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Douglas L. Wilson, Rodney O. Davis, eds. *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xxxii + 827 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02328-6.

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Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis, two prominent historians long associated with Knox College in Illinois, have successfully tackled the challenge of editing the often-controversial oral and written testimony collected by Lincoln's final law partner, William H. Herndon. Their work will aid future historians immeasurably.

Following the assassination of Lincoln in 1865, Herndon, his Springfield- based law partner from 1843 to 1861, began the process of conducting interviews with key figures from the president's past. He aspired to write a biography of his former partner that captured the "inner life of Mr. L" (p. xiv). For about two years, Herndon and a handful of friends interviewed and corresponded with residents of central Illinois and Indiana who knew the young Lincoln. However, personal and business troubles interfered, and Herndon allowed the project to languish until the 1880s.

Then he met a government employee and history buff from Indiana named Jesse W. Weik, who soon convinced him to resume the effort. Herndon sent Weik his own recollections of Lincoln, and the younger man conducted new interviews with former Lincoln associates and extended family members. Altogether they compiled a collection of interviews and documents from over 250 informants who had known Lincoln principally during the years before he became president. Largely from this material, they published *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of A Great Life*, in 1889.

Ever since, questions about the reliability of Herndon and his Lincoln sources have been the subject of heated controversy. Adding to the usual problems of recollected testimony, scholars faced particular issues with Herndon. He was a colorful and strange figure, blessed with obvious intelligence and admirable curiosity, but also prone to wild theories and questionable tact. "Billy," Lincoln had reportedly said, "you're too rampant and spontaneous."[1]

There was always a fear among academic historians who approached the Herndon-Weik collection that the occasionally bizarre opinions of the interviewer, his near total absence of any sense of humor, and his uneven note-taking habits distorted the responses by the subjects. In addition, many of the topics covered were especially prone to misinterpretation–illegitimacy, childhood behavior, strained family relations, love affairs, religious views, personal habits, etc.

It was from these documents, for example, that the legend–or true story, depending on your perspective–of Lincoln's romance with Ann Rutledge was nurtured. Lincoln's supposedly heretical religious views came under frequent scrutiny during the interviews. Several of Mary Todd Lincoln's most notorious outbursts were described in deliciously nasty detail by her former neighbors. Here one also discovers that according to his best friend, Lincoln once asked where he could "get some" (p. 719). Unbelievably, the story ends with a chastened Lincoln walking out on a partially undressed prostitute because he didn't bring enough cash. Such outrageous stories have understandably raised more than a few scholarly eyebrows. On the other hand, the nature of those matters has distinguished the Herndon-Weik record from any other source, including the official collection of Lincoln's own papers (donated by his son to the Library of Congress), for its intimacy and gritty flavor.

Over the years, historians have thus dipped in and out of the collection (principally housed at the Library of Congress and available on microfilm) with widely varying degrees of enthusiasm and concern. The haphazard organization of the collection and the relatively poor indexing also presented obstacles in using the materials.

In general, however, those eager to portray Lincoln's "human" side quoted heavily from Herndon and his gossipy informants, while those focused on more ostensibly erudite goals tended to dismiss the material as a collection of unreliable tales. Jean Baker once aptly summed up the back-and-forth by pointing out that Herndon had become "every Lincoln scholar's reserve army," easily ig-

nored but definitely available.[2]

Wilson and Knox have wisely refrained from using this forum to inject their opinions, although each (especially Wilson) has published important works that defend Herndon's veracity. Their introduction is exceptionally balanced and well written. Their notes are useful without being intrusive. In addition, the decision to include a biographical registry of the informants will please just about everybody, from the serious scholar to the confused general reader. They have also included a helpful outline of the Hanks family (Lincoln's maternal line) prepared by genealogist Paul H. Verduin.

What is perhaps most amazing about the publication of this incredibly important work is that it is not an isolated appearance. The recent edition of Lincoln's recollected words by Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher and the ongoing Lincoln Legal Project, headed by Cullom Davis, are equally important additions to the primary sources just now becoming available on the great president. Once again, the Lincoln theme appears not only inexhaustible, but also still remarkably compelling.

Notes

[1]. David Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948; rprt., New York, Da Capo, 1989), 128.

[2]. Jean Baker, "Commentary on Charles B. Strozier, 'Lincoln's Quest for Union : Public and Private Meanings,"' in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *The Historian's Lincoln: Pseudohistory, Psychohistory and History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 244.

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