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Robert Bray

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Robert Bray, Illinois Wesleyan University, interviewed by Jim Browne

WGLT Interview

Jim Browne: Robert Bray is a professor of American Literature at Illinois Wesleyan University, and he also co-wrote a play commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birth, *Lincoln's in Town*, which focused on the sixteenth president's time in McLean County. His new book is called *Reading with Lincoln*. Bray says one reason Lincoln read so much was because of poor self esteem.

Robert Bray: Because of his, well not to put too fine a point on it, what we would call white trash origins today, upland Southern poverty stricken family, no education, no particular distinction whatsoever. That was one, and the other was he thought that his lack of a formal education, in a sense, put him at a disadvantage in the game of life.

Browne: A lot of great men and women have, if not plagiarized, at least borrowed from others. Martin Luther King Jr. often credited with the phrase, "the law and arc of the universe bends toward justice"; it was taken from a text written by a Unitarian minister back in the 1850s. Did Lincoln borrow from great writers?

Bray: Yes, and ironically enough, one of the most important of such borrowings came from a Unitarian minister in the 1850s. That was Theodore Parker.

Browne: Well that was the same person—

Bray: Isn't that interesting?

Browne: ...That—

Bray: Yes, yes—

Browne: ...Martin Luther King, lifted the "arc of history" quote from.

Bray: And let me explain what Lincoln did. June 16th, 1858, "House Divided" speech in Springfield to accept the nomination of the Republican Party to run against Steven A. Douglas. Lincoln famously announced that text—"a House divided against itself cannot stand." His hearers immediately would have connected that to the Gospel of Mark and Chapter 3, verses 24 and 25, and Lincoln knew that, of course. He made good use of the Bible throughout his public speaking and writing career. But that's only half the story. It turns out that in the months leading up to the nomination speech, Lincoln actually did read a speech in which Theodore Parker anticipated Lincoln's use of the "House Divided" as a metaphor for the United States' peril under slavery.

Browne: Do you have the Theodore Parker text available?

Bray: Yes I just happen to have that here, I was thinking about this, let me just read you part of the peroration of that speech which is called "Dangers Which Threaten the Rights of Man in America." And I quote, 'There can be no national welfare without national unity of action, which pre-supposes a national

unity of idea in fundamentals. Without this, a nation is a House divided against itself; of course it cannot stand.”

Browne: And those words are so familiar to all of us—

Bray: Yes—

Browne: ...In this country.

Bray: Yes, so I think if I might just put a code into that very quickly. Parker didn't teach Lincoln about the Bible, but he did teach Lincoln how to deepen the application of a text, so Lincoln's sort of acting like an intellectual preacher in that speech.

Browne: It seems as though it was very hard to figure out exactly what Lincoln read and what people claim he read. What's so tough about that? This is the President of the United States.

Bray: One thing is that Lincoln didn't help. A quiet and deeply reserved man generally, except among his intimates, he did not say very often that he had read a given text. Perhaps the biggest exception to that is that he would talk about Shakespeare from time to time. So when I tried to figure out whether Lincoln read a text I had mainly to try and evaluate the person-who-said-so's credibility. And that was not always that good.

Browne: So, what did you find out about his reading habits? What would surprise us?

Bray: My imaginary metaphor for this is looking over Lincoln's shoulder as he was reading. He was not very interested in fiction. He once said that he never read a novel all the way through.

Browne: It surprised me years ago when I found out that he seldom traveled very far without Shakespeare's sonnets.

Bray: Not only the sonnets but sometimes the dramas as well, and he would sometimes put Poe's poems in his saddle bag, Burn's, Byron, but almost always never anywhere without Shakespeare.

Browne: What about his own written legacy, aside from the great speeches that people associate with President Abraham Lincoln. Did he leave a written legacy of his own?

Bray: The only literature that Lincoln wrote, but what we might call creative, or philosophical writings, the great speeches are of course at the very top. But, many people do not know that Abraham Lincoln wanted to be a poet, and actually made several attempts in the eighteen-forties, which he shared with a very few people, which today can be found in his collected works or the Library of America edition.

Browne: Robert Bray, author of *Reading with Lincoln*, says he hopes the book is read outside academic circles, but he says he wrote it with the general reading public in mind. Bray says that while Lincoln did not read widely, he read deeply. I'm Jim Browne, WGLT news.