1312 Dean St. Brooklyn Nov. 17th

Dear Mr. McClure:-

I have been delving in old Atheneums lately and have cut out the enclosed about Lincoln. You will see its date. I do not know whether you can make any use of this English estimate or not, but perhaps you will like to read it. How short-sighted it is! I immediately thought of you in connetction with it as you are now publishing such a valuable and highly interesting life of Lincoln.

Sincerely Yours

Kenyon West

Digital Image, 2012. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

LONDON, SATURDAY, AUGUST 12, 1865.

LITERATURE

The President's Words: a Selection of Passages from the Speeches, Addresses, and Letters of Abraham Lincoln. (Trübner & Co.)

Of Abraham Lincoln, more than of any other modern statesman, it may be said that his death was opportune for his renown. It is often said that the first Napoleon should not have outlived the humiliation of Waterloo; but great men sometimes suffer as much loss of reputation by surviving their successes as by enduring actual defeats, and it would be easy to mention heroes who missed the brightest glories of fame simply because their days were extended beyond their triumphs. The crowning success of Nelson's career was death at the very moment of victory, even as Kosciusko's heaviest misfortune was the preservation of his mortal life at Maciejowice. In like manner it may be maintained that its tragic close was the happiest incident of President Lincoln's useful and honourable story.

Raised to the throne by men who, in their admiration of his temper and principles, made no attempt to conceal or palliate his defects, he entered the White House under peculiar disadvantages. The frankness of his friends aiding the malice of his enemies, he was at times ridiculed with dangerous unanimity by those who were pledged to render him contemptible, and by persons who would fain have cherished respect for him as the official chief of a great nation. To hostile caricaturists, who exaggerated the grotesque points of his awkward person and slovenly attire, friendly caricaturists responded with piquant stories of his homely manners and uncourtly address. Whilst the opposition proclaimed him an ignorant artisan, his supporters cheered him as a rail-splitter who had worked his way upwards from obscure poverty. In many important particulars the commendations poured upon him by his admirers gave such countenance to the libels of his detractors that the world, with some show of reason, rated him far below his real deserts. Nor did they err without excuse who thought somewhat too unfavourably of a man for whom political sympathy could say so little—against whom political antipathy could say so much. Men of intellectual capacity and attainments are invariably distrustful of the unlettered and rude, and, naturally enough, they could not readily put confidence in a statesman of whom they knew little, save that his education had been very defective. It would have been matter for surprise had they credited him with virtues that are rare amongst men of any class, instead of attributing to him the disagreeable and dangerous qualities that are most frequent amongst those who are most ignorant. On this side the Atlantic, public opinion, at the outset, strove to deal fairly by the American President; and throughout the war Englishmen always gave him credit for goodness of intention, even at times when they were most inclined to blame his policy. Judging him as they judge their own public men, they struck a balance between the evidence for and the testimony against him—crediting him with the result, and refusing to take him exactly at the valuation of his backers, or altogether on the representations of his opponents. That they erred in thinking too lightly of him there can be no doubt; but their error was mainly due to the misleading honesty with which Mr. Lincoln's warmest supporters spoke of him during his life.

