Honest Abe

Lincoln taught himself the three R's—and more

Where did Abraham Lincoln get his moral compass? He certainly did not have parents like those of John Quincy Adams. There was no equivalent of Abigail Adams, reading great history books to her young son and teaching him patriotic poems. The poetry that Lincoln could quote (of which there was quite a bit) he had learned on his own.

He surely did not learn much from his father. Tom Lincoln did not understand or support his extraordinary son; he disapproved of Abe’s constant reading and made him go to work.

Lincoln attended five one-room schools in Kentucky and Illinois. Of his teachers, he could not say, “All that I have become I owe to that man”—as James Madison said about his tutor Donald Robinson. There was, Lincoln wrote, “absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education” in the cluster of cabins in the Indiana woods called Little Pigeon Creek.

Did he receive instruction in morals from the Little Pigeon Creek Baptist Church? His father, stepmother, and sister joined the church—but not Abraham. Instead, the 15-year-old boy mimicked the sermons with his own presentations from a tree stump.

One reviewer of my biography, Lincoln’s Virtues, suggested that I should have emphasized the importance of women—of his mother and stepmother. Some who knew Nancy Hanks said that she was more intellectually able than her husband. About Lincoln’s stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln, Mark E. Neely Jr., in his excellent short book The Last Best Hope of Earth, wrote, “She apparently came to like Lincoln better than her own progeny, and he apparently came to like her better than he liked his own father.” Perhaps these two women played a strong role in the initial shaping of Abraham Lincoln. But still, the two mothers, each unable to sign her name, do not appear to have mentored the able boy so much as they encouraged his own self-improving bent.

Truth is, nothing was more important in shaping Lincoln than the printing press. Only a few texts made their way to the newly formed little settlements in the western woods, and on the whole they tended to be publications with some lasting merit. Lincoln’s knowledge of the Bible was probably not surpassed by an American statesman. The plays—particularly the tragedies—of Shakespeare were read first in snippets in pedagogical readers. Those readers—like Scott’s Lessons in Elocution—had selections from eminent writers across the past of English and classical literature, all chosen with an unembarrassed attention to moral development.

There was American history, too: Parson Weems’s famous life of Washington, William Grimshaw’s History of the United States. You might not think an energetic teenager would be much interested in a book called Revised Statutes of Indiana, but young Lincoln borrowed it from a neighbor. In it he found not only technical legal materials, but also the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In New Salem he read and loved and memorized poems by Robert Burns.

From these disciplined beginnings sprouted a lifetime of self-education: teaching himself grammar when he was 23; teaching himself how to be a surveyor; borrowing Blackstone’s law dictionary and teaching himself to be a lawyer. As president, he got books on military science from the Library of Congress so he could deal with the generals.

These habits of intense study appear in his speeches. His greatest speeches are short, compressed, and eloquent. But he also gave longer speeches, and often their preparation included arduous historical research: You would have a hard time composing a better summary of early American history than the first half of the Cooper Institute Address.

—William Lee Miller is the author of Lincoln’s Virtues: An Ethical Biography (Knopf, 2002).