

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S VOICE

Much has been written about Lincoln's oratory, but very little information is available which will allow one to conclude whether or not the quality of his voice contributed materially to the general presentation of his thoughts.

Lincoln throughout his early years and in fact during most of his life was an "open-air" speaker. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates, Farewell Address, First Inaugural, Gettysburg Address, and Second Inaugural were all delivered out of doors.

We know that when he was but fifteen or sixteen years of age he began to practice public speaking and those who lived with him in the southern Indiana home have testified as to his early attempts at oratory out in the open air.

Just how much Lincoln's voice was affected by his self-directed studies in elocution, it is impossible to conclude, but it is known that he had in his possession during his Indiana years a text book known as Scott's Lessons.

In the chapter on elocution the first statement must have at least registered a lasting impression on Lincoln's mind. "A good articulation consists in giving a clear and full utterance to the several simple and complex sounds," the editor observed and then in a series of discussions developed such subjects as breathing, altering the tone, height and strength of the voice, pitching the voice in different keys, etc.

While we are not to assume that Lincoln had any formal instruction in elocution, he learned, possibly through the trial and error method, to place his tones correctly. He found that guttural tones proceeding from the throat brought on fatigue much more rapidly than the lingual tones made in the roof of the mouth.

In commenting on the voices of the two speakers in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates at Quincy, Ill., a correspondent noticed that "almost everybody present could hear Mr. Lincoln distinctly and not a hundred in the crowd could understand Mr. Douglas." While there may have been some political bias in this particular criticism, it is conceded generally that Mr. Lincoln's voice was much better adapted to speaking out of doors than the voice of Mr. Douglas. It had the carrying qualities which allowed him to reach a large number of the 20,000 people who heard him at Galesburg, Ill., the largest audience he had addressed up to that time and possibly the largest group ever within the "hearing of his voice." The college building which served as a sounding board directly in back of him caused his voice "to ring out clear as a bell over the vast assembly."

Douglas was known as the little man with the big voice and Lincoln was called the big man with the little voice. It must be admitted, however, that the deep voice of Mr. Douglas has received more favorable comment than the higher pitched voice of Mr. Lincoln. The penetrating voice of Lincoln used in public speaking must have largely been developed by practice. He had a very large mouth and his conversational tone was never the subject of discussion as having been unusual for a man of his type. There is no evidence that his voice in general conversation or in public speaking was either falsetto or effeminate. A newspaper reporter who heard Lincoln at Gettysburg said he spoke "in a sharp, unmusical treble voice."

One who has made a study of Lincoln's oratory claims that he always began his speeches, especially when speaking out of doors, in "a high, thin and rather metallic, but clear voice" but in a few minutes he came down to his own natural tone which was not offensive.

Of these two facts we are certain—that Lincoln placed his tones so that speaking, even out of doors, was made easy and that he spoke in a voice that was pitched higher than that of the ordinary declaimer.

It was neither of these two qualities of voice, however, that contributed most to Lincoln's oratory. Chauncey De Pew said, "In speaking Lincoln had peculiar cadence in his voice caused by laying emphasis upon the key word of the sentence."

It has never been charged that Lincoln spoke in a monotone. He had learned very early in life, probably from Scott's Lessons, that a sentence has as many meanings as it has words, and he gave the accent to the proper word to give his thought the correct emphasis.

He had also learned from Scott's Lessons that he should accompany the emotions and passions which his words expressed by the corresponding tones. It is admitted by all of Lincoln's critics that he became a part of his message. His emotions were revealed by his manner of expression, as one listener put it, "He had a voice trembling with emotion and with tender pathos."

John G. Nicolay, one of Lincoln's secretaries, contributes this information about Lincoln's speech:

"He talks fluently, uses good strong Saxon, and avoids all attempts at display and affectations of any kind. His voice is strong and clear, and his articulation is singularly perfect."

Possibly here again Lincoln was under obligation to Scott, the author of his early text on public speaking, who concluded his chapter on elocution with this advice:

"Nor can one deserve the appellation of a good speaker, much less of a complete orator, till, to distinct articulation, a good command of voice, and just emphasis, he is able to add the various expressions of emotion and passion."

Possibly the reason why so little attention has been given to Lincoln's voice is the fact that he was an orator and not an elocutionist. This is well expressed in the following excerpt from the conclusion of Robert G. Ingersoll's address on Lincoln:

"If you wish to know the difference between an orator and an elocutionist—between what is felt and what is said—between what the heart and brain can do together and what the brain can do alone—read Lincoln's wondrous words at Gettysburg, and then the speech of Edward Everett. The oration of Lincoln will never be forgotten. It will live until languages are dead and lips are dust. The speech of Everett will never be read. The elocutionists believe in the virtue of voice, the sublimity of syntax, the majesty of long sentences, and the genius of gesture. The orator loves the real, the simple, the natural. He places the thought above all."