

Those Who Knew Lincoln and Muhammad Ali's Autographs

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BOAS, Norman Francis. *Abraham Lincoln: Illustrated Biographical Dictionary—Family and Associates, 1809-1861.* Mystic, CT: Seaport Autograph Press, 2009. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 518pp. Numerous illustrations. **\$45.00.**

ANDERSON, Shawn, BRANDES, Markus, and KOSCHAL, Stephen. *The Collector's Guide to Muhammad Ali Autographs.* Miami, FL 33231: Steve Koschal, P.O. Box 311061, 2009. 8vo. Softbound. 88pp. Numerous illustrations. Edition limited to 150 numbered copies signed by the authors. Postpaid **\$19.00.**

“Incomparable” is a word this reviewer doesn’t use lightly. In fact, that word has never appeared in this column—until now, when a book crossed my path that cannot be compared to anything in the large field of Lincolniana.

Many of us know Norm Boas as the respected owner of Seaport Autographs, a salt-of-the-earth autograph firm that’s cranked out an impressive 115 catalogues over the past 35 years. For years I’ve known that Norm’s *Abraham Lincoln: Illustrated Biographical Dictionary* has been in the works, and for years I’ve nagged him occasionally about it.

The wait was well worth it. I'm thrilled to report that this handsome hardbound production exceeds my expectations. Norm is no newcomer to publishing, having written and published biographies of Franz Boas and Jane Pierce, a history of Stonington, Connecticut and other titles. Nowhere else in the vast body of Abraham Lincoln studies is there a biographical dictionary that focuses on the army of friends, colleagues, neighbors and assorted associates that crossed Lincoln's path in a meaningful way prior to his assuming the presidency. One can read, for instance Benjamin Thomas's *Lincoln's New Salem* and find biographical snippets about a number of Lincoln's early neighbors and others... one can read Mark E. Neely's *Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* for biographical entries on any major Lincoln coevil, though mainly those of more national significance from his later years... one might well find articles about some of these earlier Lincoln cohorts buried in long-ago issues of *Lincoln Lore* or one of the other scholarly journals devoted to him. But nowhere—and I mean *nowhere*—will you find a mass of information on this specialized group under one roof.

The sheer volume of what's known as "Lincolniana" (accent the 4th syllable) normally stuns those introduced to it in my shop, where Lincoln is one of our specialties. Supposedly Lincoln is the third most written about person in human history. (The other two? Make your guess—answer appears at the end of this article on page 158.) A Lincoln-related subject can scarce be thought of that hasn't been addressed umpteen times, no matter how arcane—even if only in the form of scholarly journal articles or privately published pamphlets. And unless you've experienced the seductive, all-consuming addiction of Lincolniana, it's challenging to articulate the appeal to non-addicts. Try making a teetotaler yearn for a tall cold one.

"For over twenty years," writes Boas in his Preface,

...this author has been collecting letters and documents that relate primarily to Abraham Lincoln's family, friends, and associates prior to his presidential years. In identifying and accessing this material it became increasingly apparent that there was no one central biographical source for identifying the hundreds of individuals whose lives, in one way or another, crossed that of Abraham Lincoln. It is mind-boggling to conjure up the number

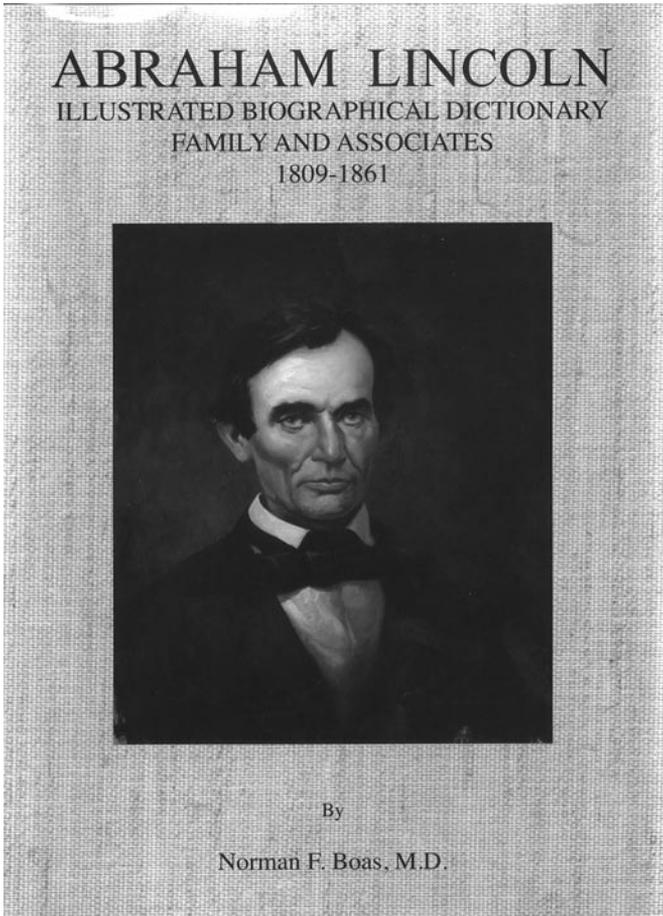
of individuals Lincoln may have met during the 52 years he lived in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. In our dictionary we have entered biographical information on hundreds of individuals who knew Lincoln, limited only by the number of examples of their autographs available to this author for illustrative purposes.

