

RICHARD BROOKHISER



FOUNDERS'  
SON

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*A LIFE of* ABRAHAM LINCOLN

## Praise for *Founders' Son*

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“[Brookhiser’s] melding of Lincoln with the founders yields significant implications for the interpretation of the American past—in both the Revolutionary and Civil War eras.”

—Drew Gilpin Faust, *New York Times Book Review*

“Beautifully written and choked with insights. . . . For Brookhiser, Lincoln’s life was an encounter with a succession of fathers: his own, the Founding Fathers, and God the father. Can it be only coincidence that in time he himself was regarded as Father Abraham?”

—*Boston Globe*

“Mr. Brookhiser positions Lincoln as the self-conscious heir of the eighteenth-century Founders and thus fends off the claim (made in the fever swamps of both left and right) that Lincoln subverted the Constitution in the interests of creating an all-powerful central government.”

—Allen Guelzo, *Wall Street Journal*, Gift Books: Civil War

“Brookhiser has done the seemingly impossible: He has written a life of Lincoln that is fresh, original, and ideal for those new to the subject. . . . While others have explored the influence of the Founders on Lincoln’s thought and statesmanship . . . Brookhiser has distilled his own profound insights, gained from writing eight fine books on the Founders, into a masterpiece of brevity and crystalline prose. He is a moral biographer of great erudition—a Parson Weems with his facts straight—and has given us a study of Lincoln that can be swiftly read but should be slowly savored. . . . With deft, epigrammatic phrases, Brookhiser distills Lincoln’s life to its essence.”

—*National Review*

“Since he is well-chronicled, and often mythologized, it is hard to expand our understanding of Lincoln. But Richard Brookhiser does an expert job of finding new room.”

—*Weekly Standard*

“*Founders' Son* is not just another Lincoln biography (more than 15,000 have already been published). Instead, it is a chronicle of Lincoln’s mental and spiritual evolution, much of it written in his own words; indeed, Abraham Lincoln has almost all the best lines.”

—*Washington Times*

“A well-written and readable interpretation of Lincoln’s political philosophy.”

—*Choice*

“[An] illuminating but unconventional new biography of Abraham Lincoln. . . . [Brookhiser] succeeds brilliantly in giving us a new and original perspective on Lincoln’s statesmanship. His prose is spare and robust (the author has been schooled by Lincoln) and even readers who know little of Lincoln will find the treatment entirely readable, enjoyable, and persuasive.”

—*New Criterion*

“As he has before . . . he clearly demonstrates—in decided contrast to so many of his comrades on the right—that he takes history seriously. And here, providing us with a close historical reading of Lincoln’s speeches, notes, and correspondence, he enables us to not only better understand, but also (and even more effectively than he did in his previous biographical studies) to actually ‘feel’ his subject’s battles both with his antagonists and with history itself.”

—Harvey Kaye, *Daily Beacon*

“Drawing on Lincoln’s official papers, speeches, and private letters, the book makes clear how he looked back to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution’s Preamble to resolve the great contradiction that the Founders couldn’t—slavery’s existence in a nation where all are created equal and have unalienable rights.”

—*Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*

“An unconventional new biography of Lincoln. . . . Brookhiser quotes many of Lincoln’s speeches and letters to demonstrate how he was influenced by the Founders in his struggle with the great issues of his time, slavery, and civil war.”

—*Seattle Times*

“A compact, profound, and utterly absorbing new life of Abraham Lincoln. . . . With searchlight intensity, it dazzlingly illuminates the great president’s evolving views of slavery and the extraordinary speeches in which he unfolded that vision, molding the American mind on the central conflict in American history and resolving, at heroic and tragic cost to the nation and himself, the contradiction that the Founding Fathers themselves could not resolve.”

—*City Journal*

“Irresistible pacing, exciting, and accessible, [*Founders’ Son*] is a unique and essential insight into this pivotal figure from American history.”

—*San Francisco Book Review*

“A pithy biography of the man who not only ended slavery in America, but also distilled the Founders’ legacy. Astonishingly, Brookhiser has added to the massive Lincoln literature a book that is both distinct and important.”

—*Commentary*

“Working mainly from Lincoln’s speeches, Brookhiser carefully examines the full range, from his early talks as Lincoln began his career to the famous ones of the Lincoln-Douglas debates and those of his presidency. . . . There is much to admire in *Founders’ Son*.”

—*American Scholar*

“Brookhiser excels in describing Lincoln’s political fights over government banks and in parsing his presidency in wartime—specifically, his detailed account of the complex evolution of the president’s views on slavery.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Lincoln knew that history was both past and prologue, and he sought to appropriate the earlier age properly to guide the nation successfully through the Civil War. This highly accessible read will appeal most to readers who desire to learn more about Lincoln and especially the ideas, dogmas, and dreams that moved him to his public career and life in the White House.”

—*Library Journal*

“[Brookhiser’s] discussion of the second inaugural is genuinely moving and instructive. The narrative always smoothly returns, though, to the Founders and Lincoln’s unceasing attempt to divine their intentions and to examine the institutions they built and the opportunity they created for someone like him to thrive. For years now, Brookhiser has helped bring the Founders back to life, precisely Lincoln’s purpose as the president contemplated for his country a new birth of freedom, ‘the old freedom’ they envisioned in 1776 but couldn’t quite perfect.”

