

↔ Introduction ↔

SOME SAY Abraham Lincoln never wrote a book. But someone “wrote” a political bestseller in 1860. An astounding 50,000 copies were devoured by an eager American public in just months. No less an authority than Carl Sandburg called the Lincoln-Douglas Debates “the only book that Lincoln wrote and edited or prepared for publication.”¹ But a controversy about his “authorship” has developed among historians, scholars and readers alike, because of the unconventional way the book entitled *The Political Debates Between Hon. Abraham Lincoln and Hon. Stephen A. Douglas: In the Celebrated Campaign of 1858 in Illinois* was created. That story is explored in this book.

Modern bibliophiles calculate that over 15,000 books have been written about, but not by, Lincoln. All of these contain his words in some form or another. For example, one can find tomes featuring all three of Abraham’s original poems. Between 1832 when he first ran for the legislature and the making of his last public remarks three days before the assassination, some hundreds of Lincoln public addresses were delivered. Now, many are recorded in type. Yet, Lincoln clearly never “wrote” all of these books which report his poetry or speeches.

What did he write? In 1848, Lincoln carefully tailored a 47-word autobiography for the official register of the U.S. House of

1. Carl Sandburg, *Lincoln Collector: The Story of Oliver R. Barrett’s Great Private Collection* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), 152.

Representatives. However, that biography had grown to 226 words by 1864, as his public career blossomed and others embellished his terse text. Today, those Lincoln words are still periodically republished as new editions of the *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* are released.

Lincoln's other sole autobiographical writing was offered to support his Presidential candidacy in 1860. Remarkably, just one day after he sent the text of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates to Ohio for publication, Lincoln wrote a two and one-half page description of his life for Jesse Fell, later an Illinois Congressman. It was to be presented to a Pennsylvania newspaperman for publication and was widely circulated in the 1860 campaign. Obviously, neither of these brief life summaries amounted to full "book" status.

Besides the Debates, only two other volumes can claim any possibility of being "books written by Lincoln." In 1901, the New York publisher, McClure, Phillips and Company put out a 3" x 5" leather-bound, facsimile reproduction of a small notebook of clippings which Lincoln made for a friend who was campaigning for the Illinois legislature late in 1858. Lincoln prepared this just three days after the last joint debate with Douglas at Alton. The text summarized Lincoln's views on "Negro equality." It contained 15 pages of pasted-in newspaper columns reporting an 1854 speech by Douglas and Lincoln's reply, an 1857 speech on equality, excerpts of his 1858 pre-debates remarks at Chicago, and extracts from Lincoln's comments at the first and fourth debates against Douglas. The clippings were followed by an eight-page letter written to the friend, J. N. Brown, in October 1858, expounding on Mr. Lincoln's views and on Henry Clay's position that "all men are created equal." While this notebook was a contemporaneous usage by Lincoln of the same newspaper extract format that later became the Debates, it was not intended nor prepared by him for publication. It did not see print until 36 years after the assassination.

Finally, though not the author, Lincoln did review and correct the text of an 1860 campaign biography for his friend, Samuel

Parks. On July 5, 1860, about four months after its first printing of the Debates, the Columbus publishing house of Follett, Foster and Company published another Lincoln volume. A campaign biography written by William Dean Howells entitled *The Lives and Speeches of Abraham Lincoln and Hanibal Hamlin* came roaring off the presses to compete with several other printers' offerings about the Republican Party nominees. Follett sought a marketing advantage by circulating pre-release advertisements which promised that Lincoln himself had "authorized" the edition. He had not and did not. On June 19, 1860, Lincoln wrote an "especially confidential" letter to the same Ohio lawyer, James Galloway, who had solicited the Debates manuscript for Follett, decrying this misstatement of his "authorization." Thereafter, Parks took a unique step with his own copy of the book.

Soon after his nomination for the Presidency, I bought Howells's campaign "Life of Lincoln," which I wish to use in the canvass, and asked Mr. Lincoln to correct it for me. He went through it carefully, speeches and all, and returned it to me with about twenty corrections on the margin over the signature of "L." in pencil.²

The extent to which Parks actually used the Lincoln annotated biography during the 1860 campaign remains unreported. Nevertheless, the importance of the volume as a biography of Lincoln's life is unparalleled. During his lifetime, Lincoln authored the two relatively brief autobiographical essays. But because the Howells book is greater in length and contains many more facts and descriptions than either of Lincoln's personal efforts, it becomes the definitive statement of Lincoln's history when read together with his corrections. Thus, Parks' act, together with Lincoln's response,

2. Leroy H. Fischer, "Samuel C. Park's Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln," *Lincoln Herald* (Spring 1996): 11.

