LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1191 FORT WAYNE, INDIANA February 4, 1952

LINCOLN—MASTER OF PROSE

There has been a tendency to view the passing of Abraham Lincoln when but 56 years of age, purely as a political calamity. Some historians have gone so far as to stress the point that his martyrdom was the primary factor in his elevation to a place among the immortals. There are others, however, who believe that possibly his political task was not completely finished by April 15, 1865. There is every indication that had he lived he would have brought to the reconstruction days a type of statesmanship transcending even his first administration.

Little attention has been given to the cutting short by an assassin of Lincoln's career as a jurist. How well the former Illinois lawyer would have graced the chair of the Chief Justice on the Supreme Court bench has been given but little consideration. What about his moral integrity and its influence on the institutions with which he might have been associated, had he lived. Would his oratory have suffered as he approached a more mature age? For our present inquiry, we wonder if the assassin's bullet did not cut short one of the most promising literary careers in the field of American letters.

The *London Spectator*, which usually speaks with some authority in English literary circles, while Lincoln still lived made some important observations with respect to him as a master of prose, as this opening sentence of a contributed article will reveal:

"No criticism of Mr. Lincoln can be in any sense adequate which does not deal with his astonishing power over words. It is not too much to say of him that he is among the greatest masters of prose ever produced by the English race. Self-educated, or rather not educated at all in the ordinary sense, as he was, he contrived to obtain an insight and power in the handling of the mechanism of letters such as has been given to few men in his, or, indeed, in any age."

Before launching into a fuller discussion of Lincoln's power over words, the contributor to *The Spectator* acknowledged Lincoln's ability as an orator which the writer thought might be instinctive. He hastened to argue however, that "Mr. Lincoln did not get his ability to handle prose through his gift of speech. That these are separate though coordinate faculties is a matter beyond dispute, for many of the great orators of the world have proved themselves exceedingly inefficient in the matter of deliberate composition."

The Spectator critique felt that Lincoln's prose was even finer than some of his "pieces of inspired rhetoric." Lincoln's rhetoric, memoranda and written addresses, were suggested as offering examples of his superior use of words. He was likened to John Bright who could exercise the power of "winning illuminating phrases" as expertly on paper as upon the platform. The critique did acknowledge that "Lincoln was far superior to Bright in measuring up to Hazlett's description of the successful prose writer's performance."

William Hazlett, friend and collaborator of both Charles Lamb and Leigh Hunt and a famous English essayist in his own name, was "perfect in definition." Hazlett stresses that "the prose writer so uses his pen; that he loses no particle of the exact characteristic extreme impression of the thing he writes about." This achievement noted by Hazlett according to our *Spectator* article is set forth as: "The predominant note throughout all of Mr. Lincoln's work. We feel that he is like the engineer who controls some mighty reservoir. As he desires he opens the various sluice gates, but for no instance is the water not under his entire control. We are sensible in reading Mr. Lincoln's writings that an immense force is gathering up behind him, and in each jet that flows every drop is meant. Some writers only leak; others half flow through determined channels, half leak away their words like a broken lock when it is emptying. The greatest, like Mr. Lincoln, send out none but clear-shaped streams."

Lincoln's literary ability has not escaped the notice of some American critiques. One of them states, "The Lincoln speeches and messages are all marked by the same original power and felicity. He used words as none of his contemporaries used them. His style was his own, and nobody could successfully imitate it. . . . There is no trace of resemblance in any model in all the abundance of his composition, but in every instance there is the same sense of individuality, the same assurance of perfect knowledge, the same skillful adaptation of means to an end which leave no room for criticism."

While we do have a statement written in 1832 when Abraham Lincoln was but 23 years old, it is to be regretted that we do not have extant earlier contributions which Lincoln is known to have prepared when he was not over sixteen years of age. The origin of Lincoln's peculiar choice of words is revealed by a reminiscence of Dr. John Putnam Gulliver who conversed with Lincoln about his early literary habits and wrote down at the time comments made by the Cooper Union orator.

Lincoln said to Gulliver: "I can say this, that among my earliest recollections I remember how, when a mere child, I used to get irritated when anybody talked to me in a way I could not understand. I don't think I ever got angry at anything else in my life. But that always disturbed my temper, and has ever since. I can remember going to my little bedroom, after hearing the neighbors talk, of an evening, with my father, and spending no small part of the night walking up and down, and trying to make out what was the exact meaning of some of their, to me, dark sayings. I could not sleep, though I often tried to, when I got on such a hunt after an idea, until I had caught it; and when I thought I had got it, I was not satisfied until I had repeated it over and over, until I had put it in language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend. This was a kind of passion with me, and it has stuck by me, for I am never easy now, when I am handling a thought, till I have bounded it north and bounded it south, and bounded it east, and bounded it west."

Dr. Gulliver referred to this statement of Lincoln's as "the most splendid educational fact I ever happened upon."