

>> Peter Robinson: Welcome to uncommon knowledge. I'm Peter Robinson. Joining me today, Andrew Ferguson the author of Land of Lincoln. To put my cards on the table right away, this is a brilliant book; funny, informative, brilliant. Take it from there and go up Andy. [ laughing ]

>> Andrew Ferguson: I like that introduction.

>> Peter Robinson: From the preface to Land to Lincoln " Lincoln hasn't been forgotten but he's shrunk from the enormous figure of the past, he's been reduced to a hobbyist, eccentricity, a charming obsession shared by a self selected subculture, he has been detached from the national patrimony. He is no longer our common possession, that earlier Lincoln, that large Lincoln seems to be slipping away - or that's what I had assumed, anyway". Lincoln shrinking; explain that assumption with which you start the book.

>> Andrew Ferguson: Well as I mentioned in the book, I grew up with that sort of Lincoln that you mentioned; the iconic presence sort of hovering over the country. And I grew up in Illinois which is of course, the original land of Lincoln. But it wasn't just that, I think that kids through the early sixties and mid sixties still had that sense of Lincoln, this almost sort of universal presence in our history and even in contemporary life. But then ... it isn't even so that he shrunk but it's as though he were cut to fit everybody's own individual biases and preconceptions, and it's almost as though he was privatized might be the best word. Everybody has his own individual Lincoln and you see this in the books that have come out now, just in the last generation or so - even less, 10 or 15 years you only go back, you see there's been a book about proving Lincoln wasn't an evangelical Christian; written by an evangelical Christian. There's one proving that he was a socialist, written by a socialist. I guess most famously there's one proving a few years ago that Lincoln was an active homosexual, written by a homosexual activist. There was even - came out a couple years ago - proving that if Lincoln were alive today his political beliefs would be identical to those of Mario Cuomo, and guess who wrote that book? And so the thing that started the book was, well what about Lincoln - Lincoln? Isn't there still the big Lincoln, the universal Lincoln that we can all sort of draw inspiration from and lay claim to, as earlier generations have. That's sort of the question I wanted to ...

>> Peter Robinson: So you went, in Land of Lincoln which is part travel log, you travel all over the country in this book. In Land of Lincoln you're in search of an authentic Lincoln and what he still means to the country today. Is that a fair point of departure?

>> Andrew Ferguson: Yeah, and it's partly ... I think there was some urgency to it. I don't want to aggrandize the enterprise too much, but this is sort of a rough patch in the country's history right now. You see it in the polls and we're all, 70 percent say we're on the wrong track and there's a loss of faith in the institutions and the competence of government, and all these sorts of things. And this is exactly when, in earlier years people turned to historical figures and icons to use the other phrase, like Lincoln and I

thought, well if there was ever a time when we needed to know whether there was such a presence in our history is this big Lincoln, now is the time.

>> Peter Robinson: So you set out not merely to write an amusing and informative book, but to save the nation?

>> Andrew Ferguson: Actually humanity, I think this was the goal here.

>> Peter Robinson: Excellent. As I said, you crisscrossed the country in this book ... 3 stops in the Land of Lincoln. I'll name them, you tell me the story. Stop 1: the Thai Little Home Cafe in Chicago.