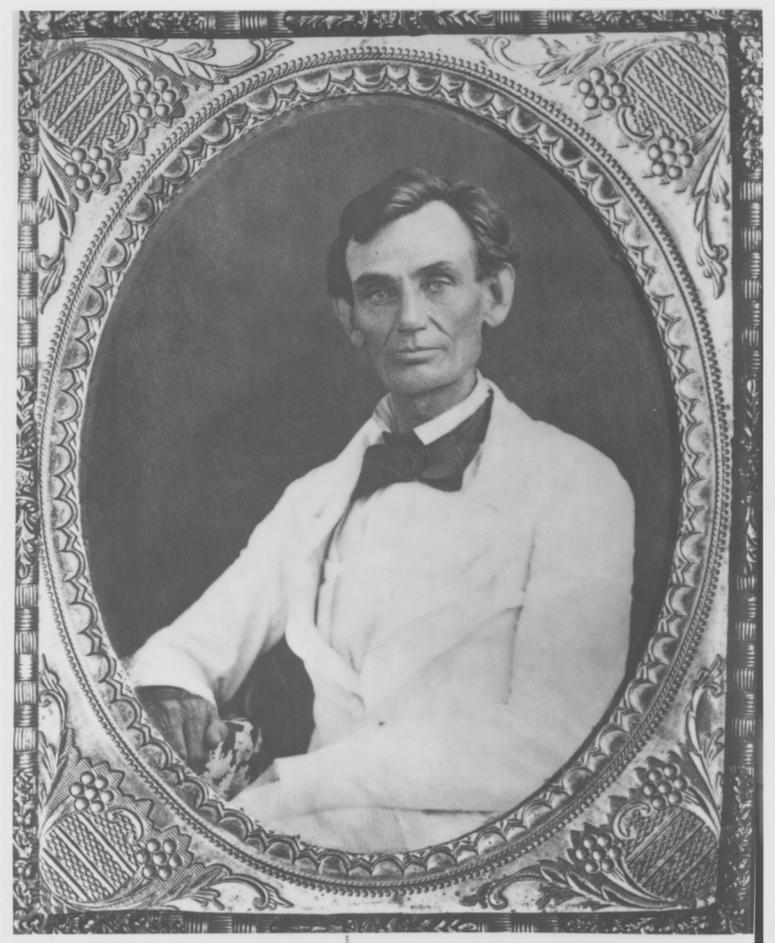
established the “authorized” edition of Lincoln’s life, whether the candidate intended it to be so or not.³ This marked-up text, though not of Lincoln’s authorship, certainly carries his imprimatur.

These brief writings, mostly created by others, are insufficient contenders to displace the volume described in this text as Lincoln’s possible single effort at true “authorship.” At a minimum, he was the editor of the Debates. However, since he kept the editorializing to a minimum, he was obviously something more and something else.

Therefore, I will leave it to the reader to judge if the Debates is “Mr. Lincoln’s book” and his only book. None other carries so much as one-half of its text written or spoken and arranged by him. Lincoln, alone, also chose which version of Douglas’s words would be included. He did not edit before printing or contract the publication of any other volume. Only this publication did Lincoln envision, dictate a low sale price to assure its reaching the masses, and so consistently inscribe to his closest friends. Perhaps this book will end the debate about the Debates.⁴

3. David H. Leroy, “Lincoln and Idaho: A Rocky Mountain Legacy,” in *Abraham Lincoln: Sources and Style of Leadership*, eds. Frank J. Williams and et al. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 146.

4. Lincoln’s efforts and interactions with others in bringing the Debates to publication are well detailed in the contemporaneous correspondence of that day. Where such letters are quoted verbatim we have retained the original spelling, word choice, errors and abbreviations, however colloquial they may be. In only a very few instances are words illegible. Blanks are left there. We have also included all or most of the text of even lengthy letters. This gives the modern reader a most precise literary insight into the pre-Civil War era and the communication form of its prominent citizens.



An ambrotype by Abraham Byers, Beardstown, Illinois, May 7, 1858, showing how Lincoln looked during the planning stages of the debates. On this day he had just won his famous “Almanac” murder case defending Duff Armstrong, the son of a New Salem friend. (O-5) [Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, Inc., Chicago, IL]