And elsewhere:

Its dual purpose is to also include autographs illustrating the signatures and handwriting of the biographees. Included are many scarce examples with some of important historic content. Again, there are many volumes dedicated to the autographs of famous and distinguished Americans, but none that focus on this Lincoln group in particular. Thus, published examples of the handwriting of many of these individuals may be found only in ephemeral dealers' catalogues.

Mind boggling, indeed, is the importance of this volume to collectors of Lincolniana. For the first time ever, they will be able to properly identify documents penned by persons unknown but from the right place and the right time period. They'll have a large array of exemplars against which to compare items from their collections. The whole field of Lincolniana autographs has been enlarged by Boas' *Illustrated Biographical Dictionary*, for now scores and scores of individuals difficult to pinpoint and identify may be properly named. Previously, an attempt to collect pre-presidential Lincoln friends, associates and neighbors would be thwarted unless one had access to a large array of specialized Lincoln volumes and time to research them exhaustively. Dealer catalogues such as my own often offer documents in this area, but collectors wanting to collect in any organized fashion faced serious difficulties.

Boas' contribution may well transform and enlarge what before was a vaguely defined collecting field. Biographical sketches and autograph exemplars on well-known Lincoln contemporaries such as Stephen A. Douglas, Edward Everett, Hannibal Hamlin, Charles Sumner and hundreds of other famed governors, senators and politicians have always been readily available. Many of these figures have biographies, sometimes a handful, written about them, and examples of their signatures



and handwriting abound throughout the autograph literature. But the now-obscure but nonetheless interesting and worthwhile persons that comprise the bulk of the Boas book are usually not accessible anywhere—or perhaps a sentence in this book, a few words in that book. And as for examples of their signatures and handwriting... well, good luck locating examples in other books. Ain't gonna happen.

Want to collect autograph material from Lincoln's neighbors in the tiny pioneer village of New Salem, where Lincoln lived between 1831 and 1837? By going to Boas's *Illustrated Biographi-*

cal Dictionary one could easily cull out score upon score of those individuals, complete with examples of their signatures. Prefer to focus on Lincoln's colleagues from the Illinois legislature? Again, Boas would be an ideal starting point. Intrigued by Lincoln's fellow circuit court lawyers and other legal associates? In a word: Boas. I have no doubt that documents written and/or signed by interesting Lincoln associates lay unidentified in many a cluster of early 19th century Illinois papers, just waiting to be properly identified.

Boas does not of course claim his dictionary is definitive—though at this point one could accurately call it authoritative for the simple fact that it's the only book of its kind! At about 625 entries, it is extraordinarily thorough. Any Lincolnist would be hard pressed to name an early Lincoln friend, neighbor or colleague and *not* find him or her in its pages. I've been playing "Stump Norm" for the past couple weeks, and have yet to come up with a name not given an entry (though I dare say my friend and colleague Dan Weinberg, owner of the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, may be able to find a few names which were not included.). To his credit, Boas remains modest, as when he remarks, "Encyclopedic reference volumes are never complete and must be periodically updated with new information... It is our hope that this volume will be updated in the future adding many more names and illustrations."

These illustrations, by the way, are plentiful and varied and of decent quality—although none are in color—ranging from simple signatures (or "Joe Blow His X Mark" for illiterates) to many sizeable handwriting examples in the form of letters, legal documents, the occasional signed photograph and such. I did find one entrant (John C. Black Jr.) whose portrait appears, but no signature—the verso of the photograph, which also is illustrated, bears the signature of Esbon Blackmur, also an entrant.