>> Andrew Ferguson: Yeah, one of the first places I went was back to Chicago where I grew up, but also because Chicago was actually a very important city in sort of the growth of the Lincoln myth right after his death, his very violent death, that shook up the country. Cultists started to appear around the country and Chicago was a very fertile ground for them. One of them was one of my heroes, Jane Addams, who founded Hull House on the west side of the city, to bring in the ... her word was 'Americanized' these ways of immigrants coming in from Central Europe and from Ireland. She wanted to make them at home in their new country and the way she did this was holding up Lincoln as kind of the icon. Again, that word, the exemplary American. If you wanted to be a real American, this is the kind of man you should emulate. Well I wanted to find out if that was still going on and I found, heard, about this Thai restaurant on the northwest side of Chicago, Albany Park neighborhood, run by an elderly couple, Oscar Esha and his wife; both Thai, neither one speak English very well, and they showed me a little shrine that they had built back on the bar of their Thai restaurant, which has been there for 35 years, and what had happened was when they first moved to Chicago Mrs. Esha saw on all the license plates 'Land of Lincoln'. She said, well who is this Lincoln? He must be the head man in history. He must be the man who runs the country. So she went and she learned everything she could about Lincoln, taught her children to revere him as they grew, and eventually built this little shrine to him. And the sort of kicker to the story, Mr. Esha showed me that they set out a plate of food for Mr. Lincoln, as they called him, everyday and he said we put out everything: entree, desert, appetizer, drink also, everything. And his wife sort of [ whispering ] and he said, oh that's right but no pork. And I said, oh why is that? He goes, well he's Abraham Lincoln. Jewish people, they don't eat pork. So he had everything right about Lincoln except for that one little ...

>> Peter Robinson: Stop number one is the Thai Little Home Cafe in Chicago. Second stop: a very large house in Beverly Hills.

>> Andrew Ferguson: So large, it's the largest house I've ever been in that wasn't originally owned by royalty, I think. In fact it's not even in Beverly Hills, it's in the hills above Beverly Hills if you can imagine ...

>> Peter Robinson: So exclusive we don't even know the name of the town?

>> Andrew Ferguson: Exactly, I could tell you right where it was but then I'd have to shoot you. In it lives a widow who is without a doubt the greatest private collector of Lincoln stuff that may be has ever lived, but certainly that is alive now. And she very kindly and generously showed me into her house, which is a treasures gallery of Lincoln stuff. She would walk me around and here was one of the three Abraham Lincoln top hats that we know were actually his that she has in a little case there, she would take me into the vault where she keeps Mary Lincoln's undergarments, where she has bits of the cloth coat that Lincoln was wearing the night he was shot, she showed me and let me hold the gloves that he was wearing still stained with his blood, at Ford's Theatre.

>> Peter Robinson: Now is this the kind of sane expression of devotion or is it a little nutty?

>> Andrew Ferguson: I think it's both, actually. I think that it isn't nutty, of course, but America is a land full of nuts. I mean, we all have, one of the things about this as I say about Lincoln, is he became kind of a private enthusiasm for a lot of people and in pursuing those enthusiasms, sometimes people go a little around the bend. Now Mrs. Taper, her name is Louise Taper, is a perfectly sane and wonderful person but she has a devotion to Lincoln that has caused to spend large amounts of money on these beautiful things because from the things themselves, she somehow is drawing closer to him; and I was fascinated by this. It's almost a Catholic devotion to the material object.

>> Peter Robinson: By the way we should, now that we've called Mrs. Taper slightly nutty, we should in her defense ... you've made it very clear she's extremely generous with this collection.

>> Andrew Ferguson: Oh absolutely.

>> Peter Robinson: And lends it out to museums amidst wayward journalists ...

>> Andrew Ferguson: I mean nutty in the ...

>> Peter Robinson: In the best possible sense of the word!

>> Andrew Ferguson: You said nutty - eccentric, eccentricity is, I think a wonderful thing.

>> Peter Robinson: Third stop: Richmond.

>> Andrew Ferguson: Richmond was actually the first chapter in the book and was one of the things that started the whole journey off. I picked up the newspaper from my stoop one morning and there was a headline that said 'Lincoln Statue Stirs Outrage in Richmond'. Well you know the word outrage and Lincoln are not supposed to appear in the same sentence usually. But sure enough, the city father's Ben and Richmond, which of course is the former capital of the confederacy, had decided to put in a statue of Abraham Lincoln on public property - and just touched off a firestorm. I mean there

were public demonstrations and letter writing campaigns and advertising campaigns in the newspaper, and stuff to try and keep this statue from going in and I thought, you know this is something like an eruption from the past into the present - I have to go see what this is all about. And I went down and spent a great deal of time with these guys who really, really dislike Abraham Lincoln - I mean hate is not too strong of a word. But the thing about it that sort of spurred me on was they held a conference called Lincoln Reconsidered, which they brought in outside scholars to sort of explain why they hated Abraham Lincoln. And I went there and ...

