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## The Cartwright-Lincoln Acquaintance

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## THE CARTWRIGHT-LINCOLN ACQUAINTANCE

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Myth holds that two such mighty western Americans as Peter Cartwright and Abraham Lincoln were destined to meet; tradition, agreeable to myth, brings Lincoln and Cartwright together many times over a period of 50 years. Bare bones history is left to insist that the intersection was largely a matter of the Congressional campaign of 1846, of rising and setting stars, of the young Lincoln's triumph and the aging Cartwright's demise. Consider this spiritualized interpretation of their relationship, which makes for dubious history but fascinating mythography: "Peter Cartwright was the forerunner of Abraham Lincoln. This was the order of Providence. Religious emotion would precede political commotion. The heart had to be warmed before the mind could be convinced. A flame of love had to be kindled before the conscience could be converted" (Hill 375). If Cartwright acted John the Baptist to Lincoln's Jesus, then we should look for a prophetic encounter long before Illinois and the events of 1846. And, sure enough, at least one daydreaming source claims that as a boy Lincoln met Cartwright in southern Indiana, when the already-famous Methodist preacher came round on his quarterly circuit rounds (Wall 112). The Lincolns had left Hardin County, Kentucky, late in 1816, and lived shiftlessly in various southern Indiana locations for more than a decade. But by the time they arrived, Cartwright was only a memory in the

area, though still a vital one. His first circuits there dated from 1808, when he had caused a local sensation by routing the Shakers at Busro, and he returned in 1812-13 to supervise the Vincennes circuit, part of his first district as a presiding elder (Cartwright 53-55, 126). The Lincolns probably knew of Cartwright by reputation, since the "Kentucky Boy's" fame was even greater all across the Ohio Valley now that he was the Kentucky man. Yet after 1813, and until his permanent removal to Illinois in 1824, Cartwright's territory centered along the Kentucky-Tennessee border, so it's highly unlikely that the Lincolns ever heard him preaching around Pigeon Creek. One wishes Cartwright had actually happened by, for, if it takes one to know one, he would have recognized in the boy Lincoln a crucial aspect of himself 20 years earlier: the bent for mimicry with a comic turn. And the spectacle of an adolescent Lincoln stopping work to deliver one of his burlesque sermons "from the top of some tempting stump," so edifying to the harvest hands gathered round, might have prepared Cartwright for another and more masterful trick to be played in the campaign of '46, some 30 years down their parallel roads to Illinois (Nicolay and Hay 1:38). Sending up frontier preachers was something that came naturally to Abraham Lincoln.<sup>1</sup>

Discounting this Indiana fantasy, the first credibly documented meeting between them took place in rural Sangamon County sometime during the late summer of 1831, soon after Lincoln's return from his flatboating expedition to New Orleans (Morrison 3). According to Nicolay and Hay, who had the story from William Butler, Lincoln was working as a farmhand in Island Grove when one day Cartwright rode by "electioneering for the Legislature." Resting a spell from his work, "Lincoln at once engaged in a discussion with him in the cornfield, in which the great Methodist was equally astonished at the close reasoning and the uncouth figure of Mr. Brown's extraordinary hired hand" (1:101-02). What the two of them reasoned closely about is not mentioned. A false note, however, is the business of Cartwright's alleged elec-

tionering, for in 1831 he was out of the state legislature—well out, considering his recent disillusionment in Vandalia and his defeat for re-election in 1830—and had no firm plans to run again in 1832.<sup>2</sup> Probably on this occasion Cartwright simply happened by farmer Brown's place en route to his next preaching appointment, though there's every reason to believe he would forthrightly argue with Lincoln on politics or religion or even the lack of difference between them.

