

# Abe's Junior Partner

LINCOLN'S HERNDON: A Biography. By David Donald. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1948. 373 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by PAUL M. ANGLE

SOME flippant remarks will be made about this book. Wiseacres, noticing only the title and remembering that William H. Herndon wrote a life of Lincoln, are likely to say: "So the cult has finally come to the ultimate absurdity: writing biographies of biographers of Lincoln." Or something to that effect.

Such disparagement will be both uninformed and unfair. In the first place, it ignores the historical fact that Herndon played a part in Lincoln's life. As his law partner for sixteen years, and his friend and political associate for even longer, his acts had consequences as far as Lincoln was concerned. And if there be any truth in the old adage about a man's being judged by his friends, even his personality is a relevant fact in Lincoln biography.

In the second place, disparagement of the kind I have predicted undervalues the significance of Herndon's biographical labors. "Whether or not scholarly critics approve," Mr. Donald asserts, "Herndon's lectures, letters, and books have largely shaped current beliefs and traditions about Abraham Lincoln's life." His biography, published in 1889, was not the first of the realistic lives of Lincoln, but it was the first to convince large numbers of readers that earthiness, robust humor, occasional crudities of conduct, personal ambition, and the wiles of the practical politician were commingled with higher qualities in the Civil War President. Through these frailties, understood by the masses, the man has come to be the common idol. Without Herndon's emphasis upon them, Mr. Donald contends with candor rare in one from the South, he would have been held as perfect, and hence as "boring," as Robert E. Lee.

Fortunately, the author was fully aware of these larger possibilities of his subject, and skilful in realizing them. He has stressed those aspects of Herndon's life which dovetailed with Lincoln's until the book, in many places, is almost a joint biography. Nor has he watered down his discovery that in many instances Herndon made himself out to have been more

of a figure than he really was. Mr. Donald discounts Herndon's assertion that it was he who prodded Lincoln into radicalism and led him into the Republican Party, and shows that, contrary to his own claim, he had no part in Lincoln's nomination in 1860. The senior partner, it appears, was manager of his own destinies, and not much influenced by anyone.

Herndon's biographical productions are subjected to the same sort of critical, dispassionate scrutiny. In this the author had an advantage over previous students—he was able to use the Herndon-Weik Papers, recently acquired by the Library of Congress, and thus check Herndon's finished production against his sources. His analysis, too long to be summarized here but certainly the soundest ever attempted, may be suggested by his verdict on the evidence relating to the Ann Rutledge story: "In using these confusing, contradictory, and ambiguous manuscripts, Herndon acted as a lawyer. He quoted the statements that supported his case and forgot or ignored the rest."

Of course the man Herndon has not been neglected. How could he be? How often does one come across a human being so paradoxical—a good lawyer who hates the law, a temperance crusader whose greatest vice is drunkenness, an insatiable reader without the gift of understanding, a philosopher unendowed with wisdom? How often does one find more moving tragedy—the tragedy of the proud man, independent to a fault, who is blind to the meaning of the decline in his personal fortunes that sets in as soon as the influence of Lincoln is removed, and leads finally to frustration and poverty?—the tragedy of the writer, desperately needing money and recognition, who dies in the belief that his book is a failure?

"Lincoln's Herndon" is a synthesis of biography with literary and historical criticism in the most orthodox academic tradition. The statements of men are weighed as impartially as one studies an algebraic equation, every assertion of consequence is documented, and the bibliography indicates an almost incredible degree of patience and industry. Yet these characteristics, usually considered to be concomitants of dullness, do not keep the book from being as lively and readable as a hasty piece of journal-

ism. Mr. Donald has a flair for picking pungent phrases from his sources, and the ability to create quite a few of his own. It has long been the fashion to poke fun at the academic practitioners of history, and I confess that I have made a few quips of my own. As far as "Lincoln's Herndon" is concerned, I eat my words.

Paul M. Angle, historian, is director of the Chicago Historical Society, and has written several books on Lincoln, including "The Lincoln Reader" (1947).

## Publisher Nonpareil

ISAIAH THOMAS: PRINTER, PATRIOT AND PHILANTHROPIST 1749-1831. By Clifford K. Shipton. Rochester, N. Y.: The Printing House of Leo Hart. 1948. xiv + 94 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by JOHN T. WINTERICH

ISAIAH THOMAS, who, although he has been dead for over a century, may still be regarded as Mr. Shipton's boss, "might well be called the father of the modern American printing and publishing business," says Mr. Shipton. Born in Boston, Thomas became an apprentice printer at the age of six. At twenty-one he became co-proprietor of the *Massachusetts Spy*, and three months later he was running it himself. Later he moved it, and himself, to Worcester, and there established a printing and publishing enterprise that has had no parallel since.

Mr. Shipton's book is the second unit in the Printers' Valhalla Series, which got off to an excellent start with a study of Daniel Berkeley Updike by George Parker Winship, the editor of the series. Though "written primarily for those engaged in the graphic arts field," the series has been initiated by two admirable little treatises that are broad enough in treatment to appeal to the general student of American cultural history.

Mr. Shipton's monograph is perforce an exercise in high compression. As librarian of the American Antiquarian Society, which was founded and endowed by Isaiah Thomas, Mr. Shipton is surrounded by a superlative abundance of Thomas material. To squeeze into the dimensions of a brief study a conspectus of the career of a man whose spirit is virtually peering over one's shoulders seems to me to be almost as notable an accomplishment as if Mr. Shipton had had to work with no material at all. There are twenty-three excellent illustrations.