>> Peter Robinson: So this is not sort of prude, old fashioned, KKK racists?

>> Andrew Ferguson: No this was ... what was astonishing to me, these guys could have been airlifted off the golf course of any suburban community in America. They just wore the Izod shirts and khakis, the sort of the natural suburban uniform that we all wear on a weekend and the scholars were not crazy and I realized, to my unsettlement, that they knew a lot more about Lincoln than I did and I'd sort of been raised as a Lincoln buff. That was bad enough but the worst thing was, then the people who wanted to bring the statue to Richmond decided they would have a counter conference, and they brought in scholars of their own to explain Lincoln's greatness. So I went to that with high hopes thinking, well you know I'll finally have my belief in Lincoln's greatness reconfirmed with these scholars - and they were terrible!

>> Peter Robinson: The pro Lincoln side was worse wasn't it?

>> Andrew Ferguson: They would say 'well Lincoln was great because he was tolerant of ambiguity'.

>> Peter Robinson: So it was a politically correct crowd?

>> Andrew Ferguson: He wasn't judgmental, he was nonjudgmental, he eschewed nationalistic triumphalism, was another phrase I remember from it. And it was just ... he was kind to his children. I thought - you know of all the things I know about Lincoln, one thing I do know was he waged one of the most savage wars in our history. There's gotta be more to him than the fact that he was non judgmental.

>> Peter Robinson: Stop there. There's gotta be more to him, they're telling me in my ear to keep moving along, but you just set up a beautiful transition so hold it. The question now is what do we know about Lincoln - which is also one of the main themes of the book. The great source book on Lincoln, you write, is Herndon's Lincoln - a book now called Herndon's Lincoln, which is based on interviews that Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon back in Springfield, conducted after Lincoln's assassination. You write that although Albert Beverage, the first historian to subject Herndon's work to close analysis, "never wavered in his high opinion of Herndon's reporting on what he - Herndon - had witnessed on his own. Beverage quickly discovered the same could not be said for Herndon's hundreds of sources". So the main source book we have on Lincoln,

the more closely one looks at it, the more evanescent what we think we know about Lincoln becomes.

>> Andrew Ferguson: Right.

>> Peter Robinson: Right?

>> Andrew Ferguson: Yes. There are a couple of problems, Herndon collected in the years following Lincoln's death, literally thousands of pages of reminiscents from interviews that he conducted with people ...

>> Peter Robinson: This is what we would ... historians would respect the impulse there. He went around and conducted first person interviews with as many people who knew Lincoln as he could find.

>> Andrew Ferguson: One of the great research and reportorial projects in American history and he doesn't get enough credit for it. As one historian called it, it's a toxic waste dump for historians because of the nature of memory, because people tend to aggrandize their own role with a great man because there's so much contradictory evidence about various things. So for years historians treated it as a toxic waste dump. More recently in the last 20 years or so, historians have decided no, there's a lot of invaluable stuff there and we can really get at the real Lincoln by applying our own standards to the various accounts of Lincoln's personality and behavior that are in this Herndon material. Now the problem with that is, as earlier generations of historians understood, is that historian then has to apply his own prejudices to deciding what he wants Lincoln to be and what he doesn't.

