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## Holland's Life of Abraham Lincoln

Josiah Gilbert Holland

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**Roles**

Author: Josiah Gilbert Holland (1866)

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# Holland's Life of Abraham Lincoln

## **Abstract**

"Soon after the assassination of President Lincoln in April 1865, newspaper editor Josiah Gilbert Holland traveled to Illinois to talk with people who had known Abraham Lincoln "back when." In 1866 Holland published the earliest full-scale life of the fallen leader. A great popular success, Holland's biography introduced American readers who were hungry for personal information about Lincoln's early life to some of the most famous and enduring Lincoln stories. From Holland the reader learned about Lincoln making restitution for a ruined book, the railsplitter earning his first silver dollar, the millhorse's kick to his head, the wrestling match with Jack Armstrong. Holland relayed homey stories about the young Illinois legislator and lawyer and poignant ones about the president during the dark days of the Civil War. Holland was one of the earliest biographers of Lincoln to insist that Lincoln had always opposed slavery and had planned consistently for emancipation. Most debatable, from the viewpoint of some later historians, Holland demonstrated that Lincoln was "eminently a Christian President." To understand the sixteenth president and the making of his public image, it is necessary to begin with *Holland's Life of Abraham Lincoln*." *From the publisher*

## **Keywords**

Abraham Lincoln, Josiah Gilbert Holland, biography, president, Civil War, assassination

## **Disciplines**

History | Political History | United States History

## **Comments**

Attached is the introduction to Dr. Allen C. Guelzo's book, *Holland's Life of Abraham Lincoln*.

## INTRODUCTION

Allen C. Guelzo

Published in 1866, Josiah Gilbert Holland's *Life of Abraham Lincoln* is, in a number of ways, the first great comprehensive Lincoln biography. Simply in terms of beating others to the line, Holland's *Life* leapt into print just ahead of Isaac Arnold's *The History of Abraham Lincoln and the Overthrow of American Slavery* and the book version of Francis Carpenter's *Six Months at the White House*, shortly before the completion of William Henry Herndon's sensational Springfield lecture series on Lincoln, and six years prior to Ward Hill Lamon's ghostwritten *Life of Abraham Lincoln*. Holland's *Life* also deserves pride of place among Lincoln biographies for turning away sharply from the pattern of the 1860 and 1864 campaign biographies by John Locke Scripps, Joseph Q. Howard, Joseph H. Barrett, and William Dean Howells, all of which were the initial model for the first postassassination Lincoln books. Unlike the campaign biographers, Holland saw no purpose in glorifying Lincoln's log-cabin origins, and he felt free to speculate on the complexities and ambiguities of Lincoln's character and Lincoln's religion. Above all, Holland's *Life* was the first to incorporate into a biography a substantial amount of direct interviews and correspondence with Lincoln's associates and relatives. Although James Q. Howard in 1860 (and later, William Thayer for *The Pioneer Boy* in 1863) interviewed several of Lincoln's early New Salem and Springfield acquaintances, Holland's interviews and letters produced a far larger cache

of Lincoln recollections, all of which Holland used in creating the most substantial picture of Lincoln's early life then available.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, while Holland's *Life* sold well over 100,000 copies (and by subscription rather than through trade distribution) and brought Holland "more money than he probably ever dreamed of possessing during his early life," Holland's book has also been the Lincoln biography most consistently dismissed by modern Lincolnographers.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin P. Thomas condemned the "mawkish sentimentality of the book" and wrote Holland off as a "moralist" who did little more with Lincoln's life than dress it up as a self-improvement fable.<sup>3</sup> Even one of Holland's biographers characterized the *Life of Abraham Lincoln* as "hasty and partial" and admitted that "in recent years . . . few Lincoln bibliographers have bothered to list it at all."<sup>4</sup>

The reasons for this dismissal are complicated but not subtle. For one thing, Holland was working against the clock, and although the speed with which he turned out his *Life* is remarkable, it also guaranteed that he would run roughshod over complicated issues, neglect to introduce important characters, and leave a good deal of detail to the public memory of his readership. Much as he opened up new avenues of primary research into Lincoln's early life, he seems to have made no effort to interview Lincoln's immediate family, and Mary Todd Lincoln and her children appear only infrequently and in their public roles in Holland's *Life*. Holland's stature as a biographer was also undercut by his own instincts. Holland was, after all, a journalist—even his eulogists admitted that "his talent was pre-eminently journalistic" rather than literary—and it showed all too often when Holland put his political partisanship for Lincoln on display.<sup>5</sup> Although he promised in his preface not to write "a political or a military history of Mr. Lincoln's administration," it was politics which occupied most of his chapters on Lincoln's presidency, and a politics in which Lincoln was unapologetically the champion of "strength and moderation" and the opposition, whether from John Charles Frémont or Clement

Vallandigham, was "irresponsible" or "treasonable." Holland's authority was also weakened by his never having known Lincoln personally—never, in fact, having even met him—and his principal personal qualification for writing the book was a widely published eulogy on Lincoln that he had been called to deliver after the assassination.

