

M 2820

Was Lincoln A Prohibitionist?

*His Wise and Charitable Views
Forbid the Conclusion*



A Vexed Question Investigated

Was Lincoln a Prohibitionist?

There can be no doubt (and in fact should be none) that Abraham Lincoln was a temperance man in the very best sense of the term. He abhorred drunkenness, as every right-minded man must, but he pitied and sympathized with the drunkard. He was extremely abstemious himself and may possibly have been a total-abstainer during the greater part of his life. As to the latter point the numerous biographies of Lincoln, as well as the printed reminiscences of those of his contemporaries who came into personal contact with him, offer a bewildering mass of contradictory evidence from which both sides of the question might easily deduce conclusions favorable to their contention. Thus, for instance, in "Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln," edited by Mr. Allen Thorndyke Rice, Lincoln is quoted in one paragraph as saying that "he *never* tasted liquor in his life;" while in another he is made to say: "I do not drink anything, and have *not done so for many years.*" The latter quotation appears to harmonize with the actual facts. Of course, it is extremely difficult sometimes to distinguish properly between purely anecdotal and strictly historical narratives. It may, for instance, be perfectly true, as C. G. Leland states in his book (page 26), that

“men yet alive have seen Lincoln lift a full barrel of liquor and drink from the bung-hole;” or that when urged to remove Grant on account of his alleged drinking excesses, Lincoln told his informants that he would like to send every general in the field a barrel of the brand used by the victor of Vicksburg.

All such assertions may be true, but they savour strongly of the anecdotal and should be received with caution. But even discarding all such biographical details of questionable taste and credibility, there still remains an abundance of reliable evidence that during his early public life he was not a total abstainer. In her “Life of Abraham Lincoln,” Miss I. M. Tarbell relates several instances showing that during his legislative career Lincoln frequently participated in banquets where immense quantities of wine and liquors were consumed; and on one particular occasion had assigned to him one of the formal toasts (Vol. I, pp. 145 and 153). It appears equally certain that subsequently he became a total abstainer, but there is nothing either in his own writings or his biographies to sustain the idea that he was intolerant or that he in any way approved of sumptuary laws.

Ward H. Lamon’s “Life of Abraham Lincoln” comes nearest to the truth, we believe. He says (page 480):

“He abstained himself, not so much upon principle, as because of a total lack of appetite. He had no taste for spirituous liquors; and when he took them, it was a punishment to him, not an indulgence. But

he disliked sumptuary laws, and would not prescribe by statute what other men should eat or drink. When the temperance men ran to the Legislature to invoke the power of the State,—his voice—the most eloquent among them—was silent. He did not oppose them, but quietly withdrew from the cause and left others to manage it.”

To those who appraise Lincoln's conscientiousness at its true value, who know that never in all his life did he do anything that his conscience could not sanction, there is still better proof of his liberality and tolerance in the fact that at one time in his mercantile career he even retailed liquors.

Miss Tarbell relates that on the 6th of March, 1833, the County Commissioners' Court of Sangamon granted to the firm of Berry & Lincoln a license to keep a tavern at New Salem. Her conclusion as to the purpose of this license are couched in these words, viz:

“It is probable that the license was procured not to enable the firm to keep a tavern but to retail the liquors which they had in stock. Each of the three groceries which Berry & Lincoln acquired had the usual supply of liquors and it was only natural that they should seek a way to dispose of the surplus quickly and profitably—an end which could be best accomplished by selling it over the counter by the glass.” (Vol. I, p. 94).

By way of explanation Miss Tarbell adds—quite unnecessarily, it seems to us, these somewhat apologetic words, viz:

“In a community in which liquor drinking was practically universal, at a time when whiskey was as legitimate an article of merchandise as coffee and calico, when no family was without a jug, when the minister of the gospel could take his ‘dram’ without any breach of propriety, it is not surprising that a reputable young man should have been found selling whiskey. Liquor was sold at all groceries, but it could not be lawfully sold in a smaller quantity than one quart. The law, however, was not always rigidly observed, and it was the custom of storekeepers to treat their patrons.”

