



Journal Divided – “Writing Lincoln’s Lives”

Excerpt from Chapter 16 of Michael Burlingame’s *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (pgs 1773-1777)

Link to full Chapter Sixteen

<http://www.knox.edu/documents/pdfs/LincolnStudies/Burlingame,%20Vol%201,%20Chap%2016.pdf>

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In addition to relying on that autobiographical sketch, Scripps sought to interview Lincoln about his life. At first the candidate was reluctant to cooperate, telling his would-be biographer: “it is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence and that sentence you will find in Gray’s Elogy: ‘The short and simple annals of the poor.’ That’s my life, and that’s all you or any one else can make of it.”¹ Nevertheless he told Scripps much about his life that was then incorporated into the campaign biography, making it virtually an autobiography.² Hastily the busy editor churned out ninety-six pages of copy, only to be instructed by his New York publisher (Horace Greeley’s *Tribune*) to reduce it to thirty-two pages. After reluctantly making wholesale cuts, he apologized to Lincoln for the “sadly botched” final section, which was trimmed at the last minute. Amusingly he instructed the candidate that if he had not read Plutarch’s *Lives*, he should do so immediately, for the biography asserted that he had read it in his youth!³

¹ Scripps to Herndon, Chicago, 24 June 1865, Wilson and Davis, eds., *Herndon’s Informants*, 57. He reportedly said something to the same effect on the day he was nominated. Charles S. Zane, “Lincoln as I Knew Him,” *Sunset* 29 (October 1912), reprinted in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 14 (1921-22): 82.

² Scripps to William Herndon, n.p., 20 June 1865, in Grace Locke Scripps Dyche, “John Lock Scripps, Lincoln’s Campaign Biographer,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 17 (1924): 346.

³ Scripps to Lincoln, Chicago 11 and 17 July 1860, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.