But the factor that worked longest against Holland's long-term reputation was his position as an "outsider" to what would soon become a protective ring of Springfield "insiders" who had known Lincoln themselves and who treated Holland as an interloper. Holland was, after all, an easterner, and while he tried to draw many of Lincoln's professional acquaintances from his Springfield days into his book, too many of them were planning biographies or lectures or articles of their own to welcome Holland as a rival.<sup>6</sup> What was worse, Holland chose to promote Lincoln as "eminently a Christian president," which aroused the contempt of two of the most important "insiders," William Herndon and Ward Hill Lamon, neither of whom shared much of Holland's religious interest and both of whom were convinced that Lincoln was an "infidel" and even an "atheist." Despite the fact that Holland built more upon material given him by Herndon than any other source, and despite Herndon's original enthusiasm for Holland's work, Herndon was deeply opposed to any attempt to discover religious sensibilities in Lincoln, and when it became apparent shortly before Holland's *Life* was published that Holland intended to do exactly that, Herndon embarked on his own private campaign to condemn Holland's *Life* as "all bosh."<sup>7</sup>

And yet, even granting Holland's weakness for moralisms and journalistic slickness, his *Life* was a much greater accomplishment than Herndon wanted to admit. The measure of Holland's achievement becomes clearer when his *Life* is compared to the campaign biographies that preceded, rather than those that followed, him. Although at least thirteen campaign biographies of Lincoln had appeared for the 1860 presidential election alone, their coverage of Lincoln's formative years in the 1820s and 1830s was sparse and unin-

teresting, and most of them relied for their information on Lincoln's life before 1860 on two autobiographical sketches written by Lincoln, in 1859 for Jesse W. Fell and in 1860 for John Locke Scripps.<sup>8</sup> Joseph Barrett, for instance, published a campaign biography of Lincoln in 1860, reissued it with a review of Lincoln's first term as president, and then hurried a postassassination edition into print in the summer of 1865, but only 72 of its 842 pages were devoted to Lincoln's life before his election to Congress in 1846. In the same fashion, Henry Jarvis Raymond, the strongly pro-Lincoln editor of the *New York Times*, published an election-year *History of the Administration of President Lincoln* in May 1864, but only 50 pages were given over to biography and the rest went to assembling Lincoln's speeches, public letters, and other papers. The postassassination version of the *History* that Raymond brought out in 1865 as *Life and Public Services of Abraham Lincoln* greatly lengthened the overall narrative, to 801 pages, but the new material focused only on the war years. Holland, by contrast, devoted almost one-fifth of his narrative to Lincoln's life before the 1846 congressional election, and more than half the book was spent on the period before Lincoln's inauguration.

Much of what filled that first half was material on Lincoln's early life that was now appearing for the first time. Raymond had picked up a number of "early Lincoln" anecdotes for his *History*, including the tales of Lincoln's boyhood letter to pastor Elkin, the Crawford book story, the New Orleans flatboat account, and the trial of Duff Armstrong. But Holland included over thirty such "early Lincoln" stories, including the story of the turkey that young Lincoln shot from his father's cabin; being kicked by a horse at the mill; his accounting of the New Salem post office money from a sock; the pig in the road; swinging through a "scuttle" to defend Edward Dickinson Baker; and so on. Holland was able to retail these stories because he directly sought out a number of Lincoln acquaintances, including Stephen T. Logan, Horace White, Usher F. Linder, Orville Hickman Browning, Newton Bateman, George Boutwell, Dr.

Anson G. Henry, and Joshua Speed, and either interviewed them directly in Springfield or else solicited written reminiscences. Even more significant, advertisements that Holland took out in several Midwestern papers brought him into contact with the ring of Lincoln's collateral family, especially Augustus H. Chapman (who married the daughter of Lincoln's stepsister, Matilda Johnston), John Hanks (who had carried into the 1860 Illinois state Republican convention the split rails that gave Lincoln his campaign nickname), and the irrepressible Dennis Hanks (the illegitimate cousin who had grown up with Lincoln in Indiana). Above all, whether Herndon liked to admit it or not, Holland was the first to make use of Herndon's own testimony about Lincoln's early life. If Holland's *Life* was "all bosh," much of the "bosh" had come directly from Herndon.

