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LINCOLN
AND HIS BOOKS

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by

G. LYNN SUMNER

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G. Lynn Sumner.

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LINCOLN AND HIS BOOKS

You and I live surrounded by books. The shelves of our libraries are filled with them. Our tables are heavy with magazines. Each morning and evening we find at our doors a newspaper containing a complete account of one day's history of the world. In a few short blocks on almost any business street are book stores where one may buy, or rent at trifling cost, his choice among books in infinite variety. At the corners are newsstands piled high with periodicals in such abundance that no one of us can hope to read more than a meager few. Nearby, wherever we live, is a school house where

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

any child of the community is free to come and partake of organized knowledge. Nearby, too, is a library through the open doors of which the humblest person may enter to choose among countless volumes and freely read the literature of all time.

'Mid such riches do we live. Yet, out of the past there rises the heroic figure of a man who in all his life knew only four months of school, whose youth was one long insatiable hunger for printed words, who would tramp through the night and the wilderness to borrow a book. A man who, with all his poverty of material goods and all his handicaps in so-called education, became a master of words and a leader of men.

Above the mountains of printed pages we see the shadow of his form and above the roar of the presses we

AND HIS BOOKS

hear the name of Lincoln. What was the urge that drove him in his unceasing search for books? What were the books he read? How did they influence the moulding of his mind, shape the whole course of his career?

Abraham Lincoln was just about fifteen, a lanky, sinewy farm-hand in Spencer County, Indiana, when this thirst for knowledge marked him apart among the boys of that frontier. Night after night he lay stretched out flat before the fireplace, reading and rereading every book he could discover in that sparsely settled neighborhood. And not only nights. He carried a book to the fields in the pocket of his blue jeans, and read when the plough halted at the end of a long furrow. He read on the way to the mill. He read as he sat on the rail fence

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

watching cattle. And, because his books were so pitifully few, he literally devoured them, pondered and mastered the meaning of every page and paragraph—even memorized long passages and repeated them to the boys who gathered around the stove in the Gentryville store.

No wonder those books had such an influence upon the hungry, eager, reaching mind. What were they? Most authorities agree that during this period, Lincoln read the *Bible*, Weem's *Life of Washington*, *Aesop's Fables*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. We have his own word for it that the first book that aroused his curiosity in regard to the Union of States and its beginnings was the *Life of Washington*. His imagination was stirred by the story of men struggling for their liberty.

AND HIS BOOKS

Washington became to him a truly exalted figure, and the nation he fought to establish became something which men might also die to preserve. This book, simple as it was, gave him also the first glimpse of the rights of states and nations and the principles of government.

From *Aesop's Fables*, Lincoln caught the aptness of parable for illustration. The short and homely and unfailingly appropriate stories with which he gave point to address and argument can be directly traced to the inspiration of this book.

Robinson Crusoe and *Pilgrim's Progress* left no noticeable mark on his later writings or his character, but surely they stirred the imagination of a mind so impressionable at the age of fifteen.

The *Bible* was to Lincoln, as to all

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

the pioneers, a book to be read not once, but again and again. For him it held not only the basis of a faith that emerged at its strongest in his later years, but it was a book of infinite variety. It held the stories of Ruth and Rachel and David, the supreme verse of the Psalms, the example of simple and ordered narrative.

But these books only spurred him in his desire for more. "My best friend," Lincoln said in those early days, "is the one who'll git me a book I ain't read." He found such a friend in Dave Turnham, Justice of the Peace of Gentryville, and the book he borrowed from him was *The Revised Statutes of Indiana*. This was a remarkable volume to fall into the hands of a boy who had been moved by the inspiring life of Washington. It contained the Declaration of In-

AND HIS BOOKS

dependence, the Constitution of the United States, the Act establishing the Northwest Territory, the Ordinance providing for its government, and some four hundred pages of the Indiana laws.

When Lincoln had read this book, had mastered it as he mastered all books, he had, before he was eighteen, a clear and practical understanding of how the nation was founded, how the State of Indiana came into being, and how it was governed. There is no doubt that the book aroused in him an intense interest in government and the law.

