

To Miss Tarbell
with the Compliments of
Sam T. Brown

LITERARY SIDE OF LINCOLN

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When I speak of the literary side of Abraham Lincoln it is with no thought of depicting him as a literary man, as we have come to understand the modern acceptance of that term. Lincoln, it is true, was a natural poet, a born humorist, a close observer, a deep thinker and a keen student of his fellow-men, all of which are valuable requisites for him who turns to literature for a living, with any hope of achieving permanent success. In addition, he possessed those temperamental and spiritual qualities without which no writer can give soul to his work, however brilliant a mind he may have.

And yet the only book now or ever extant of his illustrious authorship is a small pocket memorandum book containing extracts from his published speeches on the subject of "Negro Equality." This unique volume, a facsimile of which is reproduced here, as nearly as possible, precisely as it came from his pen and hand, was written and compiled by Mr. Lincoln for his staunch friend, Captain Brown who, in the celebrated campaign of 1858, when Lincoln and Douglas were opposing candidates for United States senator from Illinois, quoted from it frequently during the canvass, as the authoritative statement of Lincoln's views on the subject of "negro equality," social and political.

Captain Brown carefully preserved the Lincoln scrap-book and at his death in 1868 it passed to his sons, William and Benjamin W. Brown of Grove Park, Ill., by whom it is still owned, and to whom my friend, J. McCann Davis of Springfield, Ill., is indebted for permission to reproduce this literary curiosity. I prize this autograph copy highly, for, next to owning the original transcript, in Mr. Lincoln's well-known handwriting, is the pleasure of possessing this perfect reproduction.

But while this may be Abraham Lincoln's one and only book, we all know that his permanent contributions to literature could not be condensed into this miniature volume. It is in his public speeches, his informal addresses, his letters and his state papers we find that remarkable literary power characteristic of all his writings, and indelibly stamped with his strange and fascinating individuality. Little wonder that men of culture and deep learning have marveled at the faultless perfection of Lincoln's style, which one great critic has said "eludes a final analysis as completely as do the exquisite pages of America's great romancer, Nathaniel Hawthorne." It was the author of "The Scarlet Letter," you may remember, who, when asked once to explain the secret of his style, replied: "It comes from the desire to tell the simple truth as honestly and vividly as I can." In those words we may catch a hint of one of the great causes of Mr. Lincoln's perfection of style.

I think his letters to his war generals, to Grant, McClellan, Hooker, Burnside, and to his secretary of state, Seward, are marvels of compact statement, while his knowledge of the military situation reveals an extraordinary mind. As an illustration of the breadth of the man let me quote you in full his letter to General Hooker, dated at the executive mansion, Washington, Jan. 26, 1863. It carried the appointment of General Joseph Hooker as successor of General Burnside as commander of the army of the Potomac, and is regarded as one of Lincoln's most characteristic utterances—frank, kind, and gravely ironical. It reads:

MAJOR-GENERAL HOOKER: General—I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course, I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons, and yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and skillful soldier, which of course I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is valuable, if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm; but I think that during General Burnside's command of the army you have taken counsel of your ambition and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did wrong to the country and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the army and the government needed a dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain success can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The government will support you to the utmost of its ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders. I much fear that the spirit that you have aided to infuse into the army, of criticising their commander and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can to put it

down. Neither you nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army while such a spirit prevails in it; and now beware of rashness, but with energy and sleepless vigilance go forward and give us victories. Yours very truly,
A. LINCOLN.

In his letter to Mrs. Bixby of Boston, dated Nov. 21, 1864, note the homely pathos, the supreme faith, the exquisite feeling of the great heart seen in this brief communication. It reads:

DEAR MADAM: I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom. Yours very sincerely and respectfully,
A. LINCOLN.

No doubt there are many present who have studied Mr. Lincoln's inaugural address, delivered March 4, 1861. They will recall that simple, earnest, forceful speech, devoid of florid rhetoric, with no magniloquent periods, no flamboyant spread-eagleism, such as so many of our orators love to indulge themselves in and which, it must be confessed, our people love to hear. That, however, was not Mr. Lincoln's style. His was not the oratory of a Burke nor a Webster, and in his speeches you may look in vain for what is commonly regarded as "oratorical" quality. But above and beyond that we find structural order, clearness, sense of proportion, ease and simplicity, which combine to place so much of his public utterances in the realms of literature.