This is not to say that Holland was incapable of dealing in "bosh" when he was so inclined: Born in Belchertown, Massachusetts, on 24 July 1819 as the youngest of Harrison and Anna Gilbert Holland's seven children, Josiah Gilbert Holland grew up in a household compounded of ultra-evangelical Calvinism and Micawberish poverty, and he spent virtually all of his life trying to get away from both. Ironically, in that respect, his early life was curiously similar to Lincoln's. Lincoln found his way out through wage labor, politics, and law; Holland tried to find his way out (since his parents were too poor to send him to Yale) through medicine, spending two quick terms in the Berkshire Medical College and learning most of his profession in the office of two Northampton, Massachusetts, doctors. He could not have made a worse mistake than choosing medicine: he went into practice with a fellow medical student in Springfield, Massachusetts, but he quickly turned out to be a failure as a physician, and by 1847 he was writing hack journalism just to make ends meet. Even there, he slipped badly. A small weekly that he founded in Springfield, the *Bay State Courier*, died unnoticed after six months. In desperation, he took a teaching job in Richmond, Virginia, in 1848, and then signed on as superintendent of schools in Vicksburg, Missis-

ssippi, where he found on arrival that it was up to him to organize the school system he was supposed to superintend. By May of 1849, he was back in Springfield.

But Springfield, Massachusetts, turned out to be the making of Holland, just as another Springfield had for Lincoln. Two weeks after returning from Mississippi, Holland was hired by Samuel Bowles, the owner and editor of the weekly *Springfield Republican*, which Bowles had taken up in 1844 as a Whig political organ (Bowles' first issue was an endorsement of Henry Clay's last futile campaign for the presidency). Bowles as editor and Holland as assistant editor amounted to the entire editorial staff, and virtually all the routine writing of the paper fell to Holland. But Holland thrived on it: after a year Bowles made him coeditor, after two more years Bowles made him part owner, and by 1853 the paper had been converted into the only daily in western Massachusetts. In 1854 Holland began serializing a *History of Western Massachusetts*, which was published in book form in 1855 and got him elected to the Massachusetts Historical Society. Even more, it gave him the raw material for his first turn at fiction, a historical romance entitled *The Bay-Path, A Tale of New England Colonial Life*, which began a highly lucrative march through sixteen editions. He gave up editing the *Republican*, but not his stake in the paper, and he now used the *Republican* as his platform for serializing what became his most popular production, a moral-advice book, *Timothy Titcomb's Letters to Young People* (1858). Two more novels followed by 1860, and thereafter Holland took to the lecture circuit.

It was his success as a lecturer which probably won Holland the invitation to deliver a eulogy on Lincoln at a mass meeting in the Springfield city hall on 19 April 1865, the Wednesday after Lincoln's death.<sup>9</sup> It was, as Holland's first biographer described it, "an oratorical triumph," and it moved Samuel Bowles to propose that Holland undertake a full-length Lincoln biography.<sup>10</sup> Holland wasted no time: even before Lincoln was buried, Holland had begun corresponding with John Locke Scripps, and exactly one month after



delivering his Lincoln eulogy Holland was in Lincoln's Springfield, casually announcing that he was "engaged upon a new biography of President Lincoln" and "in search of original and authentic material for the work."<sup>11</sup> That search led him directly to William Henry Herndon, who shut down his office for two days to give Holland his own view of "the inner life of Mr. L." and an invaluable list of personal contacts for Holland to follow up.

Herndon seems to have taken an immediate liking to the suave New Englander. Herndon considered himself, in cultural terms, to be "turned *New Englandwards*," and Holland shared Herndon's interest in "the *subjective* Mr. Lincoln." It was probably Herndon who recounted to Holland the story that Lincoln had posed to Stephen Douglas his famous second question at Freeport, Illinois, because he hoped to sink Douglas's chances for the presidency in 1860, and it was probably also Herndon who told Holland that Lincoln's speeches against the Mexican War had cost him popular support in his home district and caused him to leave Congress without running for reelection. Both of these stories were of dubious accuracy, but Herndon believed them, and Holland could hardly have gotten them anywhere else in 1865. By the time Holland left Springfield, Herndon had become the most important, and most enthusiastic, direct source of information about Lincoln's pre-presidential life. "I regret," Herndon wrote him shortly afterwards, "that you could not have been with me 8 or 10 days consecutively."<sup>12</sup>

In fact, Holland was in Springfield only for a week before returning to New England.<sup>13</sup> But he held at least one major interview with Usher F. Linder and with Newton Bateman, the Illinois superintendent of public instruction and a Lincoln political ally, and perhaps also with Albert Hale, the minister of the Second (now Westminster) Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Stephen Logan, and Jesse K. Dubois. He also sent off a volley of requests for reminiscences, mostly from a long list of Lincoln acquaintances given him by Herndon. Not all of these contacts proved particularly encouraging. George Boutwell was only mildly interested in

