INTRODUCTION

On the 12th February 1809 Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin in a sparsely settled region of Kentucky. Later in that same year William E. Gladstone was born in a comfortable home in the thriving city of Liverpool.

At that time no one, either in the United States or in England, would have been rash enough to predict that fifty-two years later both Lincoln and Gladstone would be leaders of their respective people, the one as a newly elected President, the other as the dominant figure in the English cabinet.

Yet in the case of Gladstone the prediction would not have been a wild one. His father was a man of large fortune who sat in Parliament for many years. The son would have the best school and university education which family position and wealth could procure. He would not need to earn a living, and could devote all his time and energy to public life.

The parents of Abraham Lincoln, on the other hand, were poor pioneers, though no poorer than most of their neighbours. The father could barely read and write, the mother made her mark. The boy would grow to maturity on backwoods farms and would learn no more in the makeshift schools that the region offered than to read, write, and do simple arithmetic. After striking out on his own he would earn his living as a clerk in a frontier store, as village postmaster, and as a surveyor of the virgin lands that new settlers were then taking up.

Even after Lincoln was well advanced in life he gave no sign of future greatness. He served four terms in the state legislature, but hundreds of other men were also members of that body. During his one term in Congress he did not distinguish himself, and had he run again he could not have been re-elected. In the practice of the law—for which he had trained himself—he stood well, but no one would have included him among the eminent American lawyers of his time.

At forty-five he had been inactive in politics for several years. But in the year in which he attained that age—1854—the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed. The effect of the bill was to open
federal territories, not yet organized as states, to slavery. Lincoln, aroused as never before, re-entered politics and did all that was within his power to repeal the new legislation. Out of the opposition of thousands like him the Republican Party came into existence. Within two years he was its acknowledged leader in Illinois.

In 1858 Stephen A. Douglas, Senator from Illinois, stood for re-election. Lincoln was the unanimous choice of his party to oppose the man who, as sponsor of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, personified the policy it represented. In the ensuing campaign Lincoln, though unsuccessful, won a nation-wide hearing and earned a national reputation. Two years later the Republican National Convention chose him as its presidential nominee. With the Democrats divided, he won the election.

Lincoln took office on 4th March 1861, an untried man. He had had legislative experience; he possessed a logical mind and the ability to reduce complex issues to simple terms; yet there had been nothing in his life to prepare him for the ordeal he faced. He rose to the challenge magnificently, and guided the nation through four years of war precipitated by the South’s determined attempt to secede from the Union.

And at the same time that he was burdened almost beyond endurance by cares that furrowed his face and wore down his rail-splitter’s iron physique, he wrote some of the most sublime prose to be found in the English language. The totality of Lincoln’s truly great writing is not large. It would include, when measured by the severest standards, perhaps only the Gettysburg Address in its entirety, a half-dozen letters, and passages in other speeches, notably the first and second inaugural addresses. But of what other writers, devoting their lives to the creation of pure literature, can much more be said? And who, at his best, has surpassed the finest work of this man who never completely mastered the niceties of composition, who read almost nothing?

Even below the summit of achievement, Lincoln’s writing has compelling interest. Except for a short-lived venture into verse and the story of a bizarre incident from his early years at the Bar, he wrote only for utilitarian purposes. Most of his letters were those of a practising lawyer, a politician, a high government official. Disregarding two or three lectures, he made speeches
in the same capacities. Although there were certainly times when he consciously strove for effect, on the whole he sought merely to make himself understood, and, when the situation warranted, to convince. Yet this workaday prose exhibits a style simple, direct, terse, which can also be imaginative and metaphorical. If two sentences would cover Lincoln’s purpose he wrote two sentences, but he did not subscribe to the fallacy that any short letter is better than a long one. If he needed four pages to develop an argument he took four pages, just as he did not hesitate to make a speech of three hours’ duration. Few writers have ever advanced ideas with more severe logic. (Whether he derived the logical habit of thought from his study of Euclid, or whether an innately logical mind aroused his interest in Euclid, is an open question.) And always, in his prose, there is clarity—clarity in such high degree that only in the rarest instances does one have to read a sentence a second time in order to comprehend its exact meaning.

Still, if the criterion were solely literary, public interest would hardly support even a limited compilation of Lincoln’s writings. But the criterion can never be solely literary. What Lincoln wrote is indispensable to an understanding of the man. The strictly autobiographical documents are few, brief, and incomplete, but they supply facts that could have been established only with great difficulty, if at all, from other sources. Much more important is the light which Lincoln’s letters and speeches shed upon his character, personality, and the quality of his mind. Often a casual letter discloses a trait more convincingly than the commentary of long-time associates and friends. He was honest, his contemporaries have said, but their testimony has had to do with the kind of honesty that leads a store-keeper to return an overcharge, that impels a lawyer to take scrupulous care of his clients’ money. What of that greater, rarer quality that induces a politician to state his convictions with complete candour, even though he courts defeat by doing so? No one who follows Lincoln’s course on the Mexican war, or reads his speeches in the debates with Douglas even as they are abridged in this volume, can doubt that here was a man who valued integrity above success. What of those human qualities so universally admired, so uncommonly practised—patience, humility, sympathy for the unfortunate and sorrow-stricken,
gentleness of spirit? That these were attributes of Lincoln is abundantly proved by letters to hot-tempered friends, to ungenerous critics, to young men discouraged by initial failures, to parents and relatives of soldiers killed in battle. What of his conception of moral values? His whole discussion of the slavery question reveals one for whom no sophistry could cloud the distinction between right and wrong; who also, knowing that distinction, would stand unwaveringly on what he considered right. Yet his mind was such that while he could know the right as it concerned relations between men, he could only grope for it as it existed between men and God. But here too his writings show him to have been either a deeply religious man or—unthinkably—an unconscionable hypocrite.

