BIOGRAPHY
CHAPTER THREE

A reader or writer who wants to carry on any extensive study of an individual's life can't do better than to start a day-by-day calendar. When a thing happened -- not only in what year, but in what month, and what day -- is often of extreme moment in estimating an event. Memory is a treacherous thing. There is nothing more risky than to attempt to carry in your mind even the most important dates in a man's career.

The story is told of Norman Hapgood, who, years ago, wrote a very good life of Abraham Lincoln, that when the day came when he was ready to begin his writing, he went into an office adjoining the room in which he worked, and said, "Tell me, was it Abram, or Abraham, Lincoln?" And Hapgood was quite serious.

Many a biographer, the general reader of biography will find, never tells you when his hero was born. Not long ago, in making a little investigation of the life of John Wilkes Booth, I looked into two of my favorite biographies of the man -- the two best, as I think -- and in neither could I find the date of his birth. In order to fix it I was obliged to search through the book for facts which would enable me to estimate it. One of my authorities says that Booth was 13 years old when his father died, and he does fix the date for that death, 1852.

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There was nothing for me to do but to run back and put down on my calendar that Booth was born in 1839. But a date I was not able to find from this favorite authority of mine I had to look up in a biographical dictionary.

This irritating neglect of dates is all too common with writers. What it indicates is that they have not sufficiently realized the bearing which the time and place may have.

This preparation of calendars in Lincoln's life has been developed in recent years in scientific fashion by the Illinois Historical Society under the direction of that meticulous Lincoln scholar, Paul Angle. Mr. Angle realized the difficulty of tracing the growth of Lincoln's argument against slavery as it went on in the '50s, and realized, too, the importance of that tracing. Therefore, he started out with a day-by-day calendar -- this runs from 1848 (?) -- and the book he published is a model for the kind of thing of which I am talking. (Reprint a page.)

Now if one examines the book he will see that there are many days in which you have the space, but no record. But the space is very valuable for it gives you the room in which to insert any new material as it comes to light -- also, to record observations and reflections, even if it is nothing more than to reflect that here are half a dozen days in this important period in which we do not know what

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the man was doing.

No calendar of the Civil War period has ever been made that corresponds to the period of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Years ago I undertook from my own work something of this kind, but I have never completed it. I understand that the Historical Society which backed Mr. Angle is now backing one of his associates, Mr. Henry Pratt, in a like series for the war period.

A detailed calendar is of great use, too, in checking up the reminiscences of contemporaries. The best meaning men in the world, the most honest men, in talking of what happened years before easily misdate an event, particularly if they are talking of an important event. Carl Schurz, one of the most honest of writers, in his reminiscences says, in talking of the encounter of the Merriman and Monitor, that for years, in talking of it, he told thestory as if he were in the President's room when it all happened and when the dispatches successfully arrived. "A careful scrutiny of documents, however," (see page 321, volume 2) "convinces me that, to my regret, I am sure I meant that I was not in the White House that day but the day following."

Mr. Schurz comments that that was one of the cases which made him anxious to verify his memory by all attainable outside evidence, when it came to writing his reminiscences.

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MAPS

After the calendar in importance come, in my judgment, maps of the country or countries in which a man lived -- his life treks. How wide was the range of this man's experience in the country in which he lived? How wide was Lincoln's experience of the United States in which he passed his days, never having lived to go to Europe, as Mary Lincoln planned they should go after he was out of the Presidency?

The graph of his journeying starts, as we know, in Kentucky, takes him from Kentucky when he was seven to southern Indiana, takes him from Indiana when he was 21 to Illinois, moves him from place to place in Illinois as a boy, settles him in the capitol of the state, shows him in his legal life journeying from week to week over eight different counties, in what was known as the figure eight circuit, familiarizes him with the growing town of Chicago, takes him to Washington as a member of Congress, into New England as a campaign speaker, to Niagara Falls, all over the state as a campaigner in the fight against slavery, to New England, Cincinnati, Ohio, New York in the same fight, and finally the last journey of his life, a tragic journey, a journey in which that association which finally ended life hung over him, and then that last sorrowful pilgrimage to his resting place in Springfield.

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These maps on one's table when the work is going on are a curious help to reality. You begin to see a man moving through places, journeying among his fellows, going with friends, meeting a stranger, seeing new towns, getting new notions of the way things are done in the world, learning better how to wear clothes, the way great dinners are given, the way platform meetings are conducted in New England, New York, on the praries. They are great helps to visualization, and one of the needs of biography, to make a living story, is to realize the surroundings of his subject, the country in which he lived, the kind of house in which he lived, his contacts with comfort, elegance.

There was little enough of that in Lincoln's life. As I went about my Lincoln studies and tried to see how the places looked in which he had lived and spoken, I was conscious always of poverty and sordidness in the surroundings, helped, of course, by the space and freedom of the prairie, the beauty of the out-of-doors -- but little of man's work that was fine as yet.

Story of Lincoln and Douglas debates -- old Maine. See notes.

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Emphasize the fact that the letters in no way corroborate the popular notion that Lincoln indulged in jokes and stories of questionable taste, that is that he had clearly the obscene, gross, and indulged it freely. If that had been true to the extent to which many commentators say exist it would have shown in what he wrote and spoke. Take his speeches however from the beginning he was sparing of stories. He does tell a story if it was for a definite purpose. There is no inuendo in his stories which is very rare - not sneaking and snickering as the vulgar-minded use the obscene. I have gone through the whole collection of his letters and speeches and find nothing of that kind in them. This particular matter of comments from English students - Lord Charnwood speaks of it - how this simply could not have happened if this had been a strong coloring in his mind.

Another thing to note about his letters and speeches is the freedom from malice. If ever a man was tempted to malice it was Lincoln in the Civil War. Garrison Godkins at the time of Lincoln's death commented on this. All through this period there was never anything angry, in his speeches. There was always a patient effort to make people understand. He showed how much larger his mental interest was in the problems he was trying to solve than in his own personal status. These are unusual things in any human being.

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For the first point the freedom from the scandalous I have come to the conclusion that it was largely in the minds of his associates, their different attitudes towards this sort of thing. They gloated over them, tasted them. Lincoln did not. He might use a story which was unfit for repetition in mixed company, but there is a pretty general concensus of opinion among those who knew him that he did it to make a point - never did it for the sake of a story alone. That story represented something to him, became an argument, an illumination. He was not telling it to tickle a ~~comrade of~~ vulgar nature.

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