

LINCOLN LORE

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ANTHOLOGY OF LINCOLN POEMS

By

FOUR CONTEMPORARY NEW ENGLAND POETS

America's five famous New England poets—Bryant, Holmes, Longfellow, Lowell, and Whittier—were living contemporaneous with Abraham Lincoln, and all of them were within fifteen years of his own age.

Poems which Lincoln inspired are available from the pens of all of them except Longfellow; and, while but one outstanding contribution to American poetry is registered among these tributes, the fame of the men has made it seem wise to gather this anthology of poems by the New England poets.

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER 1807—1892

This poem by John Greenleaf Whittier called "The Emancipation Group" was written in commemoration of the bronze statue of Lincoln dedicated at Boston, Massachusetts, in 1879:

The Emancipation Group

Amidst thy sacred effigies
Of old renown, give place,
O city, Freedom-loved! to his
Whose hand unchained a race.
Take the worn frame, that rested not
Save in a martyr's grave;
The care-lined face, that none forgot,
Bent to the kneeling slave.
Let man be free! The mighty word
He spoke was not his own;
An impulse from the Highest stirred
These chiseled lips alone.
The cloudy sign, the fiery guide,
Along his pathway ran,
And Nature, through his voice, denied
The ownership of man.
We rest in peace where these sad eyes
Saw peril, strife and pain;
His was the nation's sacrifice,
And ours the priceless gain.
O symbol of God's will on earth
As it is done above!
Bear witness to the cost and worth
Of justice and of love.
Stand in thy place and testify
To coming ages long,
That truth is stronger than a lie,
And righteousness than wrong.

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT 1794—1878

The funeral procession of Lincoln which moved through the cities of the east in April, 1865, was the inspiration of the following poem by William Cullen Bryant, which he wrote at that time:

The Death of Lincoln

Oh, slow to smite and swift to spare,
Gentle and merciful and just!
Who, in the fear of God didst bear
The sword of power, a nation's trust.
In sorrow by thy bier we stand,
Amid the awe that hushes all,

And speak the anguish of a land
That shook with horror at thy fall.
Thy task is done; the bonds are free;
We bear thee to an honored grave,
Whose proudest monument shall be
The broken fetters of the slave.
Pure was thy life; its bloody close
Hath placed thee with the sons of
light,
Among the noblest host of those
Who perished in the cause of right.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES 1817—1894

A memorial service in memory of Abraham Lincoln was held in Boston on June 1, 1865, and the following verses were prepared for the occasion by Oliver Wendell Holmes:

For Services in Memory of Abraham Lincoln

O Thou of soul and sense and breath,
The ever-present Giver,
Unto thy mighty Angel, Death,
All flesh thou dost deliver;
What most we cherish we resign,
For life and death alike are thine,
Who reignest Lord forever!
Our hearts lie buried in the dust
With him so true and tender,
The patriot's stay, the people's trust,
The shield of the offender;
Yet every murmuring voice is still,
As, bowing to thy sovereign will,
Our best-loved we surrender.
Dear Lord, with pitying eye behold
This martyr generation,
Which thou, through trials manifold,
Are showing thy salvation!
O let the blood by murder spilt
Wash out thy stricken children's guilt
And sanctify our nation!
Be thou thy orphaned Israel's friend,
Forsake thy people never,
In One our Broken Many blend,
That none again may sever!
Hear us, O Father, while we raise
With trembling lips our song of praise,
And bless thy name forever!

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL 1819—1891

The most famous of the Lincoln poems by the New England poets is by James Russell Lowell. The following verses are from the "Ode Recited at Harvard Commencement" July 21, 1865:

Abraham Lincoln

Nature, they say, doth dote
And cannot make a man
Save on some wornout plan:
Repeating us by rote:
For him her Old World moulds aside
she threw,
And, choosing sweet clay from the
breast

Of the unexhausted West,
With stuff untainted shaped a hero
new,
Wise, steadfast in the strength of
God, and true.
How beautiful to see
Once more a shepherd of mankind
indeed,
Who loved his charge, but never
loved to lead:
One whose meek flock the people
joyed to be,
Not lured by any cheat of birth,
But by his clear grained human worth
And brave old wisdom of sincerity!
They knew that outward grace is dust;
They could not choose but trust
In that sure-footed mind's unflin-
ing skill
And supple-tempered will
That bent like perfect steel to spring
again and thrust.
His was no lonely mountain-peak of
mind,
Trusting to thin air o'er our cloudy
bars,
A sea-mark now, now lost in vapors
blind;
Broad prairie rather, genial, level-
lined,
Fruitful and friendly for all human
kind,
Yet also nigh to heaven and loved
of loftiest stars.
Nothing of Europe here,
Or then, of Europe fronting morn-
ward still,
Ere any names of serf and peer
Could nature's equal scheme deface
And thwart her genial will;
Here was a type of the true elder race,
And one of Plutarch's men talked with
us face to face.
I praised him not; it were too late;
And some innate weakness there
must be
In him who condescends to victory
Such as the present gives, and can-
not wait,
Safe in himself as in a fate.
So always firmly he;
He knew to bide his time
And can his fame abide,
Still patient in his simple faith sub-
lime,
Till the wise years decide.
Great captains with their guns and
drums
Disturb our judgment for the hour,
But at last silence comes;
These all are gone, and, standing
like a tower,
Our children shall behold his fame,
The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing
man.
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise,
not blame,
New birth of our new soil, the first
American.