And this is the remainder of truth to the tale of an impromptu stump debate after dividing by the facts. Throughout his long career Cartwright either could not or would not clearly distinguish church from state, religion from civic life, preaching from politicking—especially when he was concurrently doing both himself. His ability to make political issues over into matters of religious faith had been an important source of his pre-Lincoln popular appeal in Illinois, just as later it would be a fatal liability. His message in the 1820s was as simple and absolute as Elihu Gest's in Francis Grierson's *Valley of Shadows*: “‘Sin in politics air ekil to sin in religion—thar ain't no dividin' line.’” Grierson was recreating the late 1850s (and Cartwright is a significant presence in the book), but even back in the spring of 1823, when Cartwright was prospecting the land “round about Springfield” for a place to locate, the principal political and moral issue was slavery. Though Cartwright himself doesn't mention his Illinois anti-slavery activities in the *Autobiography*, William Henry Milburn, who knew Cartwright personally in the 1840s and afterwards made a study of his old presiding elder's earlier career, remarked that during the 1823-24 statewide debate on slavery, Cartwright would typically preach on Sunday and, following services, “announce a stump speech for the Monday, and call upon his fellow-citizens to come and hear the question discussed, whether slavery should be admitted or not” (375). According to the *Autobiography* Cartwright had just left Kentucky to get his family away from slavery (among other reasons: see Ch. 18), and he wasn't about to stand still and keep silent

when it now threatened the free soil of his new state. Milburn shows Cartwright rigorously separating sabbath services from stump speeches, but one old settler's recollection of the same events sounds like an out-and-out canvass. Cartwright rode all around Morgan and Sangamon Counties in 1824, from settlement to settlement, "making speeches against slavery in all the churches and school houses, or wherever he could get an audience" (Ross 181). Harvey Ross gave Cartwright as much credit as anyone for keeping slavery out of Illinois, implying that his efforts were repaid by a thankful electorate when he decided to run for the legislature later in the decade (183).

This was the Cartwright against whom Lincoln competed—and at a considerable disadvantage—in the legislative race of 1832. Cartwright had been in central Illinois a good deal longer, ranging far and wide from his home farm on Richland Creek (he renamed the area Pleasant Plains). As a consequence he was much better known than newcomer Lincoln and, while indelibly marked as a Methodist preacher, was generally an acknowledged leader among the people. A humorist of the first order, an inveterate needler, and a bulldog in argument helped make him famous, loved or hated, in Illinois as in Kentucky. When Cartwright now and then rode into New Salem, tradition had him passing time at Sam Hill's store where he soon became the bane of the owner's existence. He would, with relish, tell customers, loafers and anyone within earshot that Hill "hired his fightin' done for him and paid for it with blue dishes," and that everyone thought Hill was a "soulless skinflint 'til the day he put a quarter to his lips and his soul came up to get it" (Duncan and Nickols 105; Thomas 15).

Such were Cartwright's tactics for scoring moral and social points with the community—Sam Hill sold liquor, neglected church, pinched pennies, etc. Naturally this sort of thing got him into trouble, and, preacher or not, establishing his leadership credentials eventually required more dramatic public proofs of manliness—fighting, in a word—and

Cartwright more than satisfied local norms in this regard, something Lincoln would also have to do a few years later in the celebrated encounter with Jack Armstrong and the boys from Clary's Grove which formed such an important part of his New Salem initiation (Nicolay and Hay 1:79-81). What Cartwright had had to do for 20 years in Kentucky he was certainly not reluctant to do in Sangamon County, Illinois, where most of the settlers were still Kentuckians, no matter what the state was officially called. They lived in a country that, culturally reckoned, was the northernmost border of Kentucky. Fighting was a principal index of male stature, and one of Cartwright's bouts was particularly outsized: during this first canvass for the legislature—this was in 1826, when feelings about slavery were still running hot—he overheard a ferryman on the Sangamon abusing him without restraint to a small group of men at river's edge, calling Cartwright a "damned rascal" and boasting that he could "whip any Methodist preacher the Lord ever made." Patiently waiting until the ferryman's speech was over, Cartwright then asked to be carried across. What happened next depends upon the source you choose. According to the *Autobiography*, when the two of them were alone in mid-stream Cartwright simply called the ferryman's bluff: no face was lost and no blows were struck (Cartwright 262-264). But William Henry Milburn, telling what he insists is "a veracious story," freely embellishes the tale. Milburn makes the ferryman "a herculean fellow" whose bitter denunciations of the preacher included a promise to "drown him in the river" should he ever show up. For his part, "[a]ll Cartwright wanted was fair play; he wished to make a public exhibition of this man, and, moreover, was glad of an opportunity to state his principles," though from Milburn's account of the fight it doesn't sound like they ever got around to principled discussion. They grappled, but Cartwright, "being very agile as well as athletic," immediately threw his opponent and proceeded to dunk him three times in the Sangamon—shouting each time "I baptize thee in the name of the Devil,

whose child thou art." Then he forced the choking ex-Hercules to repeat the Lord's prayer and swear he would thereafter ferry all Methodist preachers across the Sangamon free of charge (Milburn 375-78).