Now to the question as to whether Lincoln can rightfully be claimed as an advocate of Prohibition, there can be no better or more convincing answer than Lincoln’s famous address delivered on the 22nd of February, 1842, before the Springfield Washingtonian Temperance Society. Every line and word of that address is, inferentially, a scathing criticism of the policy of compelling men to become temperate by coercive legal measures.

Moral suasion had at that time become the aim of all rational temperance societies, and it is to moral suasion that Lincoln attributed the success of the cause. A few quotations from this address will suffice to show this:

“In my judgment, it is to the battles of this new class of champions that our late success is greatly, perhaps chiefly, owing. But, had the old-school champions themselves been of the most wise selecting, was their system of tactics the most judicious?

It seems to me it was not. Too much denunciation against dram-sellers and dram-drinkers was indulged in. This I think was both impolitic and unjust. It was impolitic, because it is not much in the nature of men to be driven to anything; *still less to be driven about that which is exclusively his own business*; and least of all where such driving is to be submitted to at the expense of pecuniary interest or burning appetite. When the dram-seller and drinker were incessantly told—not in accents of entreaty and persuasion, diffidently addressed by erring man to an erring brother, but in the thundering tones of anathema and denunciation with which the lordly judge often groups together all the crimes of the felon's life, and thrusts them in his face just ere he passes sentence of death upon him—that they were the authors of all the vice and misery and crime in the land; that they were the manufacturers and material of all the thieves and robbers and murderers that infest the earth; that their houses were the workshops of the devil; and that their persons should be shunned by all the good and virtuous as moral pestilences—I say, when they were told all this, and in this way, it is not wonderful that they were slow, very slow, to acknowledge the truth of such denunciations, and to join the ranks of their denouncers in a hue and cry against themselves.

“To have expected them to do otherwise than they did—to have expected them not to meet denunciation with denunciation, crimi-

nation with crimination, and anathema with anathema—was to expect a reversal of human nature, which is God's decree and can never be reversed. When the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, persuasion, kind, unassuming persuasion, should ever be adopted."

Throughout the address this sentiment recurs again and again. Furthermore it deserves to be emphasized that the main drift of Lincoln's appeal was aimed at the redemption of the drunkard, not against the temperate use of intoxicants.

The following quotation as to the drunkard is but another evidence of Lincoln's tolerant spirit and broadly humane views, viz:

"In my judgment such of us as have never fallen victims have been spared more by the absence of appetite than from any mental or moral superiority over those who have. Indeed, I believe if we take habitual drunkards as a class, their heads and their hearts will bear an advantageous comparison with those of any other class. There seems ever to have been a proneness in the brilliant and warm-blooded to fall into this vice—the demon of intemperance ever seems to have delighted in sucking the blood of genius and of generosity."

Moral suasion was the keynote of the whole address, and in that it reflected the views and sentiments of all enlightened American statesmen of those days.

In the very same year (1842) John Quincy Adams, in addressing the Temperance Society

504

of Norfolk County, Mass., used these words:

“Forget not the rights of personal freedom. Self-government is the foundation of all our political and social institutions, and it is by self-government alone that the law of temperance can be enforced. Seek not to enforce upon your brother, by legislative enactment, that virtue which he can possess only by the dictates of his own conscience and the energy of his own will.”

Our conclusion, then, must be that in the latter part of his life Abraham Lincoln, after having been a moderate drinker and a seller of liquor, became a total-abstainer; but that, as Lamson puts it, he abstained not so much upon principle as on account of a total lack of appetite. Lincoln's own address, as quoted herein, affords ample warrant for this view. Indeed, the first lines of the second quotation seem to have inspired Lamson's utterance.

Although himself a total-abstainer and an ardent friend of the cause of temperance, Lincoln was utterly opposed, as his own words show, to sumptuary laws, and would therefore, were he living to-day, oppose Prohibition.

T.



NEW (1908) YORK
U. S. B. A.

71.2009.084.10934