

REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS:Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Women

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Feature Essay

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Madden, David *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS:Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Women.*

LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN AND WOMEN

Let us now praise famous women. Ida Tarbell, one of the most famous women of the early twentieth century, was praised as a muckraker and garnered fame for her 1904 expose of Standard Oil, two years before a famous man, Upton Sinclair, earned praise for exposing unsanitary meat processing in *The Jungle*. It was as a famous woman that Ida Tarbell published four books over a thirty year period praising the famous man whose bicentennial we are commemorating this year and next: President Abraham Lincoln.

First, she published, in four volumes, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, one of the finest Lincoln biographies of her era (1895-1900). Next came *He Knew Lincoln* (1907). Next, she published *In Lincoln's Chair* (1920).

Unable to turn loose of a subject whose life and spirit were most representative of her vision of America, she reached back in time to trace, in records and in personal encounters with the land and the people, the movements of the Lincolns from Hingham, England, to Springfield, Massachusetts, *In the Footsteps of the Lincolns* (1924).

In the new investigative reporting tradition she helped to create, Tarbell followed an informed hunch that writings about Lincoln's ancestry and early life with his father were suspect. She followed the footsteps, figuratively in records and literally on the road and on the trail, of the Lincolns from 1637 in England to the 19th century in Springfield. Standing on ground Lincoln knew, in Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, and, of course, Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, she interviewed people who knew him or his family or who remembered what the old folks told about them, until she was certain she had a relatively new story to tell--not the paradoxical story of Lincoln the rail-splitter whose family was poor white trash, as the

American public in the 1920s had been led to believe, but the saga, the jacket promised, of a long line of courageous, hardy, industrious and tolerant men from whom Abraham Lincoln came, a story given scant recognition by American biographers, thus far. This was not her typical muckraking expose but a first attempt to take up one by one and prove by documents that his ancestors were well able to produce the Lincoln who became revered around the world.

Tarbell herself learned some of those values from her teacher at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania. I began to train my mind to go at its task regularly, keep hours, study whether I liked a thing or not. I forced myself not to waste time, not to loaf, not to give up before I finished.

The mission of *In the Footsteps of the Lincolns* was to report a pilgrimage undertaken to refresh the author's previous studies of the life of Abraham Lincoln. Her style, the tone of her voice speaking to American citizens of the Twenties, carries the reader smoothly and thoughtfully through the world of the Lincolns as she re-envisioned it. I found it an inspiring thing to trace the roads these seven successive generations of Lincoln pioneers traveled, to look upon the remains of their homes, reconstruct from documents and legends their activities, judge what manner of men and women they were, the place they held among their fellows.

Yes, these folks are interesting, indeed. And the stories of their lives illuminate our own stories. In these wanderings the whole history of the United States seemed to unroll before me. To treat them as vagrants is to fail to understand the spirit of the pioneer. Abraham Lincoln's youth was passed in one of the most daring and promising struggles to which American men have ever put their hands. He weathered it, expanded under it, saw the meaning of it and flung himself into the struggle to realize literally the great creed of Liberty for which his forebears had made their sacrifices—a great mental and moral qualities, rigorously trained and kept steadily at work, brought Abraham Lincoln naturally into the Presidency of the United States.

Having devoted chapters to tracing Lincoln's ancestry, Tarbell casts new light upon all the familiar stages in his life: the first home he remembered, his learning from labor and literature simultaneously, his moving on alone into young adulthood in New Salem, Illinois, his working as surveyor, legislator, lawyer, his meeting Ann Rutledge, his marrying Mary Todd and settling down, his plunging into local, state, and national politics, advocating internal

improvements, that moment in the Springfield telegraph office when he held in his hands the news of his election to the presidency.

Tarbell rejects the image of Lincoln's Kentucky childhood environment as forlorn, forsaken boondocks. In front of the Lincolns' door ran the highway from Louisville to Nashville—the most important turnpike in that part of the world and one freely traveled—a young Abraham Lincoln came to consciousness in a spot where the world was passing by—a young and eager world, full of adventure—not in a backwash as we used to believe. I was impressed that my wife grew up in the Young home place on Lincoln Highway in Iowa—the first transcontinental highway, conceived in 1913, eleven years before Tarbell's book appeared.