Cartwright says he won the ferryman's vote; Milburn has him joining the Methodist church. In either case the former antagonist would probably have been converted to "Cartwright's militia," which was a group of some 400 men he could count on for support in any political contest (Agnew 319). This was a strong voting bloc, if it really existed, and would help explain Cartwright's later success in the 1832 legislative race against Lincoln.

Yet despite the social utility of confrontation and of fighting and fighting well, Cartwright won most of his reputation—and the votes of his "militia"—through preaching. He often preached in New Salem, only a few miles from his Pleasant Plains home, using the schoolhouse or the Rutledge tavern for services (Barton, *Life* 1:195). Preaching in a tavern tells us something about Cartwright's adaptability: he was a lifelong teetotaler but always ready to beard the devil in his ordinary. But preaching in schools and regular meetings at the Logan County courthouse (Stinger 154), which seems an outlandish violation of proprieties, underscores both Cartwright's equation of civil and biblical religion and his community's participation in the idea. But it was the institution of the camp meeting that really made Cartwright famous. Transplanted in form and manner from the Kentucky model, they quickly became the stuff of legend, as reflected in this newspaper reminiscence of "the Jocose Preacher" taken from the *Illinois State Journal*:

Immense was the gathering at the Methodist camp-ground near Springfield on the second Sunday in September, 1832. A powerful magnet had attracted this great mass of people from their homes in many counties for a hundred miles around. The new presiding elder, a late arrival from Kentucky, an orator of wide-spread and wonderful reknown, it was known, would thunder on that day. The glittering PRESTIGE of his fame had lightened far before him, and

hence the universal eagerness to see and hear one concerning whom rumor's trumpet-tongue discoursed so loudly.

This particular gathering is said to have been protracted for two weeks, resulting in "[m]ore than 1,000 converts," which is an astounding number, even after taking into account the usual journalistic and evangelical inflation (Pratt 22). No other social summons, politics included, could bring 1,000 citizens (and half as many voters) together, and no other preacher could equal Cartwright's impact. Even when his message was a hard one, as it usually was, people stayed to listen. Most were affected and many changed. Sectaries and sinners alike fell under the force of his voice and personality, as this anonymous and humorous verse from a Logan County outdoor revival held in August 1838, testifies:

No Rest The dead's alive the lost is found  
For Peter Cartwright's on the ground  
We Campbellites and Newlights too  
From him will surely get our due . . . .  
We ask some friend to intercede  
With him to not expost our creed  
In mercy to withhold his ire  
And let our cause in peace expire (No Rest).

Unfriendly observers of camp-meeting enthusiasm such as Mentor Graham, the New Salem schoolmaster, were convinced that Cartwright was using his ample charismatic gifts to win votes as well as save souls. Hell-fire preaching didn't even make good religion, Graham thought, let alone good politics, where it was nothing more than a novel but contemptible form of demagoguery—literally scaring up votes (Duncan and Nickols 133-34). Graham considered himself as a leader among what passed for a Whiggish intelligentsia in New Salem, and the Scottish schoolmaster apparently regarded Cartwright as both a social and a political enemy (117). The irony of this is that Cartwright was hardly the stereotypical "fire-and-brimstone" ranter nor the "whole-hog" Jacksonian that Mentor Graham made

him out to be. Rather he was an orator of tremendous power and range, one of the greatest of his age and probably without equal in the Springfield area (one who knew and heard him there put it this way: "the terror of every local orator" [Wilson 63]). And Cartwright had sufficient education, admittedly of the "saddleback college" variety, to advertise for keeping a school himself, the curriculum to include study in the "dead languages" (Howard 176). Perhaps Graham's pupil-protégé Lincoln shared his severe view of Cartwright; perhaps, given his own political acumen and shrewd judgment, Lincoln knew better. At all events, as the legislative election approached, he and Graham counseled hard for a way to beat the preacher on polling day (133-34).

