

Barlow's Life

We are getting so abundant ^{a crop} of lives of Abraham Lincoln that we shall soon have to begin to classify them. The first class, and the most important to the future, will be those written by men who knew him, like Nicolay and Hay, Herndon, Lamon, Isaac Arnold. There will be a second class by those who knew those who knew him; and a third by those who, pondering the more or less raw materials produced by the other two, will give us interpretations, criticisms, and that which has not yet been done, sounder and more thorough studies of the political and social influences under which Lincoln came at various periods and which were the chief factor in shaping him, in making him the man he was. To date the most satisfactory work in this third class is far and away, I think, Lord Charnwood's study, though judging by what Albert Beveridge has done in his Life of Marshall we may hope to get from him the life of Lincoln he is writing something of this wider view.

The Life of Abraham Lincoln by William E. Barton falls into the second class. It is, he claims, the result of something like sixty years of interest and twenty or more years of indefatigable industry in gathering up fresh items, correcting errors, interviewing those who knew Lincoln, examining collections of Lincolniana. I doubt if anybody who has written a life of Lincoln has traveled so many miles, talked so many hours and written and received so many letters as Mr. Barton.

At various times he has published pamphlets, giving the results of special findings, such as his discovery of a speech made by Lincoln in Chicago in 1850 on the death of President Taylor -

something that had been overlooked by collectors.

He has also published two fat volumes - one "The Soul of Abraham Lincoln" in which he has collected a great mass of material on Mr. Lincoln's religious life - and a most useful compilation it is. In the second of these volumes, called "The Paternity of Abraham Lincoln," Mr. Barton has ^{gathered} in spite of the fact that that paternity has long been established by indisputable records, all of the miserable and foolish gossip in which the ignorant and the partisan in remote parts of the country have indulged ever since the election of 1860. Mr. Barton very properly characterizes ~~the~~ ^{most} of what he has collected and published as "putrid reminiscences." It is, and it was buried long before Mr. Barton took the pains to dig it up and repeat it to the world.

It is perhaps inevitable that a life of Lincoln, based on material gathered as Mr. Barton's has been, and preceded by such a variety of publications, should be somewhat unbalanced. To give fifty pages to the ^{Gettysburg} Speech out of four hundred and fifty on the Civil War and only twenty to Emancipation and the Emancipation Proclamation is certainly out of proportion, unless, indeed, you are going to make the Gettysburg Speech a pivotal point from which to work back and forth, which Mr. Barton does not do.

The chapter of the work which appeals most to a student of Abraham Lincoln's life, keen for the impressions and reflections of interested minds as well as for all sorts of new items, is that in which he deals with the Kentucky period. He gives, I think, far and away the best picture that has been written of the life that Tom and Nancy Lincoln lived both before and after the birth of their son, and this he was better prepared to do than anybody else for he was familiar from boyhood with the scenes and the life of the class to which the Lincolns belonged, knew their cabins, their ways of living, their churches, their schools. He gives more reality to their lives and he adds not a few new items ~~information~~ to our meagre knowledge of Tom Lincoln's household - the fact that Tom went to auctions and brought home household articles for Nancy as well as a horse or cow to add to his stock, adds no little to the picture that we are able to build up from the scant documents. Mr. Barton has done much to overthrow the old tradition of Tom Lincoln as a shiftless and no-account man. From one who, like this reviewer, has insisted for twenty-five or more years that the father of Abraham Lincoln was a better man than he has been painted by all early biographers, there is real gratitude for these new facts, dug out so patiently from the nests of records, hidden away in Kentucky courthouses.

No other period of Lincoln's life is treated with anything like the authority or the freshness of the Kentucky period, though his dealing with the life in Springfield, and particularly with Mrs.

Lincoln's place in society, there is a genuine and fresh contribution. Here again he is attacking old prejudices, deeply rooted gossip, and with success.