—*Kirkus Review*

“Lincoln was not a conventional politician, and neither is Richard Brookhiser a conventional historian, nor, fittingly, is *Founders’ Son* a conventional biography. For the sixteenth president, as Brookhiser dazzlingly argues, ideas *mattered*—but never so much as when translated into action. Throughout Lincoln’s life, the Founders served as his touchstones, their ideals his lodestars, and he dedicated himself to completing the task they had left unfinished; the destruction of slavery, that Damoclean Sword menacing the Republic since its creation, would be both his monument and his tomb. *Founders’ Son* is an ingenious intellectual biography, a work of the highest order written by one of our most creative historians about the most brilliant of our presidents.”

—Alexander Rose, author of *Washington’s Spies: The Story of America’s First Spy Ring*

“In his first inaugural, Abraham Lincoln spoke of the ‘mystic chords of memory’ that bound those about to fight a civil war over the meaning of union and liberty to those who had built a system of government on them during and after the Revolution. Distinguished historian Richard Brookhiser strikes those chords in *Founders’ Son*. In doing so, he reveals Lincoln to be not only a student of the past, but a leader with the mind and courage to redeem America’s first ‘birth of freedom’ with a new one, sealed in blood.”

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Alphonse Fletcher University Professor, Harvard University

“Abraham Lincoln is the most written-about man in American history, yet Richard Brookhiser, historian and writer of extraordinary talent, has written an analysis that is lively, incisive, novel—and brilliant. This book reminds us of Lincoln’s reverence for the Founders, his ‘stubborn concern for firm principles’ and—ultimately—the often-overlooked reverence for the Almighty God that guided him in America’s darkest hours.”

—John Boehner, Speaker of the House

“In this sharply-etched portrait of Abraham Lincoln as the true heir of the Founders and their principles, Richard Brookhiser disposes of the reams of nonsense which have portrayed Lincoln as a sly provocateur who twisted the course of American government into a wholly different course. Just as Lincoln vindicated the Founders, Brookhiser vindicates Lincoln and offers us a statesman, not a politician, and one eminently worth imitating in today’s politics.”

“With the clarity and insight his readers have come to expect, Richard Brookhiser gives us the greatest American of the nineteenth century grappling with the greatest Americans of the eighteenth. A powerful, persuasive biography of the mind of Abraham Lincoln.”

—H. W. Brands, author of *The Man Who Saved the Union: Ulysses Grant in War and Peace*

“It seems impossible, but it’s true: no one has ever looked at Lincoln in quite this way before—and certainly not with Richard Brookhiser’s graceful touch, sly wit, and deep historical knowledge. The Founders’ foremost biographer has turned his eye to their greatest pupil, and everyone who cares about Lincoln (which should be everyone) will be grateful for it.”

—Andrew Ferguson, author of *Land of Lincoln: Adventures in Abe’s America*

“With characteristic elegance and economy, Richard Brookhiser demonstrates that Lincoln assured America a future by reconnecting the nation with its past. With, that is, the world-shaking egalitarianism of the Founders’ natural-rights doctrine. Hence this book is—whether Brookhiser meant so or not—a primer on the great topic of present-day politics, the relevance of the Declaration of Independence as a manifesto for limited government.”

—George F. Will

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*A LIFE of* ABRAHAM LINCOLN

RICHARD BROOKHISER

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*For*

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*Elizabeth Altham and her students*

# CONTENTS

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*Note on Spelling and Usage*

INTRODUCTION Two Old Men, One Young Man

## **PART ONE**

ONE 1809–1830: Youth

TWO George Washington and Liberty

THREE 1830–1840: Manhood

FOUR Thomas Paine, Laughter, and Reason

FIVE 1840–1852: Maturity

SIX Henry Clay and the Fourth of July

## **PART TWO**

SEVEN 1854: The Repeal of the Missouri Compromise

EIGHT 1855–1858: Running for Senate

NINE 1859–1860: Running for President

TEN Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence. The Towering Genius (I)

ELEVEN The Election of 1860. The Towering Genius (II)

## **PART THREE**

TWELVE 1861–1863: War, Emancipation

THIRTEEN Preamble to the Constitution

FOURTEEN 1864–1865: War, Death

FIFTEEN God the Father

SIXTEEN 1865: Victory. The Towering Genius (III)

EPILOGUE One Old Man

*Acknowledgments*

*Notes*

*Bibliography*



## NOTE ON SPELLING AND USAGE

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Nineteenth-century rules for spelling and punctuation differed somewhat from ours, and the uneducated followed no rules at all; even Lincoln made a few characteristic mistakes throughout his life (he liked double consonants—*verry*). I have corrected and modernized everything I have quoted, except for italics used for emphasis (mostly by Lincoln, and by Parson Weems).

# INTRODUCTION: TWO OLD MEN, ONE YOUNG MAN

WHEN ABRAHAM LINCOLN WAS A YOUNG MAN IN HIS twenties, the last of the founding fathers—the men who won the Revolution and made the Constitution—finally died. As their number dwindled, attentive people hastened to record their thoughts about America, its prospects and its problems, before they passed.