Holland's project and glumly warned him that any effort to uncover fresh material on Lincoln's early years in Indiana's Spencer county was probably useless, since "all that is known of Mr. Lincoln in this County is rapidly going into tradition."<sup>14</sup> Others, like Anson Henry, were deliberately uncooperative. Henry refused to share the contents of any of Lincoln's letters to him because "their publication would only gratify a morbid curiosity," and he refused to make any further comment on Lincoln unless it was clear that "your undertaking meets with the approbation & approval of the family of Mr. Lincoln."<sup>15</sup>

But several other contacts rewarded Holland with pure biographical gold. Joshua Speed, who assured Holland that "till 1842, no two men were more intimate" than he and Lincoln, sent Holland copies of five key Lincoln letters (including the famous 24 August 1855 letter on slavery and Kansas, which Holland reprinted in full).<sup>16</sup> An advertisement in the *Cincinnati Advertiser* brought a response from Augustus H. Chapman, who dismissed the Barrett and Raymond biographies as the work of "hacks" and sent to Holland his own collection of "facts relating to Mr. Lincoln's early life, that of his Father and Mother, his sister and all of his ancestors." Even more important, Holland was able to recruit Erastus Wright, another Lincoln acquaintancé in Springfield, to interview Dennis Hanks and John Hanks at the United States Sanitary Commission fair in Chicago in June 1865. Wright sent Holland a digest of the interviews (which Wright entitled "Biographical Sketches of Abraham Lincoln") in which Nancy Hanks Lincoln was identified as "Nancy Sparrow" and "Joseph Hanks niece," thus firing the first shot in a century-long controversy about Nancy Hanks Lincoln's possible illegitimacy.<sup>17</sup> Wright also interviewed James Short—the "Uncle Jimmy" Short of New Salem who had bought back Lincoln's surveying tools from the sheriff in 1835—and reported to Holland one of the earliest references (outside Herndon's collection of reminiscences) to yet another Lincoln controversy, the Ann Rutledge romance: "Lincoln boarded with said [James] Rutledge and was par-

tial towards his daughter, Miss Ann, an amiable young Lady who took Sick and died, causing him much sorrow and unhappiness."<sup>18</sup>.

Holland seems to have gathered most of the interviews and letters he wanted by the end of the summer of 1865, and together with the Raymond, Barrett, and Scripps biographies, plus the appearance of Noah Brooks's "Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln" in the July 1865 issue of *Harper's Magazine* and the serialization of Francis Carpenter's "Six Months in the White House" in the *New York Independent*, Holland was able swiftly to cobble together his biography and have a prospectus ready for Samuel Bowles to circulate to subscribers by December 1865. But despite the book's sensational popularity when it was released early in 1866, Holland's *Life of Abraham Lincoln* made itself into a critical target from the very first. Unlike Herndon and the campaign biographers, Holland was unconvinced that Lincoln's greatness had anything to do with his back-country common-man origins (any more, of course, than Holland wanted to concede any of his successes to his own similarly hapless, pious origins). For Holland, what set Lincoln off from the ordinary was his drive to escape those origins, not to rely on them. Holland recognized that Lincoln himself regarded his own origins as "common-place and mean," and Holland consequently found little in Lincoln's "primitive surroundings" worth romanticizing: "A good deal of what is called 'the pioneer spirit,'" Holland sharply remarked, "is simply a spirit of shiftless discontent." Far from being a man of the people, what distinguished the young Lincoln in Holland's Whiggish eyes was that, "living among the roughest of rough men, many of whom were addicted to coarse vices," Lincoln had managed to avoid becoming like them. "Not a circumstance of his life favored the development which he had reached," Holland grimly observed, "not an influence around him . . . which did not tend rather to drag him down than lift him up."

Holland made no attempt "to disguise or conceal my own personal partiality for Mr. Lincoln, and my thorough sym-

pathy with the political principles to which his life was devoted." And no wonder, since Holland and Lincoln were both Whigs who had scampered up the social ladder of the market revolution and were both Republicans who came to regard slavery as the ultimate contradiction of "the right to rise" in the market-driven economy which replaced the old Jeffersonian agrarianism championed by the Democrats. Holland rejoiced that Lincoln "was always a loyal party man" as a Whig, and his account of Lincoln's presidency gleefully stigmatized the northern Democratic opposition as "pestilent" and "malicious." He was merciless to George McClellan, who had commanded Lincoln's armies in 1862 and then ran against him for the presidency in 1864. "The whole history of McClellan's operations," Holland declared in a single damning litany, "is a history of magnificent preparations and promises, of fatal hesitations and procrastinations, of clamoring for more preparations, and justifications of hesitations and procrastinations, of government indulgence and forbearance, of military intrigues within the camp, of popular impatience and alarms, and of the waste of great means and golden opportunities." And Holland did not mind hinting broadly that McClellan "held a theory of his own as to the mode of conducting the war, and that independently of the government, he endeavored to pursue it"—which was as much as saying that McClellan, for political reasons, had tried to betray his country.