He borrowed and read, of course, many other books in the years that followed. But one book in particular, coming to him by purest accident, marked, perhaps, the turning point of his early life. It was 1833

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

and Lincoln was twenty-four years old. He had moved three years before to New Salem, Illinois, and after trying with little success many an odd job, had bought on credit a half interest in a store. Business was slim enough with the firm of Berry and Lincoln. The young man had little talent for trade, and much of his time he lay stretched out on the counter, reading *Shakespeare* and *Burns*. On summer days he lay on the grass before the store, his long legs extended up the trunk of a tree.

One such day, a man driving a covered wagon to the West stopped in front of the store, and asked Lincoln if he would care to buy a barrel that seemed to be just one barrel too many in his load. It contained odds and ends of household rubbish and Lincoln did not much want it, but

AND HIS BOOKS

he gave the man half a dollar and put the barrel away in the store. Some time later he came upon it, and out of curiosity emptied it on the floor. To the amazement of his hungry eyes, there fell out from the very bottom a complete edition of Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Those priceless volumes, inspiration and revelation to every young student of the law, absorbed every waking moment of his days and nights.

It is little wonder that next year the store failed and the business was sold. Lincoln now offered himself as a candidate for the Illinois Assembly, was elected at the age of twenty-five for his first term, and two years later took up the study of law in the office of Major John Stuart, in Springfield. There he lived;

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

there he married ; from there he went to serve a single term in Congress ; and there he returned to practice law for twenty years on the circuit of the Eighth District of Illinois. The reading of three books—the *Life of Washington* at fifteen, *The Revised Statutes of Indiana* at eighteen and *Blackstone* at twenty-four, had helped to shape the course of his thinking and his life.

No consideration of Lincoln's reading is adequate without recognition of his love of poetry. In New Salem, an itinerant school teacher had lent him volumes of *Shakespeare* and *Burns*. All the rest of his life he read them. *Burns* he knew almost by heart. Long passages of *Shakespeare* he memorized. *Macbeth* was his favorite. Its tragedy and that of *Lear* and *Hamlet* seemed to appeal

AND HIS BOOKS

to his often despondent nature. The very week of his assassination, he read aloud to Senator Charles Sumner on the steamer returning from Richmond this prophetic speech from *Macbeth*:

“Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek,
 hath been
So clear in his great office, that his
 virtues
Will plead like angels trumpet-
 tongu’d against
The deep damnation of his taking-
 off.”

But how, we may ask, did the books that Lincoln read influence the style in which he wrote? How was it that one self-schooled became such a master of words; of simple,

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

forceful, smooth, persuasive speech?

It lay, we may well believe, first in an early and long-practiced habit of a mastery of meaning, so that he might make clear to others what he had read or what he had heard.

“Even as a small boy,” he once told a friend, “I can remember going to my bedroom after hearing the neighbors talk to my father and spending no small part of the night walking up and down, trying to make out the exact meaning of some of their sayings. I could not sleep until I had repeated it over and over, until I had put it into language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend.”

Later, as he read, Lincoln related his discoveries in books to neighborhood gatherings. He took part in local political discussions. He loved

AND HIS BOOKS

to engage in argument and debate, developing his reasoning until, through its very clarity, it must convince. Remember, too, that twenty years of law practice on the circuit was the best possible preparation for the debates of the '50's and the state papers of the '60's. The simplicity of statement necessary to convince the jurors of early Illinois is the simplicity that still carries conviction to the most critical reader of today.

Lincoln sought never to confuse, but to make his side of the case so clear that even the most ordinary mentality could grasp it.

Out of this practical method and his continued reading of the masters of English prose and poetry grew a facility in the spoken and written word; a purity, a simplicity that resulted in expressions of undying fame.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Many of Lincoln's speeches and letters are familiar to all. Each anniversary of his birth becomes the occasion for new critical tributes to his mastery of words, as well as to the man. But it is interesting to dip here and there into some of his letters and addresses for passages that characterize his style. There were times when his sheer eloquence was the equal of Webster's or Burke's. For example, on Washington's Birthday, 1842, he gave the address of the day at Springfield, Illinois, and closed with this tribute to the one who had been to him an idol from earliest boyhood:

"To add brightness to the sun or glory to the name of Washington is alike impossible. Let none attempt it. In solemn awe pronounce the

AND HIS BOOKS

name and in its naked, deathless splendor leave it shining on."