In November 1831, the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, Charles Carroll, age ninety-four, was visited by Alexis de Tocqueville, a young Frenchman touring America to study its institutions. Carroll, a wealthy planter from the state of Maryland, reminded his guest of an English aristocrat—genial, gracious, proud (“he holds himself very erect,” Tocqueville noted). Carroll was especially proud of the glory days of American independence and of his own role in proclaiming it. In the concluding sentence of the Declaration, the signers had pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to support it; Carroll let Tocqueville know that the fortune he had pledged had been “the most considerable” in America. (“There go a few millions,” another signer commented, with gallows humor, as Carroll signed the revolutionary document.)

The Revolution had been won, and Carroll kept his millions. Now, however, he fretted about the nation he had made, for America was becoming too democratic for his tastes. He mourned “the old aristocratic institutions” of Maryland, by which he meant property qualifications for voting, which had been abolished in 1810. (Before then, a Marylander had to own fifty acres of land to vote—a problem for Carroll, who owned 13,000.) He feared even more changes. “A mere Democracy,” he warned Tocqueville as the visit ended, “is but a mob”—willful, possibly violent. Fortunately, America had a safety valve: “Every year we can push our innovators out West.” This was Carroll’s vision of the frontier: as a dumping ground for democrats. Carroll died in 1832.

In February 1835, the last surviving signer of the Constitution, James Madison, played host to another curious traveler, Harriet Martineau, an English writer making her own study of the United States. Madison, an eighty-three-year-old Virginian, was a grander figure than Carroll, for he was former president as well as the signer of a founding document. Physically he had aged harder than Carroll—rheumatism confined him to a favorite chair in his bedroom—but his mind and his conversation sparkled: Martineau, clearly enchanted with him, called him “wonderful,” “lively,” “playful.” Madison’s upbeat temperament suited his politics, for unlike Carroll, he had no fear of democracy. He was a democratic politician par excellence; he and his best friend, Thomas Jefferson, had founded a political party (first called the Republican Party, then the Democratic) that had dominated American politics for over thirty years. “Madison,” as Martineau put it, “reposed cheerfully, gaily . . . on his faith in the people’s power of wise self-government.”

He had a concern of his own about the state of the nation, however, and that was slavery. Like Carroll, Madison was a planter and a slave owner. He had grown up with the institution, knew its evils from the inside, and discussed them frankly with Martineau. Slavery kept owners in a state of perpetual fear. It degraded slaves’ minds, even when it did not brutalize them physically (he cited promiscuity and cruelty to animals as bad habits encouraged by lives of bondage).

How could the country free itself of the evil? Ideally, Madison believed, slaves should be free

(though he had not freed his own). But where then could they go? Free states did not want them—many had stringent laws to keep out black immigrants; Canada, he thought, was too cold for them. Maybe they could be sent back to Africa (Martineau thought that scheme was fantastic: American slaves were Americans; they would not want to leave). Where slavery was concerned, the last of the founders “owned himself to be almost in despair.” In 1836 Madison died.

If the dying founders were anxious about their legacy, their heirs were no less troubled to see them go. Fathers should die before their children; it is the order of nature. But then responsibility and anxiety shift to new shoulders.

In January 1838 Abraham Lincoln gave a speech to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, on “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions.” His speech was both a farewell to the founding fathers and a somewhat fearful look ahead.

Lincoln himself was a young man as he delivered it—he would turn twenty-nine in two weeks. No curious foreigner interviewed him; his remarks were printed in the *Sangamo Journal*, a local newspaper.

Illinois was the west that Carroll had spoken of to Tocqueville—almost the frontier of American civilization. Northwestern Illinois had been the scene of an Indian war only six years earlier (Lincoln had served in it). No one would ever mistake Lincoln for an English aristocrat: he was the son of a subsistence farmer and carpenter, and his own property consisted mostly of debts. He had spent his early twenties bouncing from job to job—river boatman, clerk, storekeeper, postmaster, surveyor—until he settled on politics and law, getting himself elected to the state legislature and becoming the law partner of an older officeholder. Socially he belonged to the democratic mass, and the life he had chosen to pursue was climbing the ladders of democratic politics and litigation.

Lincoln was an autodidact—all his schooling amounted to no more than a year in one-room schoolhouses—and he gave an autodidact’s speech to the Young Men’s Lyceum: well-planned, but stiff and a little fancy, like a brand-new suit. One phrase foreshadowed the Lincoln to come: in his peroration, he said, of the founding fathers, “what invading foemen could *never do*, the silent artillery of time *has done*. . . . They are gone.” Lincoln’s artillery metaphor had the force and paradox of great poetry: artillery is the loudest thing on a battlefield, as it is the most destructive; but the deadliest artillery of all is noiseless, quieter even than the ticking of a watch. Lincoln’s metaphor also had the music of great poetry. It was a three-word variation on the letters *i* and *t*. *Silent*—a long *i*, trailed by a soft final *t*. *Artillery*—a sharp *t*, followed immediately by a short *i*. *Time*, the monosyllable—a sharp *t* with a long moaning *i*. The music underscored the image: *Silent* (ready) *artillery* (aim) *time* (fire—direct hit). For the rest, Lincoln’s thoughts and his language were sometimes interesting, sometimes half baked. That was all right; he had years of baking ahead.

The institutions whose perpetuation he discussed at the Lyceum were those of American democratic republicanism: “a system,” he told the young men grandly, “conducting more essentially to the ends of civil and religious liberty, than any of which the history of former times tells us.” The system was the handiwork of the founding fathers: “a legacy bequeathed us” by “hardy, brave and patriotic” ancestors.