That first inaugural address may have been disappointing to certain impulsive northerners, as Mr. Morse suggests in his admirable life of Lincoln; but to those thoughtful citizens who read and studied the address, it gave general satisfaction. In the closing paragraph is seen the utmost purity of style combined with great force and compression. It is of the highest standard of literature. Remember, this was before the break, when he was addressing South as well as North. He reached his climax in these thrilling words: "I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break, our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chords of the union when again touched, as surely they will be by the better angels of our nature."

Can we wonder that the London Spectator, that acknowledged literary authority, in reviewing one of Lincoln's lofty public utterances, declared him to be "among the greatest masters of prose ever produced by the English race."

That great address at Cooper institute delivered forty-two years ago this month, marked Lincoln's first appearance before an eastern audience. It was, perhaps, the most carefully prepared speech Mr. Lincoln ever made, and that it was most heartily received we all know. It was no common rail-splitter who rendered that forcible, logical, able analysis of the conditions then confronting the country. There are biting sentences throughout, that will never die. You will recall that comprehensive reply to one of the opposition in which he said:

But you will not abide the election of a republican president! In that supposed event you say you will destroy the Union, and then you say the great crime of having destroyed it will be upon us! That is cool. A highwayman holds a pistol to my ear and mutters between his teeth, "Stand and deliver, or I shall kill you, and then you will be a murderer!"

What could be more to the point than this fetching bit of sarcasm? Is it strange that he confounded his detractors? All through that great address we find deep human sympathy mingled with a clear mastery of words that compels the most unbounded respect from every lover of perfect English—and this is to lay aside the other great forces that made for clear, intelligent, deep feeling and beauty. As Hamilton Mabie says: "His was a voice, vibrating, pathetic and persuasive. Like Burns, he held the key to the life of his people."

The oftener I read Lincoln's speeches and addresses the more impressed I become with a sense of the Godhead in man. It seems to me that if ever a human being may be said to be inspired it was this sad-eyed man, "uncouth of limb and courtly of heart," who rose to each new demand and met it adequately.

"When he speaks (wrote Lowell in 1864) it seems as if the people were listening to their own thinking aloud." President Stryker of Hamilton college put it a little differently when he said: "His alert ear heard always that little click which precedes the striking of the clock."

And yet this was the man for whom "no satire was too pointed, no ridicule too coarse, no calumny too vile, no vituperation too profane," and who was described by both American and English journalists—I blush for them—as a "gorilla" and as "the Illinois ape." It is almost impossible for the present generation to conceive of such foul abuse being applied to Mr. Lincoln, but in rightly measuring this illustrious character these additional burdens need to be taken into consideration. Remembering this calumny, those closing words in his second inaugural address will convey a more pregnant meaning to the younger students of American history. You will all recall that remarkable ending:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.

To me, as doubtless it is to you, one of the simplest yet most eloquent of his short speeches was that made to the One Hundred and Sixty-sixth Ohio regiment, Aug. 22, 1864. As a gem of thought, as it is of consummate English, it is worth reciting here. Note the direct simplicity of the opening sentence:

SOLDIERS: I suppose you are going home to see your families and friends. For the services you have done in this great struggle in which we are all engaged, I present, you sincere thanks for myself and for the country. I almost always feel inclined, when I happen to say anything to soldiers, to impress upon them, in a few brief remarks, the importance of success in this contest. It is not merely for today, but for all time to come, that we should perpetuate for our children's children that great and free government which we have enjoyed all our lives. I beg you to remember this, not merely for my sake, but for yours. I happen, temporarily, to occupy this White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order, that each one of you may have, through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright—not only for one, but for two or three years. The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel.

While Mr. Lincoln has been allotted a permanent place in literature for much that he has written, there is one of his compositions that has attained pre-eminence "by virtue of that felicity of style which gives to the largest thought the beauty of perfect simplicity." I allude to that classic address delivered at Gettysburg, Nov. 19, 1863, at the decoration of the National Military cemetery. It is known wherever the English language is spoken and is justly regarded as "proof enough, were there no other, of Lincoln's place among the masters of English speech." Mr. Nicolay has told us that it was delivered without any effort at oratorical effect; but its perfection of feeling and of phrase was instantly and universally recognized. I am sure you will think this a fitting occasion to refresh your minds with this "most memorable utterance of human eloquence":

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow, this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; that the government of the people by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

That momentous document, the act of Emancipation has been fitly termed the third great state paper marking the progress of our Anglo-Saxon civilization. "First is the Magna Charta arrested by the barons of England from King John; second, the Declaration of Independence; and third, worthy to be placed upon the tablets of history, side by side with the two preceding, is Abraham Lincoln's Proclamation of Emancipation."