They failed. On 6 August 1832, Abraham Lincoln was defeated for the first and only time "on a direct vote of the people." He ran eighth in a field of thirteen, with Cartwright and three others being elected (Pratt 22; Thomas 59-60). In a letter written nearly 30 years later Lincoln remembered not only the result but his principal opponent: "*Peter Cartwright* and three other were elected, of whom I was *not* one" (Lincoln 2: 109).<sup>3</sup> Part of the reason for Lincoln's defeat was lack of time to campaign: throughout most of the spring and summer and until a few weeks before the election, he had been "Captain Lincoln," fooling around with the boys up North in the Black Hawk War (whence, one unsatisfactory source claims, Cartwright followed) (Heinl 383).<sup>4</sup> When he returned to New Salem, late in July, there was just time to participate in the final two events of the campaign, speeches by all the candidates at Pappsville and Springfield.

No one knows whether Cartwright and Lincoln went head-to-head in debate (as they would necessarily have to do in '46), or even how they differed on the issues. Lincoln evidently stood on a firm "American System" platform (Thomas 58); Cartwright was ostensibly a Jackson Democrat. But by 1832 Cartwright was no longer "whole hog," if he had ever been. He ran in fact with the tacit support of some of the Clay men and was probably mostly interested in

local rather than national issues—"hobbies" like legislating temperance and moral reform (Agnew 368). Yet if the preacher was really listening to the summation speeches in Springfield on 4 August, he could well have heard some more of that astonishing "close reasoning" from the "uncouth man" on the platform. And about a week earlier, at Pappsville, Cartwright may have witnessed a scene to warm his heart and tempt him to vote for candidate Lincoln (since in a *viva voce* polling he couldn't in good decorum vote for himself). As Lincoln rose to speak, a fight broke out in the crowd involving his friend, J. Rowan Herndon, who appeared to be confronting unfair odds. Tradition has it that Lincoln waded in, seized Herndon's "principal assailant" by the neck and britches and hove him bodily out of the fray—ten feet or more according to one eye-witness (Nicolay and Hay 1:108; Thomas 58). One can imagine Cartwright's approval: how often had he descended the pulpit to restore order in a rowdy congregation, then resumed speaking with renewed liberty and power? "Sin in politics air ekil to sin in religion"—and here was young Lincoln doing the right thing in the right way and then proceeding to speak for a laconic two minutes or less instead of Cartwright's typical two hours:

Fellow Citizens, I presume you all know who I am—I am humble Abraham Lincoln. I have been solicited by many friends to become a candidate for the Legislature. My politics are short and sweet, like the old woman's dance. I am in favor of a national bank. I am in favor of the internal improvement system and a high protective tariff. Those are my sentiments and political principles. If elected I shall be thankful; if not, it will be all the same. (quoted in Thomas 58)

Besides being brief, this speech, if reported accurately, is notable for what it doesn't let on about Lincoln: that he was ambitious for public office. And of course when a few days later he wasn't elected it wasn't "all the same." Lincoln didn't exactly hold a grudge over the outcome of 1832, but

neither did he like to lose, especially to Peter Cartwright. Fourteen years later he was glad of another opportunity to "get the preacher."

The Congressional race of 1846 is, not surprisingly, the most completely documented part of the Cartwright-Lincoln acquaintance. Yet most of the accounts treat the events of the campaign in isolation and are written from Lincoln's point of view. Cartwright is seen as a political anomaly (the very idea of an old Methodist preacher running against Lincoln!) and always invidiously—as if his finest act was immolation in a Lincoln landslide. For such historical one-sidedness, however, Cartwright has partly himself to blame. He might have at least deepened the record somewhat in his *Autobiography* (1856), but, as is often noted, he chose not to mention to contest of 1846 or even the name of Abraham Lincoln anywhere in its 525 pages (more about this omission below).