How was the legacy doing in 1838? Lincoln was worried; though he had not read Carroll’s or Madison’s last thoughts, some of his worries echoed theirs. He had a lot to say about mobs—a “increasing disregard for law,” he argued, “pervades the country,” a point he illustrated by describing recent lynchings in Mississippi, Missouri, and Illinois. If mobs raged unchecked, the people, disgusted, might turn to a Napoleon, a dictator, to tame them. He had a little to say about slavery: the man the Illinois mob had lynched—in Alton, a town only sixty miles southwest of Springfield—had

been the editor of a crusading antislavery newspaper.

But the backdrop for Lincoln's talk—its framing anxiety—was the passing of the founding fathers and the void they left. The men who had built the country had been personally committed to its success, but now that they were gone, that commitment would inevitably weaken. "I do not mean to say, that the scenes of the [American] revolution are now or ever will be entirely forgotten; but that like every thing else, they must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time." History would tell the story of the founding fathers' great deeds, but now that they had died, it could no longer be living history. "They were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their place with other pillars."

In 1838 Lincoln had a not-quite-thirty-year career ahead of him; much of it would be preoccupied with the founding fathers—their intentions and their institutions, and how to fulfill and perpetuate them. As a lawmaker and a lawyer, he worked within the systems they had left behind. As a politician, he wanted to wrap himself in their aura. As a poet and a visionary, he drew on them for rhetoric and inspiration.

But Lincoln invoked the founding fathers not just to do his jobs, win elections, or speak well, but also to solve America's problems. His perceptions of those problems would change over the years, but in the climax of his career, from 1854, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise "aroused him," he put it, "as he had never been before," through 1865, the end of his presidency and the Civil War, he tried to solve the problem of slavery—James Madison's—by solving the problem of democracy—Charles Carroll's.

America had been a continent of slaveholders since colonial times, and the founding fathers had accepted the evil fact (reluctantly, Lincoln said). But, he would argue, they had hoped slavery would one day die out, and they had taken steps to contain it (ending the slave trade, forbidding slavery in the Northwest Territory). They had left words expressing their repugnance: the first self-evident truth in the Declaration of Independence was that "all men are created equal." They had also left silence even though the Constitution protected slavery in several ways, it never named it (so that, Lincoln said, there should be no trace of slavery "on the face of the great charter of liberty" after slavery had finally vanished).

But how could an institution as deeply rooted as American slavery ever be made to vanish, even over the very long haul? (At different times Lincoln envisioned end-dates as remote as 1893, 1900, deep into the twentieth century.) The forum of democratic politics posed a danger—and offered an opportunity. If Americans embraced slavery, or even became indifferent to it, then it would spread nationwide (Lincoln would fear it was doing just that in the 1850s). If a minority of Americans, having lost an election, simply left the country, as happened in 1861, they could take slavery with them—and cripple the very notion of republican government on their way out. (What good is a form of government that cannot maintain itself?) But if Lincoln could convince enough Americans that slavery was a blight and persuade them to vote their convictions, then slavery would be contained. If he could convince enough of them that the Union was worth fighting for, then it could be saved—and slavery extinguished sooner than 1893.

Lincoln's most important allies in these efforts were the founding fathers. They were dead. "They were a forest of giant oaks," Lincoln told the young men of Springfield, "but the all resistless hurricane has swept over them." But Lincoln called them back to life for his purposes. The principles, he maintained were his; his solutions were theirs. He summoned the past to save the present. (To make the founding fathers effectual allies, he first had to edit them a bit—to use the pas

he had to save it from aspects of itself.) Lincoln turned the founding fathers into his fathers—and the fathers of a revitalized American liberty to come.

For Lincoln, the road to the future always began in the past—America’s, and his. As a boy he admired George Washington as a champion of liberty. As a young man he found in Thomas Paine lessons about religion, which he ultimately abandoned, and about how to win arguments, which he retained for the rest of his life. At the height of his career he embraced Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence as a statement of principle (an “apple of gold,” he called it, quoting the Bible) and the Preamble to the Constitution, which named the people as the beneficiaries and guardians of freedom.

The life of a man so preoccupied with symbolic fatherhood naturally makes us curious about his relationship with his actual, flesh-and-blood father. What did Abraham Lincoln owe Thomas Lincoln (1778–1851)? Not a lot, Abraham himself would say when he talked about his origins, which was seldom. But the son owed Thomas more than he ever admitted. Some women also had a profound effect on him—though not his lovers, except for one who died. Some of the most potent women in Lincoln’s life were widows, beginning with his stepmother; some were figures of his imagination (and some of these imaginary women were black).

There were many problems for Lincoln in his efforts to use the founding fathers. Not least was the fact that other politicians and writers used them too, for very different purposes of their own. Maybe the founders were models of moral virtue, with no application to modern political problems. “Give us your *private virtues*,” wrote Parson Weems in his *Life of Washington*, which Lincoln read. “It was those *old-fashioned* virtues that our hero owed everything. . . . Private life is always *real life*.” (Or maybe the problems that Lincoln found so pressing were not problems at all, and the founders were the source and bulwark of an ideal status quo. “Why cannot this government endure divided into free and slave states, as our fathers made it?” asked Stephen Douglas, a senator and an old rival of Lincoln’s.)