These qualities and characteristics of Abraham Lincoln are aspects of the image which millions of his countrymen have shared ever since his death. Other traits, also exemplified in his writings, the general public has chosen either to ignore or to minimize. He had ambition. For more than thirty years he sought election to office without attempting to dissemble his desires, yet many continue to picture him as one who, but for the urging of his friends, would have effaced himself in the practice of the law. He was patient with imposition, but he was not supine. In any personal relationship there came a point on which he would not yield—a point which patrons of his post office, political opponents, generals, and finally the people of the South, discovered to their consternation. Occasionally he became testy, and sometimes at small irritations; less frequently he blazed with anger.

This is only to say that Lincoln was human, and therefore within the comprehension of ordinary mortals. And it is important that he be understood. He had greatness, and to know greatness is one of life's highest privileges. Moreover, without an understanding of Lincoln one can have no more than an imperfect grasp of the course of the United States for the past century, and cannot fully know the nation as it is to-day. As the Civil War recedes in time, it assumes ever larger importance as the paramount event in the last one hundred years of American life. For the United States, the war accelerated industrialism in the east and north and retarded it in the south, gave a tremendous impetus to centralization in government, produced
cleavages between sections that have influenced every national election since 1865, and created a racial problem which the passage of time gives little promise of solving. For the world, it proved that democracy, as a form of government, had come to stay.

The focal figure of the Civil War was Abraham Lincoln. In the span of his adult life the forces that would lead to conflict gathered and reached the breaking point. William Lloyd Garrison brought out the first number of the *Liberator* advocating the abolition of slavery less than a year after Lincoln came of age. In six years the pro-slavery reaction would be so violent that Lincoln had to face it in the Illinois legislature. After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act he would think out the issues, debate them, clarify them for millions. In his speeches up to and including the first Inaugural Address the points of difference over which the American people would shed blood are expounded with superlative clarity.

Once war came, it was Lincoln who defined both its purpose and significance so persuasively as to hold the adherence of the vast majority of the American people. Not only that: it was Lincoln who made the critical decisions—against premature emancipation, for emancipation when the time was ripe, in favour of relieving one commander and selecting another, for certain strategical concepts in preference to others, for a kind of reconstruction that would reunite the nation in spirit as well as actuality. What he did, and why he did what he did, can be fully understood only from the record which he himself created.

A final point needs to be made. The record that Lincoln created—his letters, his speeches, his memoranda, his homilies—was his alone. Four documents in this volume—the letters to Queen Victoria and the King of Siam, the proclamations calling out the militia and designating a day of thanksgiving—were probably prepared in the State Department. All others sprang directly from Lincoln's own mind.

*Paul M. Angle.*

1957.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The basic text of the speeches and writings in this volume is that of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Roy P. Basler, with Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap assistant editors, 9 volumes, the Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1953–5. The editor, however, has made certain minor alterations for the benefit of the general reader. Lincoln, for example, was excessively fond of the comma as a punctuation mark; he occasionally lapsed in spelling; he followed no consistent rule of capitalization. In the text presented here punctuation marks which interfered with ready comprehension have been changed or eliminated; misspellings have been corrected; capitalization has been made uniform. In no instance, however, has either the sense or flavour of Lincoln's writing been altered by these emendations. Omissions are indicated by ellipses.

In printing Lincoln's letters, the place and date have been transferred from the documents themselves to the editor's line or two of introduction. The salutations are given as Lincoln wrote them; so are the closes, but without his signature.

P. M. A.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

*The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Roy P. Basler, editor, Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, assistant editors (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1953–5, 9 vols.), has superseded all earlier comprehensive collections of Lincoln's writings and speeches. This is the only fully annotated edition of Lincoln's works and the only general collection for which complete textual accuracy can be claimed.


long-time law partner, remains a fundamental source in spite of the author's prejudices and wrong-headed judgments. The best editions currently available are the two-volume edition of Appleton-Century-Crofts (New York), which has an excellent chapter, by Horace White, on the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and the one-volume edition of the World Publishing Company (Cleveland, Ohio), with a critical introduction by Paul M. Angle. The Nicolay and Hay book, written by Lincoln's two presidential secretaries, is a truly monumental work which is both a biography of Lincoln and a history of the Civil War. In spite of the arch-republicanism of its authors the book has enduring value.

The life of Lincoln cannot be understood without some knowledge of the Civil War. The literature of that subject is a library in itself, but three recent books will serve the purpose of most readers. Bruce Catton, This Hallowed Ground, The Story of the Union Side of the Civil War (Garden City, Doubleday, 1956), does not ignore the Confederacy in spite of the subtitle, and is characterized by rare literary distinction. Henry Steele Commager, The Blue and the Gray (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1950, 2 vols.), is a collection of personal narratives representing both sides and all ranks. A similar collection is to be found in the first volume of Otto Eisenschiml, Ralph Newman, and E. B. Long, The Civil War (New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1956, 2 vols.); the second volume contains a useful pictorial record, chronology, biographical encyclopaedia, and bibliography.