>> Peter Robinson: Right. Deeper problem still - "even Herndon", you write, I'm quoting you once again, "acknowledged the greatest obstacle he faced, Lincoln himself. Lincoln never poured out his soul to any mortal creature at any time and on no subject, Herndon confessed, he was the most secretive, reticent, shut-mouthed man that ever existed". You argue here that more; you don't argue you assert, that more books have been written about Lincoln than about any other American by a wide margin. Movies, statues, television programs, the PBS series on the Civil War, now Land of Lincoln, we feel somehow that we know Lincoln or that we can touch him, that he's assessable, we can reach him in a way that the first generation - Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and so forth - they're just marble figures to us. But it's all a delusion. He kept himself to himself and the primary source material is contradictory, uncertain, unreliable.

>> Andrew Ferguson: Yes, that is true as far as it goes. The essential Lincoln, who he was in the deepest recesses of his soul, is unknowable and people will want to play, and historians will want to play the parlor game for as long as Lincoln occurs to us, of what kind of man was he? Was he generous with children, was he mean with his bank account, was he mean to his wife, so on and so forth.

>> Peter Robinson: By the way, do you see for a modern parallel, this business about Herndon calling him the most secretive, reticent, shut-mouthed man that ever existed. Do you feel any parallel with Reagan? You get the same feeling that the inner Reagan is somehow mysterious.

>> Andrew Ferguson: It's mercurial and it's always just out of reach. But see this is tantalizing to the contemporaries of people like that. And this is one of the reasons that Lincoln drew people to himself, was that there seemed to be something un-get-at-able about him that you just would never get. And he was withdrawn, he would always withhold some part of himself in any relationship that he had. The conclusion I eventually reached is, we're missing the forest for the trees. While we're arguing over what historians and hobbyists and enthusiasts are arguing over, the particular strains in Lincoln's personality, whether we can know this or whether we can't know it, and what one witness said and what another witness didn't, we're actually missing the public Lincoln. We're forgetting the Lincoln that really matters, which is the Lincoln who was president and who did the achievements that we should still revere.

>> Peter Robinson: Okay. Now let me put to you, and here I indulge myself, I would like to put to you the two questions I myself find the most perplexing about Abe Lincoln. They're two questions but they both come under the heading of 'how did he do it?'. Question one: how did Abraham Lincoln develop such a first rate military mind? His total military experience before becoming president was to participate at the age of 23, in the Black Hawk War in which during one summer, the month of a single summer in 1832, a couple of thousand Illinois militiamen chased around a couple of bands of Indians, out raiding Indians, and finally captured them and shipped them west of the Mississippi. Lincoln played a part in that brief and, frankly, minor conflict - and then you go less than 3 decades later, he's president of the United States saying that general isn't any good, that general isn't any good, here's the strategy, Grant is good ... shaping the strategy for a conflict that involves most of the nation. How did that happen?

>> Andrew Ferguson: Well what he had was the essential thing, which was a will to win and a reason to win. He actually believed that what he was doing was of world historical importance, and when he arrayed around himself these generals who were doing the trick, he fired them and as he once said to Halleck, 'go forth and give us victories'. General Halleck was one of his substitute generals. He just wanted to win. That's the first thing. The second thing is, he was a very studious guy and he would go over to the Library of Congress, the big congressional library, and take out books on military history and read Clausewitz and would read late into the night and try and teach himself tactics.

>> Peter Robinson: Do we know we are able to assemble a list of the books that he read while he was president?

>> Andrew Ferguson: I think there is such a list, yeah.

>> Peter Robinson: Is there? Okay, alright. Here's the second question: how did he become such a master, perhaps the master, of American prose? You read, I never can

remember whether something's modern library or library of America, but one of those brought out within the last year - two volume, the Great Histories of the United ... and they start out in the eighteenth century with the founders. These are well wrought, beautifully written speeches. But then you descend into the nineteenth century - Clay, Webster, Steven A. Douglas, and these are two or three hour speeches; tedious, bombastic. And this is in the collection of the best of ... and then you get to Abraham Lincoln and it's not just that he was the best of his kind; he's inventing a new kind of prose. He's got the clarity, the concision, the rhythms, he invents a new form of expression ... how did he do that?