Or maybe—a minority view, but it had advocates—the founding fathers were mistaken or even wrong. Perhaps the Declaration’s assertion that all men are created equal was not a self-evident truth, but “fundamentally wrong,” as Alexander Stephens, a former congressman and a friend of Lincoln’s, put it. Or perhaps the Constitution, instead of securing the blessings of liberty, as the Preamble boasted, secured the institution of slavery and made thereby “a covenant with death, and with Hell,” as abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison said. Maybe no faith need be kept with the men who had written, signed, and implemented such wrongheaded documents.

Lincoln spent years contending with rival visions of the founding fathers. He contended successfully—and legitimately. For all the times he squeezed the evidence or hurried over the record, he was more right about the founders than wrong—and more right about them than any of his contentious contemporaries.

But the main problem for Lincoln in his dealings with the founding fathers, as he (unwittingly) neared the end of his life, was that they were not quite enough for him. Their systems and their ideas would survive the Civil War, but the strain was unbearable, horrors upon horrors. By the end the father who stood above all others was God the Father—and for Lincoln, His all-encompassing superintendence raised the further problem that, though He perhaps listened, He rarely spoke. It was lonely—soul-destroyingly lonely—to be left with a Father who left you so alone.

This book is not a full-dress biography of Lincoln, or a history of his times. It is not about Lincoln’s marriage, or how the Battle of Gettysburg was won, though it will touch on these and many other points. It is the history of a career, and the unfolding of the ideas that animated it.



Because Lincoln was a politician in a democracy, he had to present his ideas to the public; history of his career is in large part a history of his rhetoric. Rhetoric is how democratic politicians point with pride and view with alarm; how they sketch their visions and justify their deals. It is one of the most important ways by which they earn their reputations, win elections, and wield power. There is a lot of Lincoln's writing in this book—jotted down notes, state papers, private letters that were written for public consumption. There is even more of his speaking—orations before huge open-air crowds, stories told in small rooms. Because Lincoln was both self-taught and multitalented, he drew on a variety of models and genres: humor, logic, poetry; fart jokes, Euclid, Byron. He went from mocking the Bible as a youngster to channeling it as a prematurely old man. But time and again he came back to the founders, the men who most inspired him.

This book is also a history of the afterlife of those great Americans, his predecessors—how their words and their reputations percolated into the nineteenth century, in great debates and in the frontiers, in the reading of a curious boy. Other books on Lincoln have noted his interest in the founding fathers and how he looked back to them, but here, for the first time, a historian of the founding looks ahead to Lincoln.

This book, finally, is training—in thinking, feeling, and acting. The founding fathers were world-historical figures; so was Abraham Lincoln. If we study how Lincoln engaged with them, we can learn how to engage with them, and him, ourselves.

# PART ONE

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## 1809–1830: YOUTH

WHEN LINCOLN WAS A CHILD HE LEARNED TWO UNSETTLING things about his family tree, one for each branch of it.

His paternal grandfather, also called Abraham Lincoln, was killed when he was forty-two years old. This Lincoln, a Virginian, had been a captain in the militia during the Revolution, helping to build frontier forts. As the war wound down, he moved with his family to Kentucky. One day in 1786 he was in his field with his three young sons when an Indian shot him from the cover of the trees. One boy ran for help; another, the eldest, ran for a gun. The Indian ran for seven-year-old Thomas, the youngest, but the eldest brother managed to shoot and kill him before he carried Thomas off.

When Thomas grew up he told the story so often that it became a “legend” to his own son Abraham, who said it was “imprinted on my mind and memory.” In the speech to the Young Men’s Lyceum, Lincoln would say that veterans of the Revolution had supplied a “living history” of the war in every American family. The repository of living history in his family was no Revolutionary War veteran, but a survivor of frontier violence. That long ago shootout, as sudden and arbitrary as it was brutal, almost erased the future: if Thomas Lincoln had been killed along with the first Abraham Lincoln, there would have been no second.

Lincoln’s mother, Nancy, whom Thomas Lincoln married in Kentucky in 1806, was a Hanks, another family of transplanted Virginians. The recurring shadow in the Hanks family was illegitimacy. Nancy Hanks was born eight years before her mother, Lucey, married. The shadow covered a second generation: years after Nancy died, old neighbors accused her of adultery, assigning Abraham Lincoln’s paternity to various men besides Thomas Lincoln. Dennis Hanks, one of Abraham’s cousins, would bluster to an inquiring biographer that “the stories going about, charging wrong or indecency [of prostitution] in the Hanks family were false. But since Dennis Hanks had been born out of wedlock himself, he protested too much. Abraham Lincoln almost never mentioned the family stain, but he was aware of it.

The near-death of Abraham Lincoln’s father almost canceled his existence; the mores of the Hanks family clouded his identity.

Lincoln absorbed another life lesson when he was very young, not about himself but about the world. When he was no older than seven, he helped his father, Thomas, plant one of the family fields. This was a seven-acre patch laid out in cornrows. Abraham’s task was to drop pumpkin seeds in the mounds where the corn would grow—“two seeds every other hill and every other row.” The next day a cloudburst in the surrounding highlands caused a flood in the valley where the Lincoln farm lay, which swept away pumpkin seeds, corn, soil—everything.

The flood did not sour Lincoln on work. All his life he would preach the value of hard work—n

farm work, which he detested, but the labor of self-improvement, for which he had a passion. But his childhood effort, done in a day, wiped out in an hour, showed him that an otherwise-minded cosmos does not always support our efforts.

