

Lincoln - Abraham

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## ABRAHAM LINCOLN

**A**BRAMHAM LINCOLN is the idol of the American people because he is the great representative of Freedom. His star shines brighter with each recurring year. He was a great man, a genius, an orator, and a writer.

Genius is ever a most difficult thing for which to account. It seems always to be evasive and indefinable. There are some who say it is a special gift of providence while others assert it is but the capacity to "toil terribly."

Nothing has so baffled the biographer of Abraham Lincoln as the explanation of his literary powers. He was born and grew up in distressing poverty on the frontiers where men knew little and cared less about the rules of grammar and fine phrasing. He attended public school less than one year and had little or no contact with the centers of culture and education. From whence then did this humble son of the prairies, this awkward country lawyer acquire a literary style that made it possible for him to produce state papers, addresses, letters and prose poems which in literary art have not been surpassed in the English language?

It has remained for Dr. E. H. Robinson of Monmouth College, to give us in his book, "Lincoln, the Man of Letters," the first comprehensive and satisfactory explanation of the war president's literary development and achievement.

Professor Robinson is not only an essayist and critic of note, but a profound student of Lincoln and his times. He also understands the frontier environment in which Lincoln grew up and the political and social problems that stirred men's souls in that day. With this background he traces step by step the literary growth of him who has been called the Great Emancipator.

Notwithstanding the scarcity of books in those pioneer days, Lincoln did possess a few great books—Weem's Washington, Shakespeare, Pilgrim's Progress, Robinson Crusoe and the English Bible. He seems to have saturated his mind and spirit with rhythm, cadence, diction, and idealism of those great classics. Reading the English Bible was a life habit and all his writings and addresses are shot through with scriptural allusions. At the close of his notable Cooper Union address, James Russell Lowell, who presided, said, "His style reminds me of the grand simplicity of the Bible."

Lincoln seems to have inherited, in small measure at least, the gift of style, but aside from this he possessed no magic literary wand—his so-called genius can be accounted for. What he did other men can do in varying degree if they pay the price in self-discipline, intense study, hard work and clear, deep thinking.

Lincoln grew up in the atmosphere of controversy. Great questions were stirring men on the Illinois frontiers. As a boy Abraham listened often to heated debates around the open fire, in the country store and on the platform. He tells us that he was often angry—the only thing that ever made him downright mad—when men in their arguments and discussions used words and sentences he could not understand. He often went off alone to try to figure out what they meant. He vowed then that if he ever made speeches or wrote anything when he grew up he would use words and sentences that even a small boy could understand. This notion seems never to have deserted him, and was always a guiding principle in all his literary endeavors. He was a student of Shakespeare and often entertained his friends by repeating long sections from memory. Even under the stress of war while in the White House, he would slip away with his aides or one of his secretaries and read aloud from this instructive bard.

It is pointed out by Professor Robinson that, contrary to a prevailing notion among critics, Lincoln knew much of the technique of writing. He was constantly criticizing his vocabulary, and worked long to find the best word. Like Howells, he believed in the principle of the "one best word." He was not above revising, rewriting, or discarding altogether. But Lincoln, like all great artists had more than technique. A French scientist made himself famous as a literary critic by saying that "style is the man." He meant that style in literature was but the expression of the personality of the writer. No cadence, rhythm, diction, or well-balanced sentences ever made a great poem or essay. It must have deep reality and great conception, and these qualities, according to Dr. Robinson, dominate in all that Lincoln wrote.