>> Andrew Ferguson: Well again, it's largely self taught. He did not read widely, but he read deeply. One of the most interesting facts about Lincoln, I think and revealing in a way, is Lincoln loved Shakespeare but from what we know he only read 3 or 4 Shakespeare plays. He read Macbeth over and over and over again, and never bothered, say, with the Tempest or Richard the Third. It was some kind of sense of concentration and focus that he had that was almost incurious. He wasn't even curious about these other plays of Shakespeare, so he would focus in on one thing and work it and work it and work it until he had mastered it. This is why he became such a good lawyer ... in fact his writing is the writing of a first rate lawyer who has just enough sense of the eloquence to ratchet it up just a bit when he needs to.

>> Peter Robinson: But he's always making the essential argument.

>> Andrew Ferguson: Right.

>> Peter Robinson: Okay. Thank you. I think I will accept that as an answer. [ laughing ] There's still a little bit of mystery there but I'll just ... by the way, what do we know about ...

>> Andrew Ferguson: Genius is a mystery.

>> Peter Robinson: What do we know about his reading of the Bible? Here it said over and over it's a common place that his rhythms are based on those of the King James Bible. Is that so?

>> Andrew Ferguson: I don't know, I'm not enough of a linguist to tell about the rhythms, but he read the Bible and could quote lengthy passages of it. What he believed about the Bible is a matter of some dispute. He clearly wasn't a Christian in any kind of ordinary sense of the word, but he was devoted to the Bible as sort of a book of wisdom and a source of beauty.

>> Peter Robinson: I see. So when Reagan - that famous quotation, I have often been driven to my knees in the firm conviction that I had no place else to go - that's not an exact quotation so we think that's that Lincoln having us on? Or we really do feel that he's quite conscious that there is some sort of Supreme Being, he's just ...

>> Andrew Ferguson: Yeah ...

>> Peter Robinson: There's nothing to sign onto every dogma of the Roman Catholic Church or the Presbyterian Church, is that ... ?

>> Andrew Ferguson: The religious people of every sector tried to claim him, including Mary Baker Eddy who invented Christian Science the year after he died, said that he was a Christian scientist which would have been a neat trick. But ... atheists are now trying to claim him as sort of a proto atheist. He clearly was not an atheist, he had a deep sense of providence and a fate and of something guiding the affairs of men, and you simply can't get around that in talking about Lincoln; and I think that probably did result in his prayer once in a while. It's also true that he would kind of use flowery religious rhetoric that I don't think would have been his natural mode of expression.

>> Peter Robinson: Well now I want to push you just a little bit further because you said, providence on the one hand and fate on the other. So you've just set up on the one hand providence is a Christian conception, and fate is more of a Greek conception right? Who was it - Oden said that the Greek sense of tragedy is that it could not have been otherwise, and the Christian sense of tragedy is that it could have been otherwise, right? So where does he fit on that scale?

>> Andrew Ferguson: I think that's unknown. And again, I don't think he would have known. There are scraps ... one of the things about his writing is he practiced writing a lot and he would stay up late at night, couldn't sleep he was a terrible insomniac, and later his secretaries gathering scraps that he would write late at night just to himself, trying to order his thoughts or sort of expand on an ideal that had occurred to him. And a lot of these are sort of contemplations. One very famous one was called The Meditation on the Divine Will, which is a title given by his secretaries, in which he was trying to wrestle with this very tension between free will and man making under the providence of God, the future - and kind of condemned a sense of we are doomed to live the life that we're doomed to live. And he wrestled with both of those poles throughout his adult life, as far as we know. He never resolved it I don't think.

>> Peter Robinson: I see, does he still matter - let me do what I'm sure you're getting over and over and over again on your book tour - but I'm going to do it to you too. I'm name an issue, you tell me what Lincoln would have made of it; contemporary issue - immigration.