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Thomas Lincoln successively owned three farms in central Kentucky, south of Louisville. He and Nancy had three children—Sarah (born in 1807), Abraham (born in 1809), and Thomas (born in 1811 and died after three days). In December 1816 the Lincolns left Kentucky, crossing the Ohio River into southwestern Indiana, where they would live until Abraham was twenty-one.

We know almost nothing about Lincoln's mother. No letters by or about her, no pictures, no trustworthy descriptions survive. Dennis Hanks, who knew the Lincolns in Kentucky and followed them in their later moves, recalled that Nancy Lincoln "learned" her son "to read the Bible." She could not write, not even her name, but she probably told Abraham the stories. One of Dennis Hanks's recollections of the Lincoln family turns on a biblical phrase, and it has the texture of a remembered scene. One day when Nancy was weaving, Abraham abruptly asked her, "Who was the father of Zebedee's children?" (Matthew 27:56 mentions "the mother of Zebedee's children"; Zebedee was the fisherman on the Sea of Galilee whose sons James and John became Apostles. The father of Zebedee's children was, obviously, Zebedee.) Nancy laughed and told her son to scat: "Get out of here you nasty little pup, you." Abraham, said Dennis Hanks, "saw he had got his mother and ran off laughing." The simple riddle like that is just what a bright little boy would think was the funniest thing in the world. Nancy's response is just the reaction a hardworking, affectionate mother might have, caught in the midst of her chores.

In September 1818 Nancy's aunt and uncle, who were neighbors of the Lincolns in Indiana, died. The cause was "milk-sick," a disease carried in the milk of cows that had eaten white snakeroot, a poisonous wild plant. The symptoms were grotesque: coated tongue, changing from white to brown, stomach pain, constipation, vomiting. Death could come in three days. Early in October Nancy Lincoln died of milk-sick, too. Before she passed, she told her children to be good to their father and to each other, and to worship God.

Thomas Lincoln spent a year as a widower, then at the end of 1819 went back to Kentucky looking to remarry. The woman he sought was Sarah Bush Johnston, an old acquaintance a few years his junior, now a widow herself. According to the man who issued their marriage license, the courtship was quick. Thomas told Sarah "that they knew each other from childhood, that he had no wife and she no husband, and that he came all the way to marry her and if she was willing he wanted it done right off." Sarah said she had a few small debts she wanted to pay first. Thomas asked for a list of them, and paid them that night. He returned to Indiana with a new wife and her three children.

Sarah Bush Lincoln is more vivid to history than Nancy Lincoln; she outlived both her husband and her famous stepson, and was interviewed in her old age. Unlike the wicked stepmothers of fairy tales (and real life), she embraced her new family as her own. She made her husband put a wood floor in the family cabin and cut a window in the walls; she mended Abraham's and his sister Sarah's clothes; where there had been the disorganization of death, she brought cleanliness and warmth.

She noticed, as an exceptional woman would, that her stepson was exceptional. Her reminiscences of him as a boy were both observant and admiring. "He didn't like physical labor—was diligent for knowledge—wished to know, and if pains and labor would get it he was sure to get it." He learned by listening: "When old folks were at our house," he was "silent and attentive . . . never speaking or asking questions till they were gone, and then he must understand everything, even to the smallest

thing, minutely and exactly. He would then repeat it over to himself again and again, sometimes one form and then in another, and when it was fixed in his mind to suit him he became easy." He learned, most of all, by reading. "Abe read all the books he could lay his hands on, and when he came across a passage that struck him he would write it down on boards if he had no paper and keep it there till he did get paper. Then he would re-write it, look at it, repeat it."

Lincoln learned to read in school. He had briefly attended two country schools in Kentucky when he was little, and in Indiana he would attend three more. These schools were all short-lived ventures depending on the presence in the neighborhood of men, generally young, who knew enough to stay ahead of their pupils, and were vigorous enough to keep the older ones in line. One of Lincoln's schoolmasters was surnamed Hazel, which gave rise to jokes about hazelnut switches as pedagogical tools. As Lincoln aged, his attendance was limited by how long he could be spared from farm chores. All told, he spent no more than a year in his various schools. When he was a man he would say that he had not learned much in them, but he did learn to write, to do arithmetic up to the level of cross-multiplication, and to read.

He read a few widely used primers; a few popular classics—*Aesop's Fables*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, selections from the *Arabian Nights*—and a few popular biographies. Reading was the skill that first gave him the power to stretch himself, to go into himself, and to get away from his surroundings. Sarah Bush Lincoln watched over these stirrings with sympathy. "His mind and mine—what little I had," she added too modestly, "seemed to run together."

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Lincoln's mother died when he was nine years old; he did not meet his stepmother until he was almost eleven. His father, however, was at his side for the first twenty-two years of his life. Thomas Lincoln was the man who provided for him, exploited him, and shaped him, through repulsion and attraction, both. Abraham Lincoln served his father, rejected him, and never acknowledged the ways—few but crucial—in which he took after him.

Lincoln's father worked at farming and carpentry all his life. His farming was small scale; the farm where Abraham was born was 300 acres, the first farm in Indiana was 160 acres. Those properties would have entitled Thomas to vote in old Maryland, though someone like Charles Carroll would have barely noticed them. As a carpenter he built his family's houses, and made his family's coffins; sometimes he did carpentry work for others. He never went broke, or left bad debts, and served on a few juries (a sign of respectability, if not prosperity).