Boas wisely refrains from offering any comments whatsoever on the value of documents signed by any of these persons. This is decidedly *not* a price guide. Prices in this field naturally tend toward the subjective, for values of most of the lesser-known figures aren't well defined. I do wish that Boas had offered some thoughts on the relative scarcity (not values) of autograph material for all or at least some of his entries and the type of items most often found, perhaps at the close of the entries. Ann

Rutledge material is virtually unheard-of and unobtainable... William Berry is rare but occasionally surfaces... William “Billy” Herndon is readily available though not inexpensive.... those kind of casual observations would add a whole other dimension of usefulness to this volume. No dealer alive today has handled more of this type of Lincolniana than Boas, after all, so his perspective on this would be a welcome addition to a revised edition.

In a field of Lincolniana, so extensive that it’s rare to find anything that strikes one as having never been done, Boas’s *Abraham Lincoln: Illustrated Biographical Dictionary—Family and Associates, 1809-1861* manages to create a new and fascinating niche.

Muhammad Ali

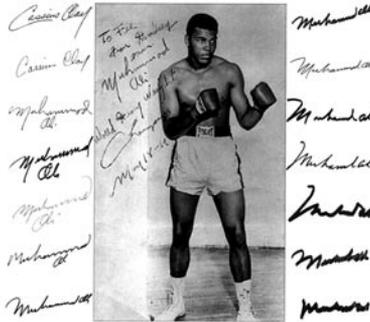
The fine art of pugilism (to aficionados; two brutes beating each other bloody to detractors) has never had a book devoted to its autographs—until now. The specialist guide *The Collector’s Guide to Muhammad Ali Autographs* is truly a first in its field, though I hope that someone somewhere is working on a general guide to collecting boxing autographs.

American dealer Stephen Koschal and up-and-coming German dealer Markus Brandes (whose *From the Hand of Albert Schweitzer* I reviewed in the Summer 2008 issue of *Manuscripts*) have paired up with specialist collector Shawn Anderson to offer this highly focused guide. Koschal most recently paired up with another German dealer, Andreas Wiemer, to produce *Presidents of the United States Autopen Guide* (reviewed in the Spring 2009 issue).

The Collector’s Guide to Muhammad Ali Autographs is a slim, slick little booklet sporting numerous brief chapters, many only a page or two—I would’ve organized it into twelve more sizeable chapters and called them “Round One,” “Round Two” and so on. The authors chronicle Ali’s signature over the past four decades, commenting also on Ali scams of recent years and other routine collecting advice.

Outstanding is what I’d call the array of scarce early “Cassius Clay” signatures that opens this volume. Fans will especially enjoy seeing the boastful phrase “Next Champ” that Ali often penned with these early signatures—or the 1963 example before

The Collector's Guide to Muhammad Ali Autographs



Shawn Anderson - Markus Brandes - Stephen Koschal

his championship bout with Sonny Liston in which he prophetically bragged "Liston in 6"! A few scarce 1960s vintage "Muhammad Ali" signatures are also shown. Best is the uncommon and desirable "Honorary Negro" cards signed by him that he used to hand out. "Note the unusual way Ali formed the 'M' in Muhammad," note the authors. "This is a rare variant of the 'M' which he has used on occasion through the early 1970's."

An impressive array of Ali autograph items—an ALS, signed book, signed contract, fight ticket and more—are displayed from the more common 1970s period, along with useful commentary on Ali's signing practices during this period. The same is true for the 1980s chapter, and here begin the many inspirational quotes and sketches with which Ali began to decorate his

signature. The 1990s chapter of course illustrates the inevitable deterioration of Ali's motor skills as the Parkinson's Disease progressed, evidenced in his diminutive, crabbed scrawl of a signature. Not surprisingly, the authors concur with every serious autograph dealer's opinion that "these are nearly impossible to authenticate as genuine"—"nearly" being an understatement in this dealer's opinion. *Absolutely* impossible would be more accurate.

Most intriguing of all, perhaps, is the authors' revelation that Ali (more likely an official "handler" or merchandiser) appears to have had an Autopen machine and to have employed it in recent years. The authors' assertion that many of the high-priced autograph items offered for sale by Muhammad Ali Enterprises are Autopen-signed is a serious allegation that warrants further research. They illustrate eight obviously 100% identical signatures taken off Ali's website—disturbing and hard to refute.