A period to which Mr. Barton seems to have contributed little is the important fourteen years that Lincoln lived in Indiana. The recent researches of the Historical Society of Southwestern Indiana seem to show conclusively that the young Lincoln came under a higher grade of intellectual, political and social influences than former descriptions of his life in Gentryville would lead us to believe. These descriptions, generally speaking, have concerned themselves with the hardships, the commonplace, the vulgarities of his existence; but that that part of the country was active intellectually and that the boy, being what he was, inevitably responded to these influences, has not, I think, been properly brought out.

Mr. Barton's piece de resistance - the point on which he has long hammered hardest - is the grandmothers of Abraham Lincoln. We have never had satisfactory documentary proof of the names of the families from which they came. Mr. Barton gives us none. He has settled the matter for himself, but not for the student, who claims that tradition from whatever the source, must yield to documents if genuine, and that a case is not settled until documents have been found which confirm traditions.

The earliest credited story of the origin of the paternal grandmother of Abraham Lincoln came from her great-grandson, a man of

parts, who remembered her as having lived in his grandmother's house when he was a boy, and according to him she was a Mary Shipley.

But Mary will have to yield to documents for Mr. Barton has proved in his diligent researches that ^{M. Shipley} ~~her~~ name was Basheba, though, so far as his documents, or anybody else's go, she may have been a Shipley - Basheba Shipley. I do not myself, however, believe this, for there is a tradition, coming from respectable sources, that Abraham Lincoln's grandfather married a Basheba Herring. A document has been unearthed which proves that his wife's name in 1780 was Basheba, though it does not prove that she was a Herring. At the time this document was executed he had been married ten years. The record of that marriage exists though it does not give the name of his bride. So far as we know he may have had - as has been conjectured and was at one time generally accepted - two wives, one a Shipley and the other a Herring. Grant this and you satisfy both family traditions, but so far we cannot prove this is true. Mr. Barton says decidedly "There was no Mary Shipley Lincoln", though ^{for all the documents he is able to give us,} there may have been ^{He says} ~~there~~ is no vestige of proof that his marriage in 1770 was not to Basheba." That is true. It is also true that ^{there is} ~~no~~ vestige of proof ~~has been found~~ that his marriage in 1770 was to Basheba! That is, Mr. Barton does not dispose in his book of the Shipley tradition, and in a genealogical case in which the documents are incomplete no family tradition, coming from a respectable source, can be summarily wiped out except by documents. Mr. Barton, in spite of his discoveries, the value of which I heartily concede, has not

family - a name
settled finally the case of the name of Abraham Lincoln's paternal grandmother.

Now, as to the case of the maternal grandmother. There is no doubt that Mr. Barton adds interesting documents in this book on the problem of who was the mother of Nancy Hanks, the mother of Abraham Lincoln; but here again he has not closed the matter to the satisfaction of the student. Moreover, the presentation of his discoveries is so confused that the general reader will, I fear, have a difficult time in unravelling his mixture of traditions, convictions and documents. ¶ What has Mr Barton proved to help us in this matter which has so long vexed the Lincoln biographer? He has proved: ¶ 1) That in November of 1789 a woman by the name of Lucy Hanks was indicted by the grand jury of Mercer County, Ky., for misbehaviour, and the following May the suit was ordered discontinued. ¶ 2) He has proved that ~~in the month preceding~~, April 1790, a license was taken out by a Lucy Hanks to marry a Henry Sparrow, and that a year later (1791) the marriage took place. But *though he does so declare* I do not see that he proves that the Lucy who was such a bad lot was the Lucy who became Mrs. Sparrow. And in any case, what has his Lucy *the mother of* to do with Nancy Hanks, the mother of Abraham Lincoln? How does he fit her into the tradition and documents we have concerning that grandmother? There is nothing, so far as I know, of documentary character from Mr. Lincoln himself excepting his statement that his mother was a Hanks and that branches of her family lived at the time he made this statement in different parts of Illinois. No other

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information about his mother's family was given to the public until 1866. William Herndon then declared that fifteen years before that time Mr. Lincoln had told him, in a fit of depression, that his grand-^{in Virginia} mother's name was Lucy Hanks, that his mother was born/out of wed-
lock, her father being a Virginian planter.