Six years later, as a member of Congress, critical like all Whigs of President Polk and his conduct of the war with Mexico, he said in one of his few speeches to the House:

"Let him remember that he sits where Washington sat, and so remembering, let him answer as Washington would answer."

The finest examples of Lincoln's perfect prose were, of course, written or spoken during the war years. Many consider the Second Inaugural his masterpiece; but there are less familiar papers with stirring passages packed to the full with meaning. For example, the second

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

message to Congress, containing sentences so strangely appropriate to our own times that surely the one who now sits where Lincoln sat must read and find courage in these words:

“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and thus we shall save our country.”

Then there is the closing paragraph of the Emancipation Proclamation, which for beauty and brevity could hardly be surpassed:

“And upon this act, sincerely be-

AND HIS BOOKS

lieved to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God.”

Here, in a sentence of thirty-three words, Lincoln presented a complete explanation and legal defense of the freeing of the slaves.

Such simplicity and compactness marked all his speeches, letters, and even telegrams during the later years. There was, for example, the note he sent to Stanton, after the Secretary of War had refused a military appointment to a distinguished engineer because of the strictness of Stanton's examining board. Lincoln wrote:

“I personally wish Jacob Freese, of

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

New Jersey, to be appointed colonel of a colored regiment, and this regardless of whether he can tell the exact shade of Julius Caesar's hair."

Finally, let us turn to the Gettysburg address, not to the familiar words themselves, but to the circumstances under which they were spoken. The dedication of the Battlefield Cemetery took place on November 19, 1863, and in accordance with the custom of the times there was an orator of the day—the famed and eloquent Edward Everett. He spoke for two hours, and then Lincoln spoke for something less than two minutes. Contrary to tradition, his brief address was in no sense hastily prepared. It had been written in Washington with the serious care with which Lincoln always prepared

AND HIS BOOKS

his public addresses. But strangely, as we see it now, the significance and stately grandeur of those words were appreciated by only a few until many years afterward.

Most newspapers, in reporting the dedication, mentioned only that the President spoke. Some gave a garbled account of what he said. Some viciously criticized. Only five publications in the whole country remarked upon the speech with any editorial enthusiasm—the *Springfield Republican*, the *Boston Transcript*, the *Providence Journal*, the *Philadelphia Bulletin*, and *Harper's Weekly*.

But most interesting of all is the statement of Charles A. Dana, who wrote in his *Reminiscences of the Civil War* that Secretary Stanton said to him after the ceremonies:

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

“Edward Everett has made a speech that will make three columns in the newspapers, and Mr. Lincoln has made a speech that will make forty or fifty lines . . . but Lincoln’s speech will be read by a thousand men where one reads Everett’s, and it will be remembered as long as anybody’s speeches are remembered who speaks in the English language.”

This, remember, was the observation of the Democrat whom Lincoln had made his Secretary of War; the man who criticized him cruelly, then came to hold for him a great affection; the same Stanton who, seventeen months later, stood by the body of his dead chief and said, “Now he belongs to the ages.”

It is a curious coincidence that in the same year of 1809 both Glad-

AND HIS BOOKS

stone and Lincoln were born—one of a family of means and distinction; the other in the poverty of a Kentucky cabin. One attended Eton and Oxford; the other tramped the frontier trails to borrow books. One entered Parliament the same year in which the other began his political career in Illinois. In the decades that followed, both cast strong shadows across the political activities of their peoples. Gladstone was a statesman, a scholar, an orator. Thousands listened to the polished periods of his addresses, awed by his personality, charmed by his magnificent voice.

But today, 125 years after his birth and 36 years after his death, scarcely any one in England or America can point to words of the great Gladstone among the living literature of the

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

world. Yet, Lincoln's letter of consolation to Mrs. Bixby, whose five sons had fallen in battle, "may be found on the walls of one of Gladstone's own colleges at Oxford, placed there as a specimen of the purest English; and English school-boys commit to memory Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as the finest speech of its kind ever written in the English language."

* * *

Is it not fitting that we should again pay tribute to the memory of Lincoln—to him whose stature lengthens with the years—to him who in life and in death, in what he did and what he said and what he wrote, gave proof that in this land of liberty, even from a humble cabin in the wilderness, one may reach the stars.



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