That Holland, like Lincoln, was more old Whig than new Republican also appeared from his applause of Lincoln's cautious approach to emancipation and Lincoln's reluctant clinging to schemes for colonization. "Sudden emancipation was never in accordance with Mr. Lincoln's judgement," Holland was convinced, "Nothing but the necessities of war would have induced him to decree it with relation to the slaves of any state." Holland took only scant notice of the Radical Republicans, and when he did, it was usually to wave them away as an ill-tempered distraction. "Many republicans suffered under private grievances," Holland sniffed. Frémont was "virtuous above his party, virtuous above Mr. Lincoln,"

Holland sardonically commented, and his failed 1864 presidential nomination was nothing more than "a damage to the national cause"; the Wade-Davis Manifesto was simply "an offensive paper."

And yet Holland heeded Herndon's warning that Lincoln "was not God—was man: he was not perfect."<sup>19</sup> Alongside the public Lincoln, Holland turned his attention onto the complexities and ambiguities of Lincoln's inner psyche. "He was not endowed with a hopeful temperament," Holland reported, "He had no force of self-esteem—no faith in himself that buoyed him up amid the contempt of the proud and prosperous." (Here was the beginning, along with Herndon's Springfield lecture in December 1865 on the "Analysis of the Character of Abraham Lincoln," of the image of Lincoln the melancholy, the Christ-like sufferer, the "marked and peculiar man.") Holland's Lincoln was, in fact, a bundle of psychological contradictions, at one moment "oppressed with a deep melancholy at times, weighed down by the great problems of his own life and of humanity at large," and the next capable of laughing "incontinently over incidents and stories that would hardly move any other man in his position to a smile." Much as Lincoln was able to rise above the crudeness of the frontier, he was also liable to slip back down into it at times, and Holland admitted that Lincoln was quite capable of "telling stories that it would not be proper to repeat in the presence of women. It is useless for Mr. Lincoln's biographers to ignore this habit, for it is notorious." Rather than being a starry-eyed idealist, Lincoln "was a man of practical expedients," even to the point where Lincoln "had the credit or the discredit, of being a cunning man" (although Holland promptly tried to redefine *cunning* as *ingenuity*). And yet Holland noted that Lincoln was also a man of ideas, whose habits of "mental absorption" were so great that "New Salem people . . . thought him crazy, because he passed his best friends in the street without seeing them."

This might have been quite enough in 1866 to have brought down on Holland the same storms of wrath for questioning Lincoln's character that followed after Herndon for

his lectures later that same year. Instead, Holland brought down on himself the wrath of Herndon, and on a subject where Holland imagined he was paying Lincoln a compliment. Holland had been curious about Lincoln's religion after his first interview with Herndon, and although Herndon (as he later told Isaac Arnold) had simply shrugged the question off, Holland persisted. This was the first instance Holland had encountered of "insider" resistance to exposing awkward aspects of Lincoln's life to public gaze, and Herndon finally tried to bury the subject by telling Holland, "The less said the better." Then as now, this was not the best advice to give to a journalist, and Holland knowingly replied (at least as Herndon retailed the story) with a wink, "O never mind, I'll fix that." Indeed he did. Lincoln came off the pages of Holland's *Life* with a superimposed Christian halo. According to Holland, Lincoln had been taught the Christian faith at Nancy Hanks Lincoln's knee; he had come to a belief "in God, and in his personal supervision of the affairs of men" during the New Salem days; he had developed a "spirit of tender piety" after Gettysburg and Vicksburg; and he had governed an administration "which, in its policy and acts, expressed the convictions of a Christian people." Holland's Lincoln "grew more religious with every passing year of his official life," and "in all the great emergencies of his closing years, his reliance upon divine guidance and assistance was often extremely touching." The difficulty with this picture was that it clashed with a general suspicion in the public mind that Lincoln had never had any clear religious affiliations. He had attended, but never joined, churches; he had invoked the blessing of God but never specified *what* or *whose* God he was addressing; and he rebuffed efforts during the war for a constitutional amendment to give official national sanction to Christianity. Holland could not deny these suspicions, but he could tiptoe around them. It was true, Holland admitted, that Lincoln "always remained shy in the exposure of his religious experiences," but that was not the same as saying that he had never had any. This required Holland to introduce a sharp division between Lincoln's

public life, where he remained religiously neutral, and his private life, where he practiced a Christianity as devout as anyone's. Political life, Holland explained, forced Lincoln to live "a double life." But this did not diminish for Holland the discovery that "Mr. Lincoln had, in his quiet way, found a path to the Christian stand-point—that he had found God, and rested on the eternal truth of God." He was, in the end, "a Christian president," a "true Christian, true man," and Holland was moved to conclude his biography with a hymn of gratitude "to that ministry of Providence and grace which endowed thee so richly, and bestowed thee upon the nation and mankind."