Thus the significance of Cartwright's half of the campaign must be reconstructed from the Lincoln record and inferred from their previous encounters. A number of conclusions stand out. In the first place, Lincoln was a much better politician in 1846 than in 1832. Moreover, the new Seventh Illinois Congressional District was a "Whig stronghold," providing a "golden opportunity" for a strong campaigner. Indeed, according to Donald Riddle, "the prime condition of . . . election . . . was to secure the nomination" (58-59). From this it would appear that Cartwright was a Democratic forlorn hope, but (and this is the third important point) whatever chance he had was lost when the Democrats forced the issue of Lincoln's "infidelity" to the forefront of the campaign, ultimately carrying the charge to extremes that reflected their desperation.

Over the intervening years since 1832 Cartwright and Lincoln had co-existed peacefully in and around Springfield, Lincoln's political fortunes rising, Cartwright's declining. The race of '46 was Cartwright's last attempt to reclaim political respectability, Lincoln's first movement toward

national greatness. But the campaign itself took a backseat to Mexican War fever, declared on 13 May—smack between Lincoln's nomination on the 1st and Cartwright's on the 23rd. The newspapers, none too keen on the election to begin with, now more than ever begrudged room for political news, sufficient reason if any were needed for a mere two-line announcement in the Whig *Sangamo Journal* of 28 May, which was all but lost in the war commotion: "*PETER CARTWRIGHT* has received the loco foco nomination for this Congressional District" (Riddle 161). The friendlier *Illinois State Register* gave the Democratic nomination more space, pointing out that Cartwright was the unanimous choice of the convention, and the best person to rescue "this most unfortunate district" from Whig domination (Riddle 161-63). Later in the summer the *Register* printed a longer campaign piece about the nominee: "Mr. C is no holiday orator, he deals in the practical, and his opinions, when uttered, are received by all with respect. His known probity of character will secure for him the undivided support of his own party, and not a few of his political opponents" (Riddle 163).

A key to understanding the reason for Cartwright's nomination is the last phrase: "and not a few of his political opponents." The Democrats, knowing they were up against it in the Seventh District, hoped that the preacher's personal popularity, his perceived independence from party labels, and what was left of "Cartwright's militia" would constitute a winning coalition of voters. An attractive strategy, but for several reasons doomed to fail. First, with Whig voters Cartwright was caught on the horns of a dilemma: either they saw him (remembering '32) as the radical antithesis of Lincoln, making their choice clear; or he was thought of as "moderate" and too close to Lincoln on major issues (e. g., the War and slavery), in which case what was the use of switching votes? Second, Cartwright suffered defections from the very Democrats he was supposed to carry en bloc (Riddle 164, 179-81), probably because he wasn't partisan

*enough* for the remnant of loyalists and because the old militia was no longer so numerous or so single-mindedly faithful to their general. There was also some frank criticism of Cartwright for mixing vocations. Ward Lamon recalled that “[r]ough tongues circulated exaggerated stories of his wicked pugnacity and his worldly-mindedness,” while “[m]any Democrats looked with intense disgust upon his present candidacy, and believed, that, by mingling in politics, he was degrading his office and polluting the Church” (277). Herndon put the criticism more in terms of republican principle: “Cartwright was personally very popular, but it was plain the people of Springfield wanted no preacher to represent them in Congress. They believed in an absolute separation of Church and State” (2:273). But, whether from principle or prejudice, the upshot was markedly fewer votes. What had made him as a politician in the Illinois of 1832—the “pugnacity” and tenacity of a stalwart Methodist circuit rider—were now killing him as a candidate.

To make matters worse for Cartwright and his party, the campaign lacked any galvanizing issues. Reviewing the meagre evidence, Donald Riddle concludes that neither Lincoln nor Cartwright wanted to argue about slavery, and couldn’t have anyway, since they agreed that it was one evil and abolitionism another. Riddle also shows that both candidates “unhesitatingly” supported the Mexican War during the campaign. With hawkish hysteria all around them, they probably had little choice, though Lincoln would change his mind as soon as he got to Washington (167-68).

