

Lincoln's Billy

Tom LeClair

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Most of the authors who wrote any of the 15,000+ Lincoln books in existence would know immediately the full and proper name of the Billy in the title of this historical novel. He was William Herndon, who was the sixteenth president's twenty-year law partner in Springfield, Illinois, and the person who provided insights and anecdotes that fuel the Lincoln legend to this very day.

After Lincoln's assassination, Herndon, despite financial problems and on-again-off-again bouts with alcohol, retraced Lincoln's life. He interviewed and corresponded with people who knew Lincoln from his hardscrabble childhood in Kentucky, to his Mississippi River and New Orleans adventures and through the Civil War, until his assassination on April 15, 1865.

LeClair is the author of five novels and a well-known literary critic. His Herndon's dialogue catches the rustic ruses of their law partnership. For instance: "In the courtroom, Lincoln sometimes played the role of bumpkin. I, too, tucked my pants into my boots, chewed on a sliver, and said damn and hell, but our method was completely different. I was still Turkey Bill gobbling over every word and issue ... Laconic Lincoln lounged about the courtroom as if it were a stable, sat on the table, dug earwax out of his ears, and used anecdotes to illustrate the arguments."

With *Lincoln's Billy*, LeClair provides an often overlooked glimpse of a relationship that, yet again, bolsters Lincoln's everyman reputation and, beyond that, celebrates the qualities of brotherhood and loyalty.

THOMAS BEVIER (Summer 2015)

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