Of course a story of this character, first repeated fifteen years after it was said to have been told, and coming from a man more or less confused by alcoholism, could not stand alone. Mr. Herndon sought -
some corroboration from a member of the Hanks family, one Dennis Lincoln's mother, Hanks, at that time sixty-seven years of age. ~~He~~ told Mr. Herndon, was not a Hanks at all but a Sparrow. Out of what he could get from Dennis Hanks, Herndon pieced out a story which has been generally accepted, to the effect that there were four Hanks sisters - Lucy, Betsy, Polly and Nancy; that Nancy Hanks was the daughter of Lucy ^{illegitimate} ~~the~~ and that some years after her birth ~~she~~ married Henry Sparrow.

The case rested on this foundation until about twenty-five years ago a will was found - the will of one Joseph Hanks, recognizing eight children, three of them daughters - Betsy, Polly and Nancy - but no Lucy. In this will of Joseph Hanks were ^{recapitulated} ~~men~~ related to Abraham Lincoln's mother. We know that ^{Lincoln} ~~he~~ was accus-
tomed to visit one of these men and that he called him "Uncle Joe".
The descendants of this Uncle Joe have declared in writing that their grandfather spoke of Nancy Hanks as his sister.

Now, what has this to do with the Lucy Hanks that Mr. Barton proves to have married a Sparrow in 1791? The will must

be accepted. She does not appear in the will. Mr. Barton states, however, that she was a daughter of Joseph Hanks as the tradition declared ^{that} Joseph Hanks did not recognize her because of her misbehaviour. ^{but he gives no proof of this statement} Joseph Hanks, however, after enumerating eight children, speaks of ~~them as~~ ^{of} "all" his children. That is, Mr. Barton makes the will fit the tradition, not the tradition the will ^{again} ~~he~~ gives us no proof whatever that the Lucy Hanks he has unearthed had a daughter born in Virginia. He gives no documentary proof that the daughter Nancy recognised in Joseph Hanks' will did not marry Thomas Lincoln, as certain descendants have contended. ^{Of} Of course all that Mr. Barton claims may be true, but he does not prove satisfactorily that it is true. He bases much on the fact that he discovered in Mercer County, Ky., a side-tracked community of Sparrows, never before known to Lincoln biographers - the descendants of the Sparrow family into which his Lucy Hanks married; and these people, he says, claim relationship with Abraham Lincoln. That is not the kind of proof that we must have for our case. So do the Berrys, the Shipleys and the ~~Thompsons~~ ^{Thompsons} in Kentucky claim relationship with Abraham Lincoln. ^{and} But Mr. Barton ^{ignores} ~~disposes of~~ none of these claims. ^{Maltese} The name and story of the grandmothers of Abraham Lincoln is still unsettled, still based on tradition, not on documents. Mr. Barton has accepted as final one set of traditions - those of Herndon and Dennis Hanks - and materially strengthened them; but he has not disposed of various other traditions which unquestionably have some relation to the matter and which must all be explained and adjusted before the question is finally closed. No one of common sense is going to

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object to Mr. Barton's Lucy Hanks being Abraham Lincoln's grandmother if she was. The only point is that it has not been proven that she was.

What is needed on this matter is a patient, trained genealogist - somebody free from predilections, who does not set out to prove anything but takes all that has been set down in the voluminous and contradictory traditions, the meagre - oh, so meagre, documents - goes carefully through the scattered courthouses, the church records, examines the headstones of graveyards, looks at family Bibles, and pieces together what he unearths, in a purely scientific fashion. The matter cannot be settled at this date by affirmation, even as convinced and as interesting as that of Mr. Barton in this real contribution which he has made to the Life of Abraham Lincoln.