The other difficulty with Holland's Christianized Lincoln was Herndon, who was simply aghast when he read the "double life" explanation. "Mr. Lincoln had no idea of Christianity," Herndon angrily wrote to Holland in February 1866, "did not believe in it—was not a Christian—couldn't be from his very nature." The argument that Lincoln had somehow concealed his Christianity for political reasons suggested much too delicately that Lincoln was a hypocrite who would, for political advancement, say one thing while believing another. By the end of 1866, Holland had become almost unmentionable in Herndon's presence. "Do you suppose for an instant," Herndon erupted when one hapless correspondent asked him his opinion of Holland's account of Lincoln's religion, "that if Mr. Lincoln was really a converted man to the faith of three Gods, Revelation, Inspiration, Miraculous Conception, and their necessity, etc., as some of the Christian world pretend to believe of Mr. Lincoln, that he *would not have boldly said so and so acted like a deeply sincere man and an honest one fearlessly of that mob furor?*"<sup>20</sup>

But Holland never retracted his claims. When Ward Hill Lamon's *Life of Abraham Lincoln* appeared in 1872; built on Herndon's research materials and repeating Herndon's skepticism about Lincoln's "religion," Holland wrote a scorching review in *Scribner's Monthly* (which he was then editing) that reached out to knock both Lamon and Herndon on the head. "Mr. Herndon and Colonel Lamon may strive to

demonstrate that he was nothing but a heathen, and a somewhat vulgar heathen, at the best . . . but the result of the attempted demonstration is injurious to no one half so much as to themselves."<sup>21</sup> And he insisted, Herndon and Lamon notwithstanding, that good reason existed for saying so: in the first place, not even Herndon could deny that Lincoln's state papers, from his farewell address in Springfield to the Second Inaugural, were shot through with religious references, and in ways and in sheer volume that departed markedly from Lincoln's Democratic predecessors. "No President had ever before asked the people, in a public address, to pray for him," Holland observed on Lincoln's Springfield farewell. "It sounded like the cant of the conventicle to ears unaccustomed to the language of piety from the lips of politicians . . . but it came from a heart surcharged with a sense of need, and strong in its belief that the Almighty listens to the prayers of men."

The clinching evidence for Holland's belief in Lincoln's sincere, if surreptitious, conversion to Christianity lay in an interview Holland held in May of 1865 with Newton Bateman, a devout evangelical Congregationalist who had been elected as Illinois's superintendent of public instruction in 1858, one of two Republican victors in the statewide elections that accompanied Lincoln's unsuccessful bid to unseat Stephen Douglas. Bateman certainly knew Lincoln well enough to speak with some degree of authority—he had first met Lincoln in Springfield in 1842, when he was only twenty years old, and Lincoln referred to him as "my little friend, the big schoolmaster of Illinois." More to the point, from June 1860 until January 1861, his office in the Illinois state capitol was next to an office temporarily lent to Lincoln as an election headquarters by the governor of Illinois. It was during those months (Bateman told Holland) that Lincoln would often look for relief from the crowds of well-wishers and interviewers by slipping through a connecting door into Bateman's office.

It was there, Bateman claimed, that Lincoln had asked Bateman to review with him a poll list that showed how



Springfield voters were expected to cast their votes in the upcoming presidential election. Finding that all but three of "twenty-three ministers, of different denominations" in Springfield were likely to vote against him, Lincoln sadly told Bateman that although he was "not a Christian—God knows I would be one—" he did not understand how Christian ministers could read their Bible and still vote, in effect, for the continuance of slavery. Bateman then told Holland that Lincoln had drawn "from his bosom a pocket New Testament" and protested, "I know there is a God, and that he hates injustice and slavery. . . . I know I am right because I know that liberty is right, for Christ teaches it, and Christ is God." The conversation then went on, according to Bateman, to dwell "much upon the necessity of faith in the Christian's God, as an element of successful statesmanship." Bateman wrote this out for Holland less than a month later on eight legal-sized sheets of paper and sent it to Holland with the half-qualification that "Mr. Lincoln's language made a vivid impression upon me, [and] while I do not claim that the above quotations are absolutely verbatim, I know that they are very nearly so, and the sentiments are exactly as he uttered them."<sup>22</sup> It was exactly what Holland needed to prove his point, and he printed Bateman's statement in the *Life* with only a few minor editorial changes.