That Tarbell wrote four very different books about Lincoln suggests that she took him personally. Following in Tarbell's footsteps, some readers will delight in remembering connections with their own lives, as I did when she took me back to Elizabethtown, Kentucky, to which Thomas Lincoln took Nancy Hanks 205 years ago, and where I spoke the first academic word in the newly opened community college 45 years ago.

Readers will enjoy Tarbell's personal touch as she describes her expectations and responses to the Lincoln sights she beheld. In October 1922, she dreaded seeing the one room cabin in which Abraham Lincoln was born in Hodgenville, Kentucky, dedicated in 1916, because she had read about the Greek Temple in which the cabin had been encased. But listen to her describe what she saw. The little temple stands on a rising slope of ground—exquisitely white, small, serene—approached by a long, broad, generous stairway of marble. It is a triumph of perfection. Its proportions are right, its size is right. The landscape gardening simply protects the drive, the staircase, the temple itself from the encroachment of the woods, leaving the natural setting undisturbed. It is a joyful thing to see.

And you can see it for yourself. But what you will see inside the temple, says Andrew Ferguson in his recent book *Land of Lincoln*, is a cabin a foot or so less wide, made to fit inside, and not even the actual cabin but one long-thought to have been, now known not to be. The thinking seems to be, Well, you sort of get the idea, the spirit of the thing. And many—but not all—pilgrims do.

If you can track down a copy, you may see the temple in one of the 27 illustrations that Tarbell included, very well-chosen illustrations, a few of which I have not seen in any other of the thousands of books on Lincoln. Their clarity,

especially the photograph of Lincoln just before he left Springfield to step onto the stage in the Capitol where the drama of his rise to greatness unfolded, reminds us that photographs in books have not always been poorly reproduced and bunched together in one or two places as they are these days.

Having praised the subject of her book, let us now praise its author herself. While working at *McClure's* magazine as editor, Tarbell wrote a celebrated series of articles on two great, very different but perhaps in some ways similar men, Napoleon Bonaparte and Abraham Lincoln, doubling circulation. Both series became books. Now known as investigative journalism, her muckraking work ran first in *McClure's* magazine. *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, published in 1904, exposed the ruthless methods John D. Rockefeller used to destroy smaller oil businesses. That 654-page work influenced the U.S. government's antitrust actions against the Standard Oil Trust; the conglomerate broke up seven years later. In 1999, the *New York Times* ranked it number five among the top 100 works of twentieth-century American journalism.

Tarbell's difficult college experiences and later encounters in the work place made her keenly aware of the inequities in the status of women, some of the effects of which are described in two of her books: *The Business of Being a Woman* (1912) and *The Ways of Woman* (1915). *All in the Day's Work*, her autobiography, was her last work.

That Ida Tarbell was Andrew Ferguson's companion each night in his motel room as he and his reluctant family made a pilgrimage along the Lincoln Heritage Trail, an expedition that resulted in his witty, poignant semi-expose *Land of Lincoln*, (2007), suggests that *In the Footsteps of the Lincoln's* may inform and inspire other Americans during this bicentennial, perhaps even the next one in 2059. That's my argument for reprinting it.

Checking out my hunch that *In the Footsteps of the Lincolns* is not in print, I visited Amazon, where four different books are entitled *In Lincoln's Footsteps* or words to that effect, but Tarbell's is missing. My thanks to the owner and staff of Lincoln Bookstore in Chicago for providing with a copy of the book that enabled me to follow in the footsteps of Daniel F. Lincoln, Jamestown, New York, one of the books in what his owner stamp called The Lincoln Library.

The reprinting of *In the Footsteps of the Lincolns* would be not only an act in praise of a famous man but an act in praise of a famous woman, still famous

wherever women of achievement are remembered, a woman whose life and work also serves as a model as does Lincoln's.

As founder of the United States Civil War Center, David Madden also founded the Civil War Book Review. Having written several books and articles on the Civil War, he is chair of the Louisiana Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, the governor's liaison to the national commission in Washington and a member of its advisory committee. He is coordinator of the Civil War Sesquicentennial Initiative, a national organization which is a program within the office of the Louisiana Secretary of State, as is the Louisiana Lincoln Commission.