With no public policy issues to debate, and facing a largely indifferent electorate, the campaign perhaps inevitably turned to personalities. Cartwright was a past master of *ad hominem* invective, which he could apply subtly or in massive blows as the occasion required. But in Lincoln he faced an opponent who now both knew him and could match his words. Unfortunately, none of their debates were recorded in detail or reported in the newspapers; oral tradition, however, has passed down a few choice campaign stories.

From his forty-plus years of practice in the western backwoods oral culture, Cartwright knew the inestimable value of a good story told publicly. He also understood the danger of letting an opponent go one-up on him, especially in face-to-face debate. Yet if we can believe the sources Lincoln "got one" on Cartwright several times during the campaign, while the preacher, either from declining powers or because the record is biased toward Lincoln, managed but one feeble comic thrust: "This Lincoln is a man six feet four inches tall, but so angular that if you should drop a plummet from the center of his head it would cut him three times before it touched his feet" (Seitz 61). Cartwright's political point here isn't clear, but no one would have had difficulty in applying the lesson of this next anecdote, recounted many years afterward by Philip Clark, who claimed friendship with both men:

[Lincoln] asked Cartwright if General Jackson did right in the removal . . . of the bank deposits. Cartwright evaded the question and gave a very indefinite answer. Lincoln remarked that Cartwright reminded him of a hunter he once knew who recognized the fact that in summer the deer were red and in winter gray, and at one season therefore a deer might resemble a calf. The hunter had brought down one at long range when it was hard to see the difference, and boasting of his own marksmanship had said: "I shot at it so as to hit it if it was a deer and miss it if it was a calf". (Wilson 63-64)

The finest story, though, and the one that has permanently passed into Lincoln folklore, is the tale about Lincoln's unexpected appearance at a Cartwright religious service. Sandburg made the story famous in *The Prairie Years*, having probably adapted it from a 1917 *Century* article by J.B. Merwin, who claimed that Lincoln had told him the story in Springfield. According to Merwin, the location was "Cartwright's home town," which must mean Pleasant Plains, and Lincoln rather than Cartwright was the provocateur: he advertised an afternoon meeting, a challenge Cartwright met by announcing an evening revival. Evident-

ly the preacher stayed away from Lincoln's meeting, but Lincoln, against the strenuous advice of his friends, turned up in the evening, sat down on a back bench, and watched and waited:

In due time Cartwright said, "All who desire to lead a new life, to give their hearts to God, and so go to heaven, will stand," and a sprinkling of men, women, and children stood up. Then the preacher exhorted, "All who do not wish to go to hell will stand." All stood up—except Lincoln. Then Cartwright said in his gravest voice, "I observe that many responded to the first invitation to give their hearts to God and go to heaven. And I further observe that all of you save one indicated that you did not desire to go to hell. The sole exception is Mr. Lincoln, who did not respond to either invitation. May I inquire of you, Mr. Lincoln, where you are going?"

Instead of answering immediately, Lincoln slowly rose and addressed the congregation as if in a stump-speech rebuttal:

I came here as a respectful listener. I did not know that I was to be singled out by Brother Cartwright. I believe in treating religious matters with due solemnity. I admit that the questions propounded by Brother Cartwright are of great importance. I did not feel called upon to answer as the rest did. Brother Cartwright asks me directly where I am going. I desire to reply with equal directness: I am going to Congress. (Sandburg 1:237; Merwin 603-4)

This predictably broke the meeting up, but Merwin adds that the congregation "burst out in hearty laughter, very much to the chagrin of Cartwright" (604). For once the canny preacher is the straight man, unconsciously setting himself up to be duped; then follows Lincoln's poker-faced response and the punch-line, which makes a mockery of "treating religious matters with due solemnity" and the "great importance" of "Brother Cartwright's" propounded questions. The logic is to deny the dilemma: not either-or but a third and better alternative, one that both men at that point want more than heaven or hell—election to Congress. It's *Mr. Lincoln*, but *Brother Cartwright*: the familiarity is contemptuous and

the laughter entirely at the preacher's expense. There's also a perfect poetic justice to the tale: Lincoln repays Cartwright's preaching in the courthouse by politicking in church, then reports his sole campaign expense as twenty-five cents to stable his horse while attending Cartwright's meeting. "Going to Congress" alone could explain the omission of Lincoln from Cartwright's *Autobiography*, where among the hundreds of incidents and the cast of thousands nobody ever outfoxed or out-talked old Peter.

