the god of the Sinai desert. And in letters he sometimes spoke feelingly of "our heavenly father." The late Col. Ingersoll claimed Lincoln as his own as an

infidel; but any rural pastor can quote Lincoln's own words and give serious dialectical trouble to the best controversialist who makes Lincoln out as an atheist.

To Hawthorne, Lincoln was just a country store character. To Emerson he was badly mannered. But gradually as Lincoln's state papers came forth, nearly everyone who could judge of such things saw that Lincoln had a gift for words. It was not known then that he had practiced with words from his youth, and that he had written poetry, and not such inferior poetry at that. So it came to pass that he wrote the inaugurals, that he wrote telling letters to Greeley, and that he composed the Gettysburg address. It is his poetical flashes that have stayed his fame against attack. It is Apollo who has saved his fame, and made him more important in American history than William McKinley; while a considerable body of biography lifts him even above Thomas Jefferson. But be it remembered that while Apollo sided with the Trojans, Athene, the goddess of wisdom, favored the Greeks, and even Zeus at the last. There is much time ahead in which myths can be pounded to dust and blown away.



### *An American Sits in Judgment*

BY RALPH ADAMS CRAM

THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS. An Autobiography. \$2.50. 5½ x 8½; 517 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

THE appearance of a new edition of this unique and most notable book is an event of high importance. Privately printed by the author in 1906, the edition being limited to one hundred copies, most

of which were given to personal friends, the book was at once recognized as a work of singular distinction. Henry Adams did not agree with this opinion, his keen critical judgment and his habit of depreciating his own work making him dissatisfied with its form, if not with its content. While the matter of publication was pending, and at my urgent solicitation, he gave me permission to publish an edition of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* for public sale. "I give you the book," he wrote me in a letter that deserves to become an historical document, and further said I was to consider it as my own, to do with as I liked. I therefore arranged that it should be issued by Messrs. Houghton Mifflin and Company under the imprimatur of the American Institute of Architects, the royalties, at Adams' suggestion, being paid over to this organization. This was in the year 1911 and the book was published in 1913.

The *Education* was in a sense a continuation of *Chartres* (as Adams always called it); therefore, in spite of the author's dissatisfaction with its state, it was also published for general sale by the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1918. At once it took its place with the *Chartres* as one of the most fascinating, brilliant, and original works within the range of American literature. This was real history, vital, illuminating, poignant, and couched in a prose style that was as original and captivating as Adams himself. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that these two volumes, together with the *Letter to American Teachers*, stand easily at the front of all philosophical-historical works hitherto issued in this country.

So enthusiastic was the reception accorded the *Education* and so unanimous the chorus of admiring praise that followed its appearance, there would seem