Abraham Lincoln

The Trailor Murder Mystery

When one thinks of Abraham Lincoln, it is the highlights of his career that first come to mind: Lincoln the politician, the statesman, the orator and, most importantly, the man of humble beginnings who became the 16th President of the United States. Yet, what is not known by many is that Lincoln also had a single foray into fiction writing, in the sometimes lurid genre of “true crime” fiction.

In the mid-1800s, at the time Lincoln was a practicing law, it was common for lawyers to write an overview of a case and present it as fiction. These true crime pieces were very popular with the public and, apparently, were not considered to be a breach of ethics on the parts of the lawyer/authors. Lincoln was no exception to this formula and based his story, which was originally titled, “A Remarkable Case of Arrest for Murder”, on a the case in which he defended the Trailor brothers in 1841.

Why Lincoln chose to try his hand at this type of fiction writing is a bit of a mystery. It is known that Lincoln was a fan of the work of Edgar Allan Poe and that Poe's “Murders in the Rue Morgue” was first published around the time that Lincoln was defending the Trailor brothers. Lincoln may have been inspired by Poe to try his hand at writing, or, as some have suggested, the strangeness of the case itself may have led him to want to set it into print, five years after the fact.

Whatever the reasons behind its creation, “A Remarkable Case of Arrest for Murder” first appeared on the front page of the *Quincy Whig* on April 15, 1846 and was described as, “A murder mystery by Abraham Lincoln”. The editors also went so far as to add the following editorial note:

The following narrative has been handed us for publication by a member of the bar. There is no doubt of the truth of every fact stated; and the whole affair is of so extraordinary a character as to entitle it to publication, and commend it to the attention of those at present engaged in discussing reforms in criminal jurisprudence, and the abolition of capital punishment.

As near as can be determined, the facts set forth in the story are pretty much as it happened back in 1841. The title, “The Trailor Murder Mystery”, was first used when the story was reprinted in the March, 1952 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and since the story is better known by that title, it is the one used here.

And one final note: history records that the Trailors never paid Lincoln for his defense.

Bob Gay
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