

Introduction

THE Lincoln story is ever fresh. It springs eternal from the deep current of human tribute that wells up to do homage to man's achievement in the realm of the moral and spiritual. That is why the obscure birth of a boy in a rude frontier log cabin was destined to unfold a chronicle that has become a heritage for the ages. So it is that the massive seated figure enshrined in the white temple in the Nation's Capital looks down silently but movingly upon the pilgrims who come to feel the atmosphere of man's true greatness.

This was the man who split rails in frontier clearings, guided flatboats over the streams of the prairies and on the bosom of the Father of Waters, ate meagre lunches of cheese and crackers in gloomy despair in a barren law office, traveled the circuit and there enlisted law on the side of justice, cheered the countryside with a fund of humor, matched in skill and force of argument the advocates of antiquity in the historic debates with Douglas, freed the slaves, spoke the First and Second Inaugurals and the Gettysburg Address, and held in his hands unbroken at last the ties that bound together a people and made a nation.

Lincoln, in the year before his death, told a friend that he had never read an entire novel in his life. This same man could carry a volume of Euclid in his pocket for months as his constant companion. He was ever concerned with and engrossed in realities; yet his instinct of interpreting human nature in terms of fable was as rich as Aesop's. His language matched the Anglo-Saxon of Shakespeare and the beauty and simplicity of the Old Testament. He was a patient, canny politician. He was self-reliant. The resources within himself were large and ample. He listened

with courteous patience to the thoughts of others, but in the end the independence of his own judgment resolved the decision.

Any search for the fountains of Lincoln's greatness must deal with his astonishing power over words. His mental processes worked with fine precision in resolving the shadowy substance of thought into durable expression. No one with discernment can sit down and read through Lincoln's collected works, speech by speech, letter by letter, document by document, without knowing that here was a man who had mastered the language of his race.

Lincoln was only a little past 56, although he looked years older, when death came. There is every evidence that his moral, spiritual, and intellectual powers were still developing. The Second Inaugural was given to the world only by a margin of six weeks. One is left to speculate upon the what might have been. Had the assassin's hand been stayed, continued manifestations of political wisdom and additional exalted classics of the English tongue surely would have had their birth in this man's mind and would have matured to become earthly realities, enriching the heritage of our people and all mankind.

It is the purpose of this book to bring together a few of the more important and significant passages of Lincoln's letters, speeches, and state documents, together with firsthand observations and appraisals of the man by some of those who saw him with contemporary eyes as he moved from day to day through the varied experiences that destiny had ordained for him. The illustrations are intended to supplement and illuminate the text and are themselves contemporary historical documents.

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*Region One Headquarters, National Park Service,
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