The Bateman statement is the single most controversial aspect of the Holland *Life*, since so much of Holland's claims about this central aspect of Lincoln's inner life rest upon it. Herndon believed at first that "Bateman is a good man, but a mistaken one," and that Holland merely had to be warned against him; but when it became clear that Holland had bought the entire story, Herndon denounced both Bateman and Holland as charlatans.<sup>23</sup> "Holland's and Bateman's statement . . . I deem a farce," Herndon growled. "Bateman lied to Holland as Holland lies in his biography of Lincoln."<sup>24</sup> Others who knew Bateman tended to follow Herndon's judgment: Julian Sturtevant, who had known both Lincoln and Bateman, thought Bateman "naturally sly," and it is significant that on at least two other occasions when Bateman

described his brief time as Lincoln's professional neighbor, no mention of the "Christ is God" conversation surfaced.<sup>25</sup> And more recently, Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher have rated Bateman's reminiscence as "dubious biographical material."<sup>26</sup>

Still, even the Fehrenbachers have conceded that "it is not inconceivable that Lincoln had some kind of discussion with Bateman in which he revealed more religious feeling than had been his custom." The months between his nomination for the presidency in May 1860 and his departure for Washington in February 1861 were months of unusually unbuttoned reflectiveness for the otherwise "shutmouthed" and "reticent" Lincoln, especially when old friends showed up to offer congratulations or encouragement. For instance: Isaac Cogdal's claim that Lincoln confessed he "did honestly and truly" love Ann Rutledge was vigorously debunked by James G. Randall as "artificial and made to order," but it has been revived as credible testimony by John Y. Simon; and the Cogdal interview, which Simon treats as an example of a rare moment of nostalgia on Lincoln's part, took place in the same period as Bateman's.<sup>27</sup> What is likely, therefore, is that Lincoln indeed had a conversation about religion with Bateman, and that it probably revolved around Lincoln's perceived incongruity between Christian teaching and the reluctance of Christian ministers to criticize slavery (an incongruity which Lincoln had earlier observed in the case of Frederick Augustus Ross's *Slavery Ordained of God* in 1857), and perhaps even about his own felt sense of helplessness at finding a way to be religious (which, again, Lincoln had also expressed as early as 1848). But Herndon was probably correct to observe that anything more than this was embroidery on Bateman's part. "The first part of the story is correct," Herndon unyieldingly declared, "that is, that Mr. Lincoln was not a Christian, but the second part, that is, that Christ was God is false."<sup>28</sup>

Oddly, by accepting Bateman's testimony at face value, Holland made more trouble for himself than he needed. If Bateman exaggerated Lincoln's Christianity, Herndon ex-

aggerated Holland's "wink" and Holland's need to "fix that" into a deliberate plot to make Lincoln into a recommendation for orthodox evangelical Protestantism. Actually, Holland had nothing quite so relentless in view. Unlike Bateman, Holland was a liberal Congregationalist (Washington Gladden, the noted Social Gospeller, was one of the eulogists at his funeral) who was more interested in representing Lincoln as a decent Christian gentleman (as another way of indicating how successfully Lincoln had climbed from the muck of the backcountry) than in representing Lincoln as an evangelical convert. "Christianity, in the form of abstract statement and in the shape of a creed, has not any particular interest nor very much meaning," Holland wrote, in words more reminiscent of Lincoln than the ones Bateman used: "If they seem good and true and like Christ, it satisfies me, and nothing else does."<sup>29</sup> Nor did he press the subject of Lincoln's religion further. Apart from his hostile review of Lamon, Holland never returned to the Lincoln theme after the publication of the biography. He was a journalist, not a proselytizer, and within a year he had sold his partnership in the *Springfield Republican* and moved on to newer ventures. In November 1870 he launched *Scribner's Magazine*, which became the most successful literary monthly in the United States, and in 1872 moved permanently to New York City. He continued to turn out best-selling novels. In 1881 he was about to convert *Scribner's* into the *Century Magazine* when heart failure took his life. He was buried in Springfield, Massachusetts, three days later, on 15 October 1881.