Along similar lines, a lengthy preprinted Ali inscription and signature found in some copies of Ali's book *The Greatest: My Own Story* is described and illustrated. Secretarial signatures appended to Muhammad Ali Fan Club membership applications in 1989 are discussed and shown, and a poster supposedly signed by Ali in an edition of 1,000 in which Ali is pictured and accompanied by a Certificate of Authenticity from ex-wife Khalilah. "Every professional autograph authenticator and dealer we have spoken with," note the authors, "agrees that the Muhammad Ali signatures on these posters are secretarial." They also explore in greater detail an outrageous scam perpetrated by former heavyweight boxer Chuck Wepner and others that put massive number of Ali forgeries into circulation. "They produced approximately 10,000 forged items which filtered into the autograph market," state the authors. Critical data for collectors to be aware of.

All of which brings me to my main beef with Messrs. Anderson, Brandes and Koschal: They really should stand up and assert *their own opinions* on these matters, backed up of course by detailed explanation of why they think these are secretarial or otherwise non-authentic and illustrations proving their point, rather than this noncommittal characterization of *other* dealers and authenticators' opinions. Readers of this volume justifiably expect the authors to be extremely knowledgeable if not expert

on the subject. The authors need to state their views loud and clear. Use others opinions to fortify your opinions if you wish, to be sure, but readers don't want supposed experts on a subject to appear wishy-washy. They want attitude as bold and assertive as Ali.

Like some other single person autograph studies reviewed in this column (Al Wittnebert's Elvis Presley booklet comes to mind—see the review in the Spring 2007 issue), *The Collector's Guide to Muhammad Ali Autographs* is wonderfully strong on illustrations and weak on detailed analysis. It's a great thing to offer collectors a large assortment of well-organized exemplars from all periods of Ali's life, and to tell readers *These are authentic, These are secretarial, These are forgeries*, etc. But the other half of this equation is to explain *why* these are authentic, *why* these are secretarial, *why* these are forgeries. Teach them the principles behind separating the good from the bad. Just as the best fiction shows or demonstrates to the readers the character's personality rather than simply telling them, so too the best autograph studies explain in detail the material they illustrate. In this, Anderson-Brandes-Koschal fall short.

A huge number of illustrations grace *The Collector's Guide to Muhammad Ali Autographs*. Most are perfectly fine or at least acceptable, though sometimes quantity replace quality and some leave something to be desired. If an illustration breaks down into dot matrix or has to be reduced in size so much the signature cannot be seen, it should be omitted or reshot. Other minor production issues should be addressed as well. A page is devoted to a single paragraph description of the 1996 Easton Press edition of *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*—3,500 numbered copies signed by Ali and co-author Thomas Hauser. Three-fourths of this page is blank. Did the authors intend to illustrate this signed limitation page?

Elsewhere two batches of Muhammad Ali checks are described—a small cache from the 1970s (“unquestionably genuine”) and a large cache of later vintage (“dealers we have spoken with will avoid these other checks”). One of these later checks is illustrated, although the caption clearly refers to “The two illustrations below.” (And again, to revert to my earlier criticism, why aren't the authors explaining to the reader why these later checks are considered bogus? Seeing the illustration, I have my

opinion why and agree with this assessment—but they’re the authors of this book and should be spelling it out in their own words.)

One small regret I have about this study is the necessity for a chapter of eBay advice. Why the authors legitimize what many a dealer and collector consider Forgery Central (a well-known dealer’s characterization, not mine) is a puzzlement. “It is good because eBay offers many items from across the country and even across the world that you would not be able to find otherwise,” they maintain. Far safer and more reliable online sources (abebooks.com, alibris.com, etc.) flourish, combining the inventories of thousands of book and autograph dealers, and while intended mainly for books, large numbers of autographs are also found there. Websites of respected full-time autograph dealers (many of whom intentionally distance themselves from eBay) are easily found online—many of them elected members of the Professional Autograph Dealers Association (PADA) and the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA), the two most serious and respected by-election-only organizations in the field. “It is bad because the majority of the autographs sold on eBay are not as they appear.” Doesn’t this statement void the other?

So while these reservations prevent me from making the obvious analogy and describing *The Collector’s Guide to Muhammad Ali Autographs* as a knockout, it’s definitely a strong TKO. Anderson, Brandes and Koschal have produced a first of its kind on a worthwhile subject—and nowhere in the autograph literature will you find anywhere near this number of exemplars for comparison and for further research. Like all of Koschal’s productions, too, it’s a good value. At \$19 postpaid and a print run of only 150 copies it is certain to be out of print soon.

Answer: 1. Jesus Christ. 2. Napoleon Bonaparte. Or so they say. Personally, I believe the volume of Lincoln literature will outstrip Napoleon someday, if it hasn’t already.