I repeat the question that has recurred so constantly to many before me and will puzzle so many groping students that come after, How did Lincoln gain this remarkable insight into the structure of English, this freedom and skill in the selection and combination of words? One commentator says he might have read, if circumstances had been favorable, a large part of the work of Irving, Bryant, Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Lowell, Whittier, Holmes, Longfellow and Thoreau as it came from the press; but he was entirely unfamiliar with it, apparently, until later in his career, and it is doubtful if even at that period he knew it well or cared greatly for it.

Although, as Mr. Mabie points out, he was the contemporary of every distinguished man of letters in America to the close of the war, from none of them does he appear to have received literary impulse or guidance. "He was singularly isolated by circumstances and by temperament," observes this same writer, "from those influences which usually determine, within certain limits, the quality and character of a man's style."

But a study of his life shows what a great passion he had for knowledge and for companionship with great writers. One of his biographers tells us he was constantly jotting down on scraps of paper, the smooth side of a board, a shovel—anything that came handy—thoughts or phrases which had impressed him. Mr. Lincoln once told a friend, who asked how he attained such extraordinary clearness of style, of his early habit of retaining in his memory words or phrases caught in conversation or met in books and of meditating upon them until he arrived at their meaning and then translated them into his own simple speech.

But while "he fed himself with thought and trained himself with expression" we know his supreme interest lay first in the men and women about him, and later, in the great questions which agitated them. We know what books were contained in his early library: First, the Bible, that "collection of great literature in prose and verse;" a copy of Aesop's Fables, from which he imbibed wisdom, "Robinson Crusoe"—every boy should read that masterpiece of Defoe's—"Pilgrim's Progress," another classic; a history of the United States and, as everyone knows, Weems' "Life of Washington," which latter work, we are told, laid the foundation of his political education. Later in life Shakespeare and Pope came to be great favorites. For Byron he did not care; Milton he learned by heart, but this was not among his early readings, remember. Of our American poets he preferred their patriotic selections chiefly. His favorite poem we are told was that one beginning:

O why should the spirit of mortal be proud.

It was written by a young Scotchman named Knox. Of Burns' poems Mr. Lincoln was confessedly fond, and this is easy to believe, for there was much in the humble origin and checkered career of Burns, no less than in his tender, homely songs, that appealed to the great heart of the plain man who had journeyed straight from the prairies of Illinois to the national capital. We can readily imagine Mr. Lincoln's close sympathy with the poet who wrote:

The rank is but the guinea's stamp.
The man's the gowd for a' that.

That Mr. Lincoln's mentality grew with his great responsibilities no one who has followed his public utterances can doubt. There was a steady development of his literary powers until, as the scholarly editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* defines it, "he stood at last on a serener height than other men of his epoch, breathing an ampler air, perceiving more truly the eternal realities."

But while we are trying to account for Mr. Lincoln's lucidity of style, its simplicity, flexibility and compass, "the possession of these rare qualities," declares Hamilton Mabie, "is in no way more surprising than their possession by Shakespeare, Burns and Whitman."

That he owed much to his unusual education, to his close touch with nature, his pioneer ancestry and original experiences, out of which came the higher civilization, is certain. And it is just as certain that it was this "nearness to the heart of a new country that Mr. Lincoln owed his intimate knowledge of his people and his deep and beautiful sympathy with them."

Let me conclude this brief consideration of the literary side of the great Emancipator by quoting from Mr. Lowell's celebrated commemorative ode:

He knew to bide his time
And can his fame abide,
Still patient in his simple faith sublime
Till the wise years decide.
Great Captains with their guns and drums,
Disturb our judgment for the hour,
But at last silence comes:
These are all gone, and, standing like a tower,
Our children shall behold his fame.
The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,
New birth of our new soil, the first American.