

is precisely this known degree of error, together with the notoriously treacherous character of human memory, that makes the assessment and evaluation of such evidence so problematic. Some, but by no means all, of the errors of fact have been noted by the editors. While it is widely agreed among historians and biographers of Lincoln that Herndon's materials must be used carefully and selectively, no clear consensus has emerged on the criteria that should be employed. Don E. Fehrenbacher, a noted Lincoln scholar who has dealt critically with one aspect of this problem—"judging the authenticity of recollected utterances"—has concluded that "there is no simple formula" in such matters and that "every recollection of spoken words is a separate problem in historical method."³⁸

The editors' aim has not been to pass judgment on the merits of the evidence but rather to put the students of Lincoln's life into possession of the documents and, where possible, to provide information needed for better understanding and evaluating their content. In addition to annotating certain matters in the text that seem to call for explanation or comment, the editors have attempted to provide, to the extent that it could be located, pertinent biographical information for each informant. This information is in the "Register of Informants" that follows the documents. While the biographical data is often of necessity quite meager, it is offered to aid the reader in gauging the informant's relationship to Lincoln and to the people and events reported on. It goes without saying that, in many instances, much more information is needed to accurately judge the character of the testimony.

In his second lecture on discoveries and inventions, Abraham Lincoln observed that the invention of writing made possible the preservation of information and ideas whose value or usefulness, even if not fully understood at the time, might thereby be realized and exploited by others far into the future. The invention of printing, Lincoln went on to note, vastly extended this benefit to society, for "consequently a thousand minds were brought into the field where there was but one before."³⁹ Lincoln's insight helps to illustrate the basic purpose and potential value of printing Herndon's informant testimony. Well known and familiar as some of it is, there is much that is unfamiliar or known only through excerpts and inaccurate texts. Making it all available in printed form should dramatically expand its audience, and this, by Lincoln's formula, should make for a wider exposure to whatever clues and indications it might contain for future enhancements of our knowledge and understanding of Abraham Lincoln.

38. Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Lincoln in Text and Context: Collected Essays* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987), 281.

39. *CW* 3:362.