LINCOLN LORE

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY REFLECTION

The field of psychology places much emphasis on those influences exerted over one by some frequently visualized portrait or word picture of an esteemed individual. Often many of the admired characteristics of the benefactor are appropriated by the observer until he becomes a prototype of his hero. Any eulogistic writings setting forth the virtues of the exemplar might indirectly become an "Autobiography by Reflection" of the scribe. Such a writing is the eulogy on Henry Clay delivered by Abraham Lincoln in the State House at Springfield, Illinois on July 16, 1852.

Replying to Stephen A. Douglas at Ottawa in 1858 Lincoln used the expression, "Henry Clay, my **beau ideal** of a statesman." Lincoln's life long admiration for Clay is a well established fact with plenty of testimonials to support it. It is not strange that many of the qualities which set Clay apart from his associates would find expression in Lincoln's own behavior. It is of interest to observe some of the most striking statements in the Clay eulogy which might serve as fragments for a Lincoln "Autobiography by Reflection."

The excerpts here recorded are in the exact words of Lincoln with the exception of a third person pronoun being substituted for the name of Mr. Clay. Inasmuch as Lincoln once prepared an autobiographical sketch in the third person, the reading of the paragraphs, with the name of Lincoln implied where the pronoun appears, will not seem incongruous.

Education—"His education, to the end of life, was comparatively limited. I say **'to the end of life,'** because I have understood that, from time to time, he added something to his education during the greater part of his whole life. His lack of a more perfect early education, however it may be regretted generally, teaches at least one profitable lesson: it teaches that in this country, one can scarcely be so poor, but, that, if he **will**, he **can** acquire sufficient education to get through the world respectably."

Preeminence—"It is probably true he owed his preeminence to no one quality, but to a fortunate combination of several. He was surpassingly eloquent; but many eloquent men fail utterly; and they are not as, a class, generally successful. His judgment was excellent; but many men of good judgment, live and die unnoticed.—His will was indomitable; but this quality often secures to its owner nothing better than a character for useless obstinacy. These then were his leading qualities. No one of them is very uncommon; but all together are rarely combined in a single individual, and this is probably the reason why such men as he are so rare in the world."

Human Liberty—"His predominant sentiment, from first to last, was a deep devotion to the cause of human liberty—a strong sympathy with the oppressed everywhere, and an ardent wish for their elevation. With him, this was a primary and all-controlling passion. Subsidiary to this was the conduct of his whole life. He loved his country partly because it was his own country, but mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with a zeal for its advancement, prosperity and glory, because he saw in such, the advancement, prosperity, and glory, of human liberty, human right and human nature. He desired the prosperity of his countrymen partly because they were his countrymen, but chiefly to show to the world that free men could be prosperous."

Eloquence—"His eloquence did not consist, as many fine specimens of eloquence do, of types and figures—of antithesis, and elegant arrangement of words and sentences; but rather of that deeply earnest and impassioned tone, and manner, which can proceed only from great sincerity, and a thorough conviction, in the speaker of the justice and importance of his cause. This it is, that truly touches the chords of sympathy; and those who heard him never failed to be moved by it, or ever afterwards, forgot the impression. All his efforts were made for practical effect. He never spoke merely to be heard."

Lost Speech—"Several of his speeches, on these occasions, were reported, and are still extant, but the best of all these never was. During its delivery the reporters forgot their vocations, dropped their pens, and sat enchanted from near the beginning to quite the close. The speech now lives only in the memory of a few old men; and the enthusiasm with which they cherish their recollection of it is absolutely astonishing. The precise language of this speech we shall never know."

Man for a Crisis—"He seems constantly to have been regarded by all as the man for a crisis. Accordingly, in the days of Nullification, and more recently in the reappearance of the slavery question . . . the task of devising a mode of adjustment seems to have been cast upon him, by common consent—and his performance of the task in each case, was little else than, a literal fulfillment of the public expectation."

Speaking at Carlinville, Illinois on Aug. 31, 1858 Abraham Lincoln stated: "I can express all my views on the slavery question by quotations from Henry Clay."

Slavery—"He ever was on principle and in feeling, opposed to slavery. The very earliest, and one of the latest public efforts of his life, . . . were both made in favor of gradual emancipation. . . . He did not preceive, that on a question of human right, the negroes were to be excepted from the human race. . . . Cast into life when slavery was already widely spread and deeply seated, he did not perceive, as I think no wise man has perceived, how it could be at **once** eradicated without producing a greater evil, even to the cause of human liberty itself. His feeling and his judgment, therefore, ever led him to oppose both extremes of opinion on the subject. Those who would shiver into fragments the Union of these States, tear to tatters its now venerated Constitution, and even burn the last copy of the Bible, rather than slavery should continue a single hour, together with all their more halting sympathizers, have received, and are receiving their just execration; and the name, and opinions, and influence of him, are fully and, as I trust, effectually and enduringly arrayed against them. But I would also, if I could, array his name, opinions, and influence against the opposite extreme—against a few but an increasing number of men, who, for the sake of perpetuating slavery, are beginning to assail and to ridicule the white man's charter of freedom, the declaration that 'all men are created free and equal'."

While it is quite apparent that an autobiographical sketch of one's death and subsequent influence on civilization would be absurb, yet, the closing paragraph of Lincoln's eulogy on Clay parallels so closely the reactions to the Emancipator's demise, it is set forth here as a sequel to an "Autobiography by Reflection."

Immortality—"But he is dead. His long and eventful life is closed. Our country is prosperous and powerful; but could it have been quite all it has been, and is, and is to be, without him? Such a man the times have demanded, and such, in the providence of God was given us. But he is gone. Let us strive to deserve, as far as mortals may, the continued care of Divine Providence, trusting that in future national emergencies, He will not fail to provide us the instruments of safety and security."