One mark of his less-than-middling status was that he never owned a slave, though Kentucky was a slave state. Slavery was one of the reasons he left for Indiana. As a small farmer Thomas Lincoln feared the competition of slave labor, and he would not find it in his new home, which was admitted to the Union as a free state in December 1816, the very month he moved there.

Indiana had been part of the old Northwest Territory of postrevolutionary America, bounded by Pennsylvania, the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, and the Great Lakes. The Northwest Ordinance, the legislation that regulated this wilderness quadrant, had ruled it out of bounds for slavery: "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes." The Northwest Ordinance was older than the Constitution; the one-house Congress of the Articles of Confederation passed it in July 1787, as the Constitutional Convention was in mid-session. After the new Constitution went into effect, the House, the Senate, and President George Washington confirmed the Ordinance in the summer of 1789.

A more immediate reason for Thomas Lincoln's move was challenges to his existing land titles

Kentucky—a problem faced by many Kentuckians besides him. Land ownership in the state was a nightmare of bad surveying and conflicting claims. But the land of the Northwest Territory had been laid out by the federal government, which guaranteed clear possession. As far as both slavery and land were concerned, the Lincolns knew firsthand the power and the consequences of federal legislation for the territories.

Southwestern Indiana was forest when Thomas Lincoln took his family there—dense with trees and draped with wild grape vines, all the intertwined rankness of old-growth North America. As soon as Abraham was big enough to swing an axe, he was put to work, clearing land and splitting rails. Once the fields were cleared he plowed and reaped. He had a spurt of growth around age twelve, which spurred his labors. Old friends disagreed about how much shin showed between his socks and his suddenly too-short pants: one said six inches, one said twelve. People competed to tell tall tales about the tall boy. Whatever the length of his breeches, Lincoln's lifelong look of awkward elongation started before his teens. Luckily for him he was as strong as he was tall, so although everyone smiled at him, no one bullied him. And meanwhile he worked—on his father's farm, and on the farms of neighbors whose services he rented out by his father, who pocketed his earnings.

Lincoln told one of these neighbor/employers that his father had taught him how to work, but never learned him to love it. He failed to love it because he was not working for himself. Working for your father on the family farm was one thing; working elsewhere, as a hired tool or draft animal, like a mule or a plow or a horse, was something else. It is true that using family members as contract laborers was a common practice, but common practices take different people different ways. Lincoln took it badly. He would make a political philosophy, almost a theology, out of a man's right to own the fruits of his own labor; the seeds of it may have been planted while he was planting or chopping as Thomas Lincoln's unpaid work crew.

What Abraham loved instead of farm work, as his stepmother testified, was reading and learning. His father had mixed feelings about that.

Thomas Lincoln could read a little and sign his name; that was the extent of his literacy. But he wanted more for his son, which is why he sent him to school five times. Each sojourn had to be paid for, in cash or kind, and in his son's labor lost, once Abraham was old enough to work, so there was an expense involved. In her interview as an elderly widow, Sarah Bush Lincoln insisted that her husband had joined her in encouraging his son's intellectual efforts: "Mr. Lincoln never made Abe quit reading to do anything if he could avoid it. He would do it himself first." Reading, writing, and arithmetic were useful skills to have, and Thomas wanted his son to have them.

But reading was more than a skill to Abraham: it was a portal to thought and inspiration. The act of reading was also a visible mark of his aspirations. Abraham read everywhere, outdoors as well as at home; he would take a book with him into the fields when he plowed, stopping to read whenever the horse stopped to rest. He did this because, as any devoted reader knows, a book can be all-absorbing. But he also did it to show family and friends what a reader he was. All this was beyond Thomas Lincoln's ken.

Quick wits can make a boy forget his place, and Thomas Lincoln didn't like that, either. If a stranger rode by the Lincoln property when father and son were at the fence, Abraham would horn in with the first question, and sometimes his father smacked him for it. When Abraham asked his mother who was the father of Zebedee's children, she laughed and called him a nasty little pup. When he was pert in the presence of his father, Thomas gave him the back of his hand. (Sarah Bush Lincoln did not recall Abraham horning in on her, perhaps because he felt less competitive with his stepmother.)

Father and son inhabited different mental worlds; certainly Abraham thought so. Years later, when

he was running for president, he wrote in a campaign autobiography that his father “never did more the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name.” How much scorn still coils in that word *bunglingly*. Scorn, and judgment: *my father could have learned to sign his name properly if he had made the effort; after all, I did.*

Only one remark of Thomas Lincoln’s stuck in Abraham’s mind enough for him to repeat it in later years: “If you make a bad bargain, hug it the tighter.” It is a Delphic remark. It suggests persistence, which Thomas Lincoln had; maybe stubbornness—persisting in small farming, a way of life his son came to dislike. The clearest possible meaning of Thomas Lincoln’s dictum seems to be: you make a bad choice, try to make the best of it. Abraham did not follow this advice where Thomas was concerned; he had not chosen his father and he did not try very hard to make the best of him.

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And yet, our fathers give us life, while this father additionally gave Abraham twenty-two years of his company. Something rubbed off.

Thomas Lincoln was a temperate man. In his time and place this was a rare distinction. Early nineteenth-century America was a nation of drunkards; Americans consumed hard liquor at a rate of five gallons per person per year; some working men drank a quart a day. Thomas Lincoln took no part in the national binge; one in-law said he “never was intoxicated in his life.” Abraham was as temperate as his father.