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## Cosmic Irony

THIS has been a beneficent summer for America as any traveler can attest who has crossed the continent or has spent his vacation in Western and Southern mountains and plains, or in New England's green hills. Never have our fields and meadows been burdened with greater crops or have the white houses and church steeples of towns and villages shone amidst more luxuriant foliage. Even the wild flowers have edged the country roads in more profusion than ever, and the seeds escaped from nearby gardens have given them aristocratic company.

All of this beauty, this flowering of nature's abundance, in which Europe this summer has shared, should have lightened and given courage to the heart of man, if nature's apparent benevolence had not seemed to be a cosmic gesture of reproach for the spiritual doubts and self-inflicted miseries with which we are overwhelmed. Taken together they appear to be phantasmagorias, for we are threatened by so many and diverse instruments of destruction that one is inclined at moments to believe in none of them, but to call them, like the little girl in "Alice in Wonderland," nothing but a pack of cards. In William Vogt's "Road to Survival," Fairfield Osborn's "Our Plundered Planet," and the speeches of Sir John Orr the human race is reported to be headed for starvation on an inconceivable scale of universal famine. All of us are now familiar with the doom that a third world war will bring upon humanity, the "improved" atomic bombs, the radioactive gases, the marvels of bacteriological warfare, deadly to plant and animal life alike. As if

this were not enough, scientists have figured out that the earth is due to tip over soon, since the South Polar ice cap now weighs ten times more than the burden carried by the North Pole. If you are awakened some early morning feeling slightly dizzy, to find the temperature sixty degrees below zero and the sun gone from the sky, you can resign yourself to freezing to death, but you need not be surprised.

Humanity itself, considered either as a two-legged animal which has developed thumbs and an abnormally large brain, or as God's gift to the universe, has of late taken a frightful beating. No recent writer has anything good to say for what used to be called the natural man. He has been examined inside and out by self-appointed psychoanalysts, philosophers, scientists, and by the novelists, and universally found wanting. He seems to have learned nothing for the last thousand years or so except a few legal, mechanical, and scientific tricks which in the end he will use for his own destruction. A philosophic man may contemplate this group portrait of humanity, and remembering the old woman in the nursery rhyme who woke to find her skirts cut short, repeat her words of despair, "Can this be none of I?"

Toward the end of the eighteenth century it was the fashion for writers to consider man in the primitive state, as undefiled by civilization, an heroic and noble savage, the natural philosopher. This fashion was swept away by the necessity for getting rid of him by extermination. Now it is the turn of civilized and educated man to be reviled. If the reader is in the mood for further evidence of the anarchic tendencies of modern life, he need only study the proceedings of the World Congress of Intellectuals, in the magnificent old town hall of Wroclaw, Poland, once German Breslau. It was an appealing idea, to summon over 500 most distinguished intellectuals in a country whole-heartedly desiring peace, since it has suffered through the centuries from war, and there discuss the problems that are dividing the world. But the men from the west of the Iron Curtain who made the pilgrimage in apparent good faith had obviously forgotten that there might be a reason for this conference that had nothing to do with peace and sweet harmony. And so it turned into a cat-and-dog fight in which men who had gone there to debate politely with each other, or to bring order out of chaos, were forced to become arrant nationalists defending their own countries. Kingsley Martin, representing England's *New Statesman and Nation*, has described the opening speech, delivered like a

hail of buckshot by Mr. Fadiev, the Soviet writer, as "a brutal oration," sounding like a declaration of war. "Even those who most disapprove of the political trend of writers like T. S. Eliot, Eugene O'Neill, Dos Passos, Sartre, and Andre Malraux felt hot under the collar when Fadiev said, 'If hyenas could type and jackals use a fountain pen, they would write such things'."

THE next day Ilya Ehrenburg, the Soviet journalist who paid an inquiring visit to the United States not long ago, addressed the convention for forty minutes on the unity of world culture, and contributed to this unity by a blasting denunciation of Europe and the West. Though he spoke for twice the permitted time, Julian Huxley, as chairman, was in the absurd position of having neither gavel nor bell to stop the reasoned tirade. Communist intellectuals from many countries attacked American imperialism and Fascism as if they were delivering so many editorials from *Pravda*. The British and American delegates, once they had discovered what they were up against, took their destined part in the farce by belaboring Russian war propaganda, Russian secrecy, and Russian imperialism. Western Communists or fellow-travelers had their say, too, and Professor J. B. S. Haldane, though he followed the Party line, wanted to know the truth about the genetic controversy that has recently erupted in Russia which has a new Party line on this basic matter. An American delegate "made full use of a strident voice to shout the correct slogans and to declare in defiance of all probability, that Wallace would be the next President of the United States." The Dean of Canterbury, recently refused a visa to this country, made the hit of the conference by preaching the gospel of peace on earth and good will to men. The consensus seemed to be that Utopia could only be won under the wing of Stalin.

Surveying this apocalyptic age and this failure of world intellectuals to make nonsense sound like reason in the year 1948, the average American has only two rational ways of keeping sane. He must use that quality, supposed to be an attribute of his countrymen, that used to be called horse sense. And he can look at the antics of regimented propagandists and infuriated intellectuals as a spectacle worthy of cosmic laughter. He may also take what courage he can from the example of nature, which, as a preface to winter, adorns itself in the autumn in its most flamboyant colors, for our pleasures and as a seasonal defiance of approaching cold and death.

H. S.