The story may have originated in what was the only real controversy in the campaign—the charge by the Democrats that Lincoln was an “infidel.” Ida Tarbell, whose version of the story is earlier than Sandburg's by six years, implies that Lincoln showed up Cartwright in his sanctuary as a matter of revenge (8). Whether Cartwright himself began the “whispering” isn't altogether clear, though Riddle assumes that the preacher was fully responsible and, as we have seen, it would have been wholly in character for him to have made Lincoln's lack of religion a hot campaign issue (173). He was aware of rumors concerning Lincoln's heterodox views on religion that dated from the early 1830s—Deism or worse derived from the French (Volney's *Ruins* was a popular book in New Salem), Tom Paine's virtual atheism in *The Age of Reason*, and the alleged “free thought book” written by the young Lincoln himself but burned by friends who were anxious that the proof of his skepticism not reach the community (Barton, *Soul* 146-55). By 1846 the suggestion of Lincoln's unbelief was abroad and wouldn't go away. Thus, though Cartwright didn't invent the issue, he seems to have grasped at whatever advantage it might offer. Lincoln, rather than meet the “whispered” accusation head-on, replied in a handbill that did not mention Cartwright's name and appeared to be a model of toleration. Not counter-attacking directly may have simply been good political judgment, as Riddle thinks (174), but Lincoln may have gone easy because he believed that “Cartwright had never approved” of the accusation in the first place and was no party

to its circulation (Findley 57). Yet to Lincoln's friends there was no doubt whatever: Dr. Robert Boal of Lacon claimed that "Cartwright *sneaked* through this part of the district after Lincoln, and grossly misrepresented him" (Riddle 173; Lincoln 384). It is doubtful that Cartwright spread or even countenanced the wilder forms of the business—Lincoln called "Christ a bastard" (Wall 112)—but let's assume that he did in fact accuse Lincoln of "infidelity" and examine the charge.

Was Lincoln churched? No: "That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true" (Lincoln 382). Was he ever disrespectful of those who were? Yes, though he said otherwise in the handbill: "Cartwright accused Lincoln of having stated in a speech that drunkards were often as honest and generous as church-goers, sometimes more so. Lincoln had really made a statement to that effect four years before" (Luthin 199). (Compare this to the handbill: "I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular" [Lincoln 382]). Did he believe in the Bible as the word of God? In Christ as the son of God? Or in the very concept of a Judaeo-Christian God? The only honest answer to these questions is "Who Knows?" In the handbill Lincoln carefully stated that he "never denied the *truth* of the Scriptures" (my emphasis), but this reads like an equivocation on the matter of divine revelation and strict Christian belief. In the literal sense of the term, then, Lincoln was indeed an "infidel," and he had on at least one public occasion spoken disrespectfully of Christians. There is just a slight odor of hypocrisy in the concluding paragraph of the handbill:

I do not think I could myself, be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion . . . I . . . do not think any man has the right thus to insult the feelings, and injure the morals, of the community in which he may live. If, then, I was guilty of such conduct, I should blame no man who should condemn me for it; but I do blame those, whoever they may be, who falsely put such a charge in circulation against me. (382)

When Cartwright tried to make something of Lincoln's doubtful religion, he was hardly engaging in sheer calumny. His mistake was in thinking that the truth of the charge would be believed or that it sufficiently mattered to the voters of 1846. The old equation of sin in religion equalling sin in politics, the basis of his tremendous successes in the 20s and 30s, wouldn't balance. A few days before the election Lincoln told a Democrat who had offered to vote for him in a pinch: "I have got the preacher, and I don't want your vote" (Sandburg 1:336). Peter Cartwright might have believed that Abraham Lincoln was an infidel and thus going to hell, but the voters of the Seventh District had him bound for Congress—and for the time being that was all that mattered.

