

Lincoln and The Enlightenment

Lincoln was born in 1809, about the time the Enlightenment was leaving the stage of history and being replaced—in America at least—by the frenzied religious revival known as “The Great Awakening.” Millions of Americans began to embrace a highly emotional brand of Protestant Evangelicalism that seemed to be the polar opposite of the 18th Century “Age of Reason.” Lincoln, however, did not go along with this seismic shift in thinking. He remained a firm devotee of the values laid down in the salons of Paris, the coffee houses of London, and the philosophical discussion groups of Amsterdam and Vienna. An unwavering commitment to clear logic, the scientific method, and the new political principles of Anglo-American liberalism would forever define his thought process. As he put it in his rationalist manifesto of 1842 “Happy day, when, all appetites controlled...*mind*, all conquering *mind*, shall live and move [as] the monarch of the world. Glorious consummation! Hail fall of fury! Reign of Reason, all hail!” The works of Thomas Paine, David Hume, Edward Gibbon, et. al would be on his bookshelves for the rest of his days. He always respected a well-educated clergyman, but the “enthusiasm” of the more theatrical revivalists would never resonate in his (usually) well-ordered mind.

Actually, the Enlightenment as a cultural phenomenon never really ended. The term, like “The Renaissance,” is more of a historical reference point than a rigorously defined period in time. Science didn't cease with the Great Awakening, nor did clear logical thinking disappear with the rise of the more radical religious impulses of the early 19th Century. Lincoln had plenty of company in believing that biology, geology, anatomy, and physics held out more promise for the advancement of human happiness than did trips to the wilder shores of fundamentalist Protestantism.

In Springfield Lincoln met a kindred soul in his soon to be law partner William Herndon. Herndon was another Post-Enlightenment intellectual, and he had a marvelous library which contained many of the latest works on science, political theory, philosophy and economics. He made this library available to Lincoln, and

Abe used it to conduct a crash course on the latest findings of Robert Chambers, the Scottish geologist who penned the sensational "*Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*." The book was perhaps the first to explore the theory of evolution (15 years before Darwin.) Chalmers also suggested that the world was far older than 6,000 years, as standard theology at the time proclaimed. Lincoln would have had no difficulty believing in its basic tenets, even though it drew the wrath of establishment ministers. Lincoln also read the radical histories of Constantine de Volney, who proclaimed that the ancient Egyptians were not white, but rather Blacks from sub-Saharan Africa. Little shocked—or frightened—the free thinking rationalist skeptic from Illinois.

One could only wonder what today's G.O.P., so thoroughly in the grip of conservative Christian churches, would do with Abraham Lincoln. "The Party of Lincoln"—really?