Since his death public opinion in this country, as well as in America, has shown a corresponding tendency to exaggerate his virtues, and also to eulogize him for sagacity and wisdom which he unquestionably never possessed. It is not seldom that the world thus attempts to atone for its ungenerous treatment of a man whom it wronged during his life; but a case rarely occurs where such hero-worship is less justified by the qualities of its object. Not content with praising him for honesty, courage and manly goodness, or any of the other merits for which he can be justly extolled, the vindicators of the late President will have it that he was a man of commanding intellect, deserving to be placed with the foremost captains of thought. Passing over the disadvantages under which he laboured, and to which he was himself ever ready to direct the attention of flatterers, they exalt him to the highest grade of teachers, finding a ray of eternal truth in each of his most trivial jests, and foretelling an immortality of fame for every State Paper that passed under his revision. In the funeral oration uttered to a large audience at Concord, Mr. Emerson exclaimed, "He is the author of a multitude of good sayings, so disguised as pleasantries that it is certain they had no reputation at first but as jests; and only later, by the very acceptance and adoption they find in the mouths of millions, turn out to be the wisdom of the hour. I am sure if this man had ruled in a period of less facility of printing he would have become mythological in a very few years, like Æsop or Pilpay, or one of the Seven Wise Masters, by his fables and proverbs. But the weight and penetration of many passages in his letters, messages and speeches, hidden now by the very closeness of their application to the moment, are destined hereafter to a wide fame. What pregnant definitions! what unerring common sense! what foresight!" However creditable such eulogy may be to the hearts of the speakers and people who applied it to their honest chief in the first hours of their bereavement, it will not endure critical scrutiny. Abraham Lincoln was no such inspired thinker and unerring seer; and those who thus misrepresent him would blind us to the useful lessons inculcated by his exaltation and endeavour. His own opinion of himself was far lower, and much nearer the truth. Speaking with that simple modesty which distinguished him from the mob of little men, and was, perhaps, more noticeable in an American politician than it would have been in a leading statesman of any European country, he said, "I claim not to have controlled events; I confess plainly that events have controlled me." In other words, unable to look far a-head, or predict his exact course, he accepted the instruction of each passing day, and modified his views in accordance with circumstances, whilst he held firmly to the great principles for which he and his party had always contended.

Now that his course is run it is easy to account for its success, and show the means by which he falsified the hopes of the South, whilst he more than justified the confidence of the North. It may be that the task assigned to him was in reality less difficult than observers generally deemed it. No doubt the crisis itself was in a certain sense his ally, drawing to him the support of parties that would have caused him vexation in any less perilous time. Whilst the war lasted the people were willing to judge him generously; and for the end in view it is not improbable that they would have acted with the same cordiality had he been less able and personally popular. Here and there an acrimonious speaker questioned his policy and motives; but the States never wearied of giving him fresh supplies of men and money, and they answered his assailants by electing him for a second term. Until the backbone of the rebellion should be broken the Americans resolved to trust him; and scarcely had Richmond fallen when death made him the idol of his fellow countrymen. To superficial observers it seemed that he fell just when he had triumphed over all the important difficulties of the crisis; but shrewder judges are not without reason for thinking that he has left the more arduous portion of his assigned work to Andrew Johnson, who, resembling him in the strength of his anti-slavery convictions, resembles him also in lacking the benefits of gentle nurture and liberal education. But whatever may be the relative magnitude of President Johnson's difficulties, detraction does not venture to whisper that the obstacles surmounted by the late President were trivial. When all due allowance has been made for the unanimity and fervour of the public in upholding a government pledged to preserve the Union and abolish slavery, it must still be admitted that no ordinary man could have endured the ordeal which tested the powers and ascertained the moral excellence of Abraham Lincoln. The exigencies of his position were alike various and perplexing; and if we decline to admit that he met the requirements of his country by force of brain, we are compelled to refer his success to finer and more admirable qualities. Like Washington, at a period of even sterner trial, he was surrounded by men of greater intellect and higher attainments; but though he was greatly their inferior in mental resources, it may be questioned if any one of those clever subordinates would have escaped ignominious failure had he occupied the place of supreme authority. Had he filled the President's throne, Mr. Seward by excess of subtlety would have roused the distrust of thousands whom Abraham Lincoln's sheer honesty inspired with confidence. Had he reigned in the White House, Mr. Stanton's restless vehemence would have sown animosities broadcast in the quarters where his government especially needed cordial co-operation, and where the rail-splitter's cheery kindliness created good-humour and loyalty. Indeed, so completely did Mr. Lincoln succeed in drawing diverse interests and forces into harmonious action, that there is reason for questioning whether a greater amount of purely intellectual capacity would not have been a source of embarrassment, rather than an aid to the powers which enabled him to crush the rebellion.

