

Lincoln's Literary Mentors

Abraham Lincoln was not about to let his lack of *formal* education hold him back. From a young age, he knew he was bound for higher things in life than being a simple Illinois subsistence farmer. While most of his contemporaries in New Salem drank copious amounts of liquor, hunted, and brawled with gusto, Lincoln did none of these things. Instead, Lincoln read—constantly. As a result of his almost obsessive pursuit of knowledge, he became our most articulate president, and the finest writer ever to inhabit the White House. It would also be fair to say that Lincoln had a more sophisticated philosophical outlook than any other P.O.T.U.S. with the possible exceptions of Jefferson and Madison.

Not all of Lincoln's neighbors were benighted backwoodsmen. Even on the remotest prairies there could always be found a self-made intellectual of sorts. Lincoln was adept at ferreting out and becoming friends with the locals who had some learning, and who aspired to a better understanding of literature. Then he would help form a debating society, or a weekly discussion group. One such figure who exercised enormous influence on young Abe's literary development was a fascinating character named Jack Kelso. Kelso was a Scottish immigrant who lived with his wife and in-laws in a tiny cabin on the edge of town. Lincoln biographers have described him as "fat, lazy, and utterly worthless." He didn't put any serious energy into improving his small farm, preferring instead to support his family by hunting, fishing, and gathering wild honey and berries. He did not have a trade, nor did he want one. Disciplined labor was not for him. He was, in short, a "loser" like most other unpolished roughnecks in New Salem. But not quite-- these same critics also acknowledge that he was highly educated, and was well versed in Shakespeare, the Scottish poet Robert Burns, Lord Byron, and many other English men of letters. How he gained such knowledge is not clear; apparently he did not have a college degree. Like his protégé, he was self-taught.

Kelso took a liking to young Abe, (that was not unusual; most people saw something appealing in this ambitious lad) and invited Lincoln to join him on many of his endless fishing outings on the Sangamon River. There, on the banks

of the river, the two scholars would recite poetry by the hour, and exchange their thoughts on the meaning of a Shakespeare sonnet. What one wouldn't give to have been privy to these animated conversations! Kelso encouraged Lincoln to continue his deep readings of Shakespeare, and challenged him to penetrate the complex psychological makeup of characters such as Hamlet and Claudius. He may also have fostered Lincoln's formidable ability to memorize long passages from The Bard; it was later said by many who knew Lincoln in Washington that he could recite most of Macbeth, and much of Richard II. Not bad for a country boy with only two years of schooling!

Kelso never grew wealthy and died in relative obscurity. He had no interest in teaching in a distinguished university, or writing scholarly articles. His love of the classics was pure, unalloyed by ambition or a need for recognition. And, although he did not know it at the time, he played a key role in the education of our greatest statesman. Kelso was, by all lights, a contented man who loved his simple life as a rustic hunter-gatherer/philosophical genius. I would love to have known this true American original.