But if Holland allowed his instinct to give "hurtless pleasure to multitudes" (as one New York obituary put it), he did no worse than Lamon and Herndon, whose biographies are plagued with irregularities of their own making, and who are forgiven largely because they at least had claims to knowing Lincoln, which Holland did not. In his pursuit of authentic material on Lincoln's early life, Holland partly followed but also partly blazed Herndon's path toward his own eventual *Lincoln* in 1889, and by turning attention away from the stress laid by Barrett and Raymond on the politi-

cal Lincoln toward an "inner Lincoln," Holland injected a strong note of psychological realism in the midst of his political adulation of Lincoln. Benjamin Thomas once wrote of the Lincoln biographical literature that virtually all of it could be divided into the realist and the romantic; Mark E. Neely has more wisely revised that judgment to describe the two great traditions as a division between the public Lincoln (represented by Nicolay and Hay) and the private Lincoln.<sup>30</sup> In the latter tradition, the name that comes most easily to mind is Herndon. But before Herndon, there was Holland, and unwittingly or not, the broad stream of Lincoln biography that includes such widely separated work as Dwight Anderson, Charles Strozier, George Forgie, Michael Burlingame, William Barton, and Jesse Weik all find their first pattern in Josiah Holland's *Life of Abraham Lincoln*.

A sincere word of thanks belongs here to Michael Burlingame, Connecticut College, and Thomas Schwartz, Illinois State Historian, for their generous assistance, both in reading drafts of this introduction and in locating several important documents.

## NOTES

1. Howard's interview notes with John Todd Stuart, William Green, William Butler, and others are reproduced in *The Lincoln Papers*, ed. David C. Mearns (New York, 1948), 1:150-59.

2. Edward Eggleston, "Josiah Gilbert Holland," *Century Magazine* 23 (December 1881): 165.

3. Benjamin P. Thomas, *Portrait for Posterity: Lincoln and His Biographers* (New Brunswick NJ, 1947), 16; see also Paul Angle, *A Shelf of Lincoln Books: A Critical Bibliography of Lincolniana*. (New Brunswick NJ, 1946), 18-20, for a somewhat less dismissive evaluation.

4. Harry Houston Peckham, *Josiah Gilbert Holland in Relation to His Times* (Philadelphia, 1940), 64.

5. Eggleston, "Josiah Gilbert Holland," 167.

6. Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York, 1994), 69-70.

7. Herndon to Lamon, 25 February 1870, in *The Hidden Lincoln: From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon*, ed. Emmanuel Hertz (New York, 1938), 68.

8. Lincoln, "To Jesse W. Fell, Enclosing Autobiography," 20 December 1859, and "Autobiography Written for John L. Scripps," in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ, 1955), 3:511-12 and 4:60-67; and Roy P. Basler, introduction to *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, by John Locke Scripps (New York, 1968), 7-16.

9. *Eulogy on Abraham Lincoln, late President of the United States, pronounced at the City Hall, Springfield, Mass., April 19, 1865* (Springfield MA: Samuel Bowles, 1865).

10. Mrs. H. M. Plunkett, *Josiah Gilbert Holland* (New York, 1894), 48.

11. *Illinois State Journal*, 19 May 1865.

12. Herndon to Holland, 26 May 1865, Josiah Gilbert Holland Papers, New York Public Library; see also David Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon: A Biography* (New York, 1948), 169.

13. *Illinois State Journal*, 25 May 1865.

14. Boutwell to Holland, 28 June 1865, Holland Papers.

15. Henry to Holland, 16 June 1865, Holland Papers.

16. Speed to Holland, undated, Holland Papers.

17. Wright to Holland, 10 June 1865, Holland Papers.

18. Wright to Holland, 10 July 1865, Holland Papers. Wright must have interviewed Short no more than two weeks before Short provided Herndon with a similar description of the Rutledge romance; see Short to Herndon, 7 July 1865, in Herndon-Weik Papers, Library of Congress.

19. Herndon to Holland, 26 May 1865, Holland Papers.

20. Herndon, 3 December 1866, in *The Hidden Lincoln*, 45.

21. Thomas, *Portrait for Posterity*, 57-60.

22. Bateman to Holland, 19 June 1865, Holland Papers.

23. Herndon to Holland, 24 February 1866, Holland Papers.

24. Herndon to Lamon, 25 February 1870, in *The Hidden Lincoln*, 46, 68.

25. Sturtevant to William E. Barton, 8 March 1920, in the William E. Barton Papers, University of Chicago; Bateman interview manuscript, in the Ida M. Tarbell Papers, Allegheny College; see also Bateman's lecture *Abraham Lincoln: An Address* (Galesburg IL, 1899).

26. Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford CA, 1996), 26.

27. Simon, "Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 11 (spring 1990): 33.
28. Herndon, "Lincoln and Strangers," in *The Hidden Lincoln*, 404.
29. *A Memorial of Josiah Gilbert Holland* (New York, 1881), 12.
30. Mark E. Neely, "Abraham Lincoln," in *The American Civil War: A Handbook of Literature and Research*, ed. Steven E. Woodworth (Westport CT, 1996), 189-202.