

LINCOLN LORE

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INCREASING RESPECT FOR THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

There is no difference of opinion now about the literary merits of the Gettysburg Address delivered by Abraham Lincoln on November 19, 1863. Everywhere it is considered the masterpiece of American oratory. At the time it was first made available through the press, however, comparatively few people recognized in the brief remarks of the President an oration of unusual worth.

Gradually the people awakened to the fact that a truly great oration had been made by Lincoln at Gettysburg, and the respect for this address has increased from year to year, as will be revealed by excerpts from various publications presented in this bulletin.

The First Word of Praise

Edward Everett, who had preceded Abraham Lincoln with an address of great length, was undoubtedly the first one to grasp his hand the moment the speech was concluded. What he said to Lincoln is a matter of conjecture, yet one may feel quite sure his words were complimentary. The general impression is that he made some remark very much like the statement which was incorporated in a letter to Mr. Lincoln written the following day. After thanking the President for the many courtesies which had been shown him at Gettysburg, Mr. Everett concluded:

"Permit me also to express my great admiration of the thoughts expressed by you, with such eloquent simplicity and appropriateness, at the consecration of the Cemetery. I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes. My son, who parted from me at Baltimore, and my daughter, concur in this sentiment."

The First Noteworthy Newspaper Tribute

To the *Springfield (Mass.) Republican* goes the honor of contributing the first worthy estimate of the Lincoln address appearing in the press. It interprets for its readers the soul of Lincoln as it found expression in his remarks. It is very likely that Josiah G. Holland, later one of Mr. Lincoln's biographers, was the author of these appreciative words:

"Surpassingly fine as Mr. Everett's oration was in the Gettysburg consecration, the rhetorical honors of the occasion were won by President Lincoln. His little speech is a perfect gem; deep in feeling, compact in thought and expression, and tasteful and elegant in every word and comma."

The Earliest Widely Circulated Tribute

George William Curtis, editor of *Harpers Weekly*, took occasion to comment on the Gettysburg Address in the issue of his paper appearing on December 5, about two weeks after the ceremonies at the battlefield. He wrote:

"The few words of the President were from the heart to the heart. They cannot be read, even, without kindling emotion. 'The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.' It was as simple and felicitous and earnest a word as was ever spoken."

One week later *Harpers Weekly* in an editorial referred to the Gettysburg Address as "the most perfect piece of American eloquence, and as noble and pathetic and appropriate as the oration of Pericles over the Peloponnesian dead."

A Tribute by an Early Biographer

The campaign biographies of 1864 have very little to say about the address Lincoln made at Gettysburg. Some-

times mention of it is omitted altogether and seldom is there more than a line or two in comment. The same statement may be made with reference to the biographies which came out shortly after his death.

One biographer, Isaac N. Arnold, however, who knew Lincoln personally, gave more than usual attention to the dedication at Gettysburg and appreciated the fact that the words spoken there by Lincoln were immortal. After printing his remarks in full, Arnold wrote:

"These twenty lines contain more than many a volume. There is nothing finer in Fisher Ames' oration on the death of Washington, nor in the masterly address of Daniel Webster, in laying the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill Monument . . . When Mr. Lincoln uttered the words 'the world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here,' he seemed so absorbed in the heroic sacrifices of the soldiers, as to utterly forget himself, but his hearers were fully conscious that he was the greatest actor in all the drama, and that he was uttering words which would live as long as the language."

Early Foreign Tributes

M. E. Dusergier de Hauranne, editor of a French publication *Revue des Deux Mondes*, makes this statement about Lincoln in the issue of January 15, 1866.

"I do not believe that the modern speech has ever produced anything that will excel his eloquent discourse over the grave of the dead soldiers at Gettysburg."

The same year, 1866, John Malcolm Ludlow published in London a book called *President Lincoln Self-Pourtrayed*. In referring to the Gettysburg Address he said:

"Lincoln's speech on this occasion appears to me simply one of the noblest extant specimens of human eloquence."

After Fifty Years

Lord Curzon, Earl of Kedleston, Chancellor of the University of Oxford, delivered before the University of Cambridge on November 6, 1913, an address on "Modern Parliamentary Eloquence." In the course of his remarks he referred to what he considered the "three supreme masterpieces of English eloquence"—"the toast of William Pitt after the victory at Trafalgar, and two of Lincoln's speeches: The Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural." Commenting on one of these three selections, he said:

"The Gettysburg Address is far more than a pleasing piece of occasional oratory. It is a marvelous piece of English composition. It is a pure well of English undefiled. It sets one to inquiring with nothing short of wonder 'How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?' The more closely the address is analyzed the more one must confess astonishment at its choice of words, the precision of its thought, its simplicity, directness and effectiveness."

Today

A compilation of words of appreciation for the Gettysburg Address, which are appearing from day to day in nearly every language, would be an impossible task. This one brief sentiment may serve as a Twentieth Century appraisal of the Gettysburg address:

"In nobility of spirit and majesty of phrase, it is unequaled by any modern utterance."