An endnote: Lincoln came out of the campaign without resentment toward Cartwright (Findley 57). Merely the easy victor's liberality? Or partly a matter of conscience? Some thirteen years later, after the publication of Cartwright's *Autobiography* and on the eve of Lincoln's Republican nomination for president, the two men met again. Cartwright's grandson, Quinn Harrison (known as Peachy), had stabbed a man named Greek Crafton to death over in Pleasant Plains. The deed was close to being cold-blooded murder, the only provocation being an enmity between the two boys' families and an exchange of words (Duff 363).<sup>5</sup> The case against Harrison appeared to be plain, the trial, as John Duff puts it, "the merest formality en route to the nearest hanging tree" (363). But with Lincoln and Cartwright working together nothing was certain. As counsel for the defense, Lincoln called Cartwright, now nearly 74 years old, as a "character witness" for his grandson and proceeded to ask him how well he knew the boy: "I have known him since he was a babe; he laughed and cried on my knee." From this sentimental start Lincoln soon had Cartwright rehearsing the interview that he had had with the dying Crafton three days after the stabbing: "I am dying; I will soon part with all I love on earth and I want you to say to my slayer

that I forgive him" (Sandburg 2:309). Duff rightly wonders how Lincoln finessed this past the judge, but the result was a jury swayed equally by the venerable preacher's tear-jerking and the wily lawyer's pleas that they be at least as forgiving as the murdered man. Personalities prevailed over the law, Quinn Harrison was acquitted, and justice gave way to a most peculiar application of Christian charity.

Three years later, in the dark war-winter of 1862, Cartwright, now 77, was the dinner guest of publisher James Harper in New York City. The talk turned topical—an unsparing criticism of Lincoln and the conduct of the war. Cartwright, surprised and disgusted by the lack of patriotism among the businessmen, mentioned a previous engagement and tried to leave the dinner; his host importuned him to stay and at least finish the next course. But Cartwright declined and instead gave a valedictory speech to the party. He denounced them all for a bunch of tories, saying he wouldn't have broken bread with such scoundrels had he known their views; he then went over the huge ground of his own past, from his Virginian birth and earliest Kentucky years, to Illinois and the contests with Lincoln, and back to the present grave situation:

When you go from here to your homes tonight I want you to bear with you the assurances of [Lincoln's] neighbour and once-political opponent that the country will be safe in his hands. I wish to have you understand that back of him will stand an unflinching host of Western men, who have no financial ghosts that terrify them and who are destined to rescue this nation from the perils now before us. We have got the men who have got the right kind of grit in them out West. Why stand ye here idle critics? May God send patriotic light into your stingy souls!

Cartwright concluded with a toast, holding high a glass of "Heaven-brewed 'Adam's Ale'" "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable! There are now but two parties—Patriots and Traitors!" (Rankin 282-283). It was if the "forerunner" had finally come around, had realized his destiny; if the foes and scoffers wanted his head, they were

welcome to take it: "I am through. I may have said too much, and said it too harshly, for I am not a man of smooth, soft words" (282).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I prefer this version of Lincoln's "preaching" to the one given by Ida Tarbell, who has him *seriously* imitating a fire-and-brimstone preacher and reducing the neighborhood children to tears with his vision of damnation ("In Lincoln's Chair" 8).

<sup>2</sup>Cartwright does not detail his legislative experiences in the *Autobiography*, offering instead a characteristically elliptical account framed by a strongly critical judgment: "I found a great deal of corruption in our Legislature; and I found that almost every measure had to be carried by a corrupt bargain and sale; which should cause every honest man to blush for his country" (262).

<sup>3</sup>It is only fair to say here that Lincoln was *asked* in a letter from John Coulter of Niles, Michigan, to remember the circumstances of his races against Cartwright (Lincoln 2:109).

<sup>4</sup>According to the standard history of the Black Hawk War, it was either a man who spelled his name "Cutright" or, more likely, no one of the Cartwright name at all who volunteered and served (Whitney 1:407-8).

<sup>5</sup>Duff says the killing was "apparently without provocation"; William Herndon, in a letter to Jesse Weik written in 1885, asserts that there were "hot words" and that Crafton struck the first blow (Duff 363, Findley 58).

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