>> Andrew Ferguson: Well we know he talked about immigration in the 1850's himself, and he was of course ... one conviction I came up with is it's a fool's errand to try and transplant Lincoln to contemporary politics and say he would have done X, Y, or Z about the capital gains tax or No Child Left Behind; but I'll play the game. He did speak about immigration and was strongly in favor of it, both the Chinese and the Irish, and was a stout opponent of the 'know nothing's' who were threatening to cut off the immigration.

>> Peter Robinson: Free trade. He was a Republican, the first great Republican, but also a protectionist.

>> Andrew Ferguson: Yes, he was a believer in the tariff from the very first political speech he ever made - was a speech to a small gathering in central Illinois in favor of the tariff. The tariff of course then was a different matter from what it would be now. The economy wasn't developed; it was a matter of regional rivalries and so on, so again it's very hard to say what he would think about free trade versus protectionism.

>> Peter Robinson: The war on terror. You spoke about his will to win in the Civil War and his conception that what he was doing was of world historical importance. The war on terror, would he have displayed either of those?

>> Andrew Ferguson: He was absolutely convinced about the destiny of the United States, that this country had a providential role to play in human freedom in the development of the human race. That is clear to everyone, I think, who reads his writing. He would have done everything possible to defend the country against enemies like the ...

>> Peter Robinson: Now why is it a fool's errand to try to drop him into contemporary politics and say 'what would Abe have done'?

>> Andrew Ferguson: It's not fair to him and it's not fair to us. The sort of coordinates of things, of the way the country was, were utterly different. The political considerations were totally different. The sorts of pressures that any politician in 1858 would have to respond to, are utterly different. The franchise is hugely expanded from what it was. It's just doesn't ... everybody wants to claim him. This is my Cuomo joke, but it's silly in the end. That doesn't mean that he doesn't matter.

>> Peter Robinson: That's the point, what you're arguing is that he lived in a different world right?

>> Andrew Ferguson: Yes - different political world.

>> Peter Robinson: Different America, so what is ... ?

>> Andrew Ferguson: Human nature is the same. The role of the United States is the same. The internal politics of the United States is utterly different.

>> Peter Robinson: What is his distinctive place in history? Thomas Jefferson said "all men are created equal", that's 1776. What did Lincoln say 80 years later ...

>> Andrew Ferguson: The traditional answer to that question is been, he saved the union and he freed the slaves. He saved the union is actually kind of small potatoes when you think about it in terms of the 19th century. There were lots of people saving the union; Garibaldi in Italy saved the union, Bismarck created a union in Germany. It was a century of consolidators and unifiers. It wasn't just that Lincoln saved the union, he

wanted to save a particular kind of union and it was a union dedicated to the proposition. That is an achievement of an utterly different scale, and in fact I think one of the great achievements in human history. He thought that this country was a vessel for that Jeffersonian principle and if the country sank, the principle would be gone and no one knows when it could have been revived. The fact that he succeeded is the key to his greatness.

>> Peter Robinson: Final question: you write about trying to demonstrate to your own children, whom I know and are the same age as my children, so I have a special interest in your answer to this. You write about trying to demonstrate to your question, "the pleasures and exhilaration of a life touched by Lincoln". What are those pleasures and exhilarations? Why is it the case that that one life, which ended 14 decades ago, so illuminates yours?

>> Andrew Ferguson: I think we've seen an example of it here. The ramifications and the refractions are endless. He touches everything about being an American. He touches political philosophy, he touches literature, he touches any kind of history, he touches the graphic arts - as I go into the book. There isn't any sort of ...

>> Peter Robinson: You're going to have to explain that one.

>> Andrew Ferguson: Well he was the most photographed man of his time, quite consciously tried to present himself as in a certain way through the graphic arts. There really isn't an aspect of life in America that doesn't touch him, and to love him is a way of loving America I think.

>> Peter Robinson: Andrew Ferguson, author of Land of Lincoln, which I repeat is a magnificent book. Thanks for joining us; for Uncommon Knowledge, I'm Peter Robinson.