

Lincoln's Mother

NANCY HANKS LINCOLN: A Frontier Portrait. By Harold E. Briggs and Ernestine B. Briggs. 135 pp. New York: Bookman Associates. \$2.50.

By DAVID DONALD

PRACTICALLY nothing is known for certain about the mother of Abraham Lincoln. Nobody can be sure when or where she was born, or who her father was. Since she apparently could neither read nor write there is no authenticated record of anything she ever thought or said. Her career was a simple and typical one: birth in Virginia, childhood migration to the Kentucky frontier, marriage to young Thomas Lincoln, child-bearing and domestic drudgery as her husband shifted from one Kentucky farm to another, final emigration to Indiana, and death there of the "milksick."

Perhaps it is because of her virtual anonymity that Nancy Hanks has been the subject of so much pen-swinging, sentimental and otherwise. Ward Hill Lamson and William H. Herndon were sure that she was illegitimate and probably unchaste, and they believed that her husband was a dull clod. In more recent times William E. Barton definitely refuted the aspersions on Nancy's fidelity to her husband, and Louis A. Warren, by assiduously digging through the Kentucky court records, demonstrated that the Thomas Lincolns were good middle-class citizens, hard-working and well respected by their neighbors, but afflicted by unmerciful disaster.

Mother

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NOW in "Nancy Hanks Lincoln: A Frontier Portrait," Harold E. Briggs, Professor of History at Southern Illinois University, and Mrs. Briggs have restudied the whole subject and written a pleasant little book that relates Nancy's story to the general pattern of manners, morals and superstitions of the early frontier. Reaching pretty much the same conclusions as Barton and Warren, they stress that the crabbed and narrow annals of Nancy Hanks' life reflect not any personal or hereditary deficiencies but rather the impoverished cultural life of pioneer Kentucky and Indiana.

Some other scholars might not take so charitable a view toward the rather disreputable Hanks clan, and it might be said that the Briggses are unduly rhapsodic about Thomas Lincoln's quite mediocre achievements. But the authors of this unpretentious little book frankly admit that Nancy's story must always be "half-myth, half-fact," and they have carefully emphasized that much of what they recount is what Nancy Hanks "may have," "would have," or "could have" said and done. If the result is not quite a biography, the fault lies not with the authors but with the scant source materials.

Associate Professor of History at Columbia, Mr. Donald's most recent book is "Divided We Fought."

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