

# LINCOLN LORE

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## "MORTALITY"—LINCOLN'S FAVORITE POEM

Lincoln, on one occasion wrote that he would give all he was worth to be able to compose so fine a poem as "Mortality." He sent a copy of it to an acquaintance by the name of Johnston, who concluded that Lincoln was the author and so indicated in acknowledging the receipt of it. To this suggestion Lincoln re-acted as follows:

Fremont, April 18, 1846.

Friend Johnston:

... I have not your letter now before me; but, from memory, I think you ask me who is the author of the piece I sent you, and that you do so ask as to indicate a slight suspicion that I myself am the author. Beyond all question, I am not the author. I would give all I am worth, and go in debt, to be able to write so fine a piece as I think that is. Neither do I know who is the author. I met it in a straggling form in a newspaper last summer, and I remember to have seen it once before, about fifteen years ago, and this is all I know about it.

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln.

The poem was so often associated with Lincoln, who on many occasions recited it from memory that after he became President it appeared in print throughout the country attributed to him. This aroused Lincoln to the necessity of discovering, if possible, the real author and he appealed to his friends to assist him in this quest. Apparently it was James Grant Wilson, who informed Mr. Lincoln that the author of the poem was William Knox.

### William Knox

William Knox was born in Firth, Scotland, on August 17, 1789, oldest son of Thomas and Barbara Turnbull Knox. He had a grammar school education and in early youth began to write poems. One biographer says, "He was short in stature, but handsomely formed, his complexion fair, and his hair of a light color. He was a great favorite in society, possessing an inexhaustable fund of humor, and was an excellent story teller, and repeated and sang his own songs with great beauty." He passed away when he was but thirty-six years of age. On his tombstone in later years, there was engraved the inscription, "The poem entitled "Mortality" by William Knox is engraved in letters of gold on the walls of the Imperial Palace at St. Petersburg. It was, also, the favorite poem of Abraham Lincoln, who repeated verses of it on the day of his assassination."

In Edinburg, Scotland, where Knox died there stands the first heroic bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln erected on foreign soil. It is the work

of Thomas Bissell and was dedicated on August 21, 1893.

### Early Editions—1818, 1824, 1825

The first edition of Knox's Poems was published in 1818, under the caption of "The Lonely Hearth and Other Poems." Whether or not this compilation contained "Mortality" we are not advised.

The second edition of his poems was published in 1824, and was called "The Songs of Israel." It was a two volume, 12 mo. edition and contained the famous poem "Mortality."

An edition appeared in 1825, just a year later than the earlier printing under the caption "The Harp of Zion." Whether or not, "Mortality" was reprinted we do not know.

### Almanac Copy—1831

It would appear from the letter to Johnston that it was about 1831, when Lincoln first observed the poem. It is said to have been called to his attention by Dr. Jason Duncan of New Salem, Illinois, who discovered it with no authors name attached in an almanac. As far as we know the name of the almanac in which the poem was printed has not been discovered.

### Newspaper Copy—1845

It was the year before the correspondence with Johnston, in the summer of 1845, that Lincoln observed a copy of the poem in a newspaper. He said it appeared in "a straggling form." A copy of the poem appeared in The Louisville Evening Post about the time mentioned by Lincoln and it was in "straggling form," starting with the seventh stanza and concluding with the sixth.

### Johnstone Edition—1847

The collected poems of Knox were brought together by the publisher, John Johnstone, of London in 1847, under the caption "The Lonely Hearth, The Songs of Israel, Harp of Zion and Other Poems" by William Knox.

### Sheet Music—1865

After Lincoln's tragic death the theme of the poem encouraged its use more widely and at least three pieces of sheet music appeared in 1865, containing the words of "Mortality."

The Pearson Copy was published by Oliver Ditson and Company, Boston, under the caption, "Oh Why Should the Spirit of Mortal be Proud, poem by Abraham Lincoln, later President of the United States, music by George C. Pearson."

The Sedgwick copy was entitled "President Lincoln's Favorite Poem" with music by A. Sedgwick. It also gave a brief account of the reciting

of the poem by Lincoln as copied down by Carpenter. It was published by Wm. A. Pond and Company, New York.

The Everest Copy was also called "President Lincoln's Favorite Poem" and stated that it was "copied by F. B. Carpenter while our lamented chief was reciting it." This number was adapted to music by C. Everest and published by Lee and Walker, Philadelphia.

### Hours at Home Magazine—1865

One of the earliest monthly magazines to feature the poem was "Hours at Home" for September, 1865, edited by J. M. Sherwood, who evidently wrote the article on "Mr. Lincoln's Favorite Poem, and Its Author." Besides giving an interesting biographical sketch of Knox, it printed the entire fourteen stanzas of the poem.

### Humphrey's Illustrated Book—1877

A separately printed brochure bearing the title "Oh Why Should the Spirit of Mortal Be Proud?" was published in 1877, by Lee and Shepard, Boston. The illustrations, one for each stanza were designed by Miss L. B. Humphrey. The name of Lincoln is not mentioned and it is properly credited to William Knox. Other separately printed copies of the poem have since been printed.

### The Houser Brochure—1935

The most exhaustive study of Knox's poem "Mortality" as it has become associated with Abraham Lincoln, has appeared in a brochure prepared by M. L. Hauser and was published in 1935, by Edward W. Meredith of Peoria, Illinois. It is entitled "Abraham Lincoln's Favorite Poem, Its Author and His Book." The monograph also appears in "The Lincoln Group Papers" published by The Black Cat Press, Chicago.

The first and last verses of the fourteen stanzas of the immortal poem follow.

Oh, why should the spirit of mortal  
be proud?  
Like a swift-fleeting meteor, a fast-  
flying cloud,  
A flash of the lightning, a break of  
the wave,  
Man passes from life to his rest in the  
grave.

'Tis the wink of an eye, 'tis the  
draught of a breath,  
From the blossom of health to the  
paleness of death,  
From the gilded saloon to the bier and  
the shroud:  
Oh, why should the spirit of mortal  
be proud?