Of those powers, not the least important was that judicial fairness of disposition which fitted him to act as an arbiter between contending parties. Hating slavery with all the fervour of his strong affections, he judged slaveholders charitably, and raised his voice against the mischievous enthusiasts who applauded John Brown. Speaking of that madman's attempt to abolish slavery by a servile insurrection, he said, "John Brown's effort was peculiar. It was an attempt by white men to get up a revolt among slaves, in which the slaves refused to participate. In fact, it was so absurd, that the slaves, with all their ignorance, saw plainly enough it could not succeed. . . . An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people, till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution." In the same spirit, speaking of the South, four years before his elevation to the Presidency, he said, "I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what

Digital Image, 2012. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

e should be in their situation. If slavery did ot now exist among them they would not intro- uce it. If it did now exist among us, we should ot instantly give it up. This I believe of the asses, North and South. Doubtless there are dividuals who would not hold slaves under any rcumstances; and others who would gladly in- oduce slavery anew, if it were out of existence. Ve know that some Southern men do free their aves, go North, and become tip-top aboli- onists; while some Northern men go South, nd become most cruel slave-masters." Another f his serviceable qualities was evenness of emper, the want of which has wrought many statesman's downfall, and, in the cases of ourageous aspirants to political distinction, has endered eloquence, industry, and knowledge f no avail. Adverse criticism never ruffled his quanimity; sarcasm, invective, malicious mis- onstruction, could not goad him to loss of self- ommand. Confident in his own integrity, and ustained by a sufficient, though never undue, stee m of his own ability to deal with diffi- ulties as they arose, he worked on steadily, ontent that men should speak their minds reely, whilst he himself looked to the approval f his own conscience, rather than the praise f the multitude. By important sections of his wn people, and especially by public opinion n this side of the Atlantic, he was at times everely blamed for the number of arrests made during the suspension of the *habeas corpus*. To this clamour he replied, "Those now occupy- ng the very highest places in the rebel war service were all within the power of the government since the rebellion began, and were nearly as well known to be traitors then as now. Unquestionably, if we had seized and held them the insurgent cause would be much weaker. But no one of them had then com- mitted any crime defined in the law. Every one of them, if arrested, would have been dis- charged on *habeas corpus* were the writ allowed to operate. In view of these and similar cases, I think the time not unlikely to come when I shall be blamed for having made too few arrests, rather than too many." Allied to his evenness of temper was the vein of jovial, unforced humour, which enabled him to turn aside wrath with a droll answer, and to dismiss troublesome applicants unoffended even when they were not satisfied. In the daily transactions of per- plexing affairs Honest Abe's power of telling whimsical stories and speaking the witty word at the right moment did him good service, just as a similar faculty for easy *badinage* and humorous illustration has often rescued our own premier from an embarrassing position. But of all his many useful qualities the most admirable as well as the most serviceable was that thorough truthfulness of character which made his name a by-word for honesty through- out the land where impostors are not less dreaded than numerous. The secret of his great influence was the conviction of all classes that under no temptation could he be guilty of false- hood, subterfuge, or meanness. Whenever his Christian name was uttered the word "honest" was put before it; and to this universal appre- ciation of his unassailable honesty he owed his exaltation and power over a people who wisely elected to trust his moral strength and overlook the faults of his education.

The compiler, we need hardly say, is not con- tent with such an estimate of his hero. He maintains that the President was an intellectual giant; but the passages to which he draws attention by no means sustain his theory. As a compilation throwing some light upon the remarkable character so entirely misunderstood by the compiler, the book merits perusal, but in no respect can it be commended as a work of value. It is open to doubt whether Mr. Lincoln's career admits of biographic treatment; but it may be confidently asserted that no biographer will do justice to the subject who magnifies his mental at the expense of his moral endowments. Besides other salutary lessons the story of his career teaches us that goodness is stronger than much learning, and that in the life of a free country an upright citizen may confer enduring benefits on his nation although he lacks the culture of the schools, and can lay no claim to rank with men of genius. The story also teaches the English nation to believe that even in times of great excitement and angry conflict our American cousins can see their own interests, and in the exercise of their con- stitutional privileges can select the rulers who are best qualified to do their country good service.