The Lincolns were differently built—Abraham (who rose to be 6’4”) lean and gawky, Thomas (who stood 5’10”) compact and solid. But both of them were powerful, and Thomas proved it when he had to. In Kentucky he fought another reputed strong man in an arranged fight, a challenge match, and beat him, after which “no one else ever tried his manhood.” Such contests were a common feature of frontier life, a form of communal hazing; Abraham would undergo them himself, as successfully as his father.

These physical tests came to the Lincolns; neither of them looked for trouble. This, too, was noteworthy in a society of brawling and all-in fighting, which could descend to gouging, biting, and maiming. Probably their sobriety helped keep them peaceable.

But by far the most important quality father and son shared was telling stories and jokes. John Hanks, one of the many Hanks cousins who knew both men, thought Thomas was as good a storyteller as Abraham; Dennis Hanks maintained that Thomas was even better. Maybe one reason Thomas cuffed his son when he spoke up to passersby at the fence was that he was spoiling his father’s set-up. Stories were the only form of entertainment—apart from sermons, trials, and elections—that rural America had, and the only one that was readily available. Church congregations met once or twice a week, sessions of court and political campaigns were much less frequent. Stories were there anytime if you knew how to tell them. Any tavern, any store, any hearth could spawn them. They passed the news, brought in company, held the darkness at bay.

Abraham Lincoln took to storytelling because he was good at it—he was an excellent mimic, and he developed a great sense of timing—and because he enjoyed the applause he got. It gave him a role in the world, his first and his longest-running. Young Lincoln was bookish and strange-looking; as he aged, he would acquire other unprepossessing traits (shyness around women, depression). But when he opened his mouth to tell a story, he could be the life of any party. He could put his height and his ungainliness to work; being funny-looking makes you even funnier.

Among the staples of his repertoire, after he graduated from riddles about the father of Zebedee’s children, were off-color stories (scatological more often than sexual, though he told both kinds). Or

of his favorite off-color stories—his law partner William Herndon, who wrote it down, said he heard Lincoln tell it “often and often”—incidentally showed how story- and joke-telling worked for him. It was about “the Man of Audacity.”

“There was a party once, not far from here,” it always began. Among the guests “was one of those men who had audacity . . . quick-witted, cheeky, and self-possessed, never off his guard on any occasion.” When supper was ready, the Man of Audacity was asked to carve the turkey. He “whetted his carving knife with the steel and got down to business,” but as he began, he “let a fart, a loud fart, so that all the people heard it distinctly.” Silence. “However, the audacious man was cool and entirely self-possessed. . . . With a kind of sublime audacity, [he] pulled off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, put his coat deliberately on a chair, spat on his hands, took his position at the head of the table, picked up the carving knife, and whetted it again, never cracking a smile nor moving a muscle of his face.” Then “he squared himself and said loudly and distinctly: ‘Now, by God, I’ll see if I can’t cut up this turkey without farting.’”

If you fart, go further with it. If you are funny-looking, be funny. If you make a bad bargain, hug the tighter.

Storytelling served another function for Lincoln, which he discovered as early as his days in Indiana. In 1826, when he was seventeen, his sister, Sarah, married a neighbor, Aaron Grigsby. She comes to us, still living, in the memory of one of her Grigsby in-laws, forty years after her wedding. “Her good humored laugh I can see now—is as fresh in my mind as if it were yesterday.” In 1827, laughing Sarah died in childbirth. Of Lincoln’s blood relations, everyone—infant brother, mother, sister—was now gone, except his problematic father. In 1829 he took it out on the Grigsbys, on the occasion of a double wedding of two Grigsby brothers. With the help of friends, he contrived to have the grooms led to each other’s beds on the wedding night; he then wrote a satirical account of the misadventure, in pseudo-biblical prose. “So when [the grooms] came near to the house of . . . their father, their messengers came on before them, and gave a shout. And the whole multitude ran out with shouts of joy and music, playing on all kinds of instruments of music, some playing on harps and some on violins and some blowing rams’ horns.” It is pretty tame stuff, but it amused the neighbors; one claimed decades later that it was still remembered in that part of Indiana, “better than the Bible.” There truly was not much in the way of entertainment in rural America.

Mocking the Grigsbys would not bring sister Sarah back—no mockery of anyone or anything could do that—but it could distract the troubled mind. If life makes a terrible bargain for you, a funny story can push it aside for a time.

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In 1830, when Abraham was twenty-one, the Lincolns moved once more, to central Illinois. A year later, Abraham and Thomas parted ways.

Abraham had little to do with his father after that; the rest of their story is quickly told. Thomas continued his life of farming. By this time he had bonded with John Johnston, his second wife’s youngest son by her first marriage, and, like Thomas, a farmer for life. Even as Sarah Bush Lincoln chose her reading stepson to be her special companion, so Thomas chose his farming stepson to be his. In the 1840s Thomas and Johnston began hitting Abraham up for small amounts of money. Abraham paid, but came to suspect dementia in his father (who was approaching seventy), and manipulation on the part of his stepbrother.

Shortly after New Year’s Day of 1851, Abraham got word that Thomas was dying. He wrote Johnston that he would not be able to come see his father; his own wife was sick (*I have a new famil-*



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