

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S ADMIRATION FOR HALLECK'S POEMS

Lincoln's love for the poets is well known and his ability to quote from many of them is a matter of record. It is interesting to note that before public opinion had placed a very high value on the work of Fitz-Greene Halleck, Lincoln had expressed his admiration for several of Halleck's lines. Less than three weeks before Lincoln's death, he was visited by James Grant Wilson and some friends. Mr. Wilson made this memorandum in his diary at that time: "The President at the White House read to three intimate friends with much power and pathos, Halleck's "Alnwick Castle" and "Marco Bozzaris."

James Grant Wilson was traveling abroad in the summer of 1856 and spent a day with Robert Burns' youngest sister, Isabella, who is said to have resembled the poet more than any other member of the family. She was over eighty years old and the last survivor of the Burnsese. In talking about her brother she expressed the opinion that nothing had been written about him which was equal to the lines the poet Halleck had contributed.

In the month of April, 1860, Mr. Wilson was located in Chicago where he was publishing a literary journal called *The Record*. His office was in the Portland Block on Dearborn Street where Leonard Volk also had his studio on the sixth floor. One day Lincoln, who was then giving Volk some sittings, was met on the stairway by Wilson and invited to visit his office on his return from the studio.

Lincoln was very much interested in the busts of Shakespeare and Burns, which adorned Mr. Wilson's office and which he had brought from Stratford and Ayr. Mr. Lincoln was led to comment, "They are my two favorite authors, and I must manage to see their birthplaces some day, if I can contrive to cross the Atlantic." Shortly after this visit Mr. Wilson presented Abraham Lincoln with a copy of Halleck's poems and in the letter which accompanied the book, Wilson mentioned the fact that he had met Robert Burns' sister. Lincoln acknowledged the receipt of the book with the following letter:

Springfield, May 2, 1860

Mr. James G. Wilson.

My Dear Friend: I am greatly obliged for the volume of your friend Fitz-Greene Halleck's poems. Many a month has passed since I have met with anything more admirable than his beautiful lines on Burns. With Alnwick Castle, Marco Bozzaris, and Red Jacket, I am also much pleased.

It is wonderful that you should have seen and known a sister of Robert Burns. You must tell me something about her when we meet again.

Yours very truly,

A. Lincoln.

Lincoln, always a great admirer of Burns, thought Halleck's long tribute to him which contained thirty-eight stanzas a very beautiful poem. These two verses must have especially impressed him; and how much more they impress those who have stood at Lincoln's birthplace and the Lincoln National Memorial.

I've stood beside the cottage bed
Where the Bard-peasant first drew breath;
A straw-thatched roof above his head,
A straw-wrought couch beneath.
.
And I have stood beside the pile,
His monument—that tells to Heaven
The homage of earth's proudest isle
To that Bard-peasant given!

From "Alnwick Castle" the opening lines must have impressed Lincoln. His own people had always been a migratory family, living on the very frontiers of western civilization. Not so the royal family of Alnwick Castle:

Home of the Percy's high-born race,
Home of their beautiful and brave,
Alike their birth and burial place,
Their cradle and their grave!

"Red Jacket," a poem eulogizing an Indian chief, "also a Monarch born," is far removed from the atmosphere of Alnwick Castle but was quite familiar to Lincoln. A single stanza in which the chief's eloquence is praised, may have indirectly influenced the writing of the Gettysburg Address when he told a friend that it was to be "short, short, short."

Is eloquence?—Her spell is thine that reaches
The heart, and makes the wisest head its sport;
And there's one rare, strange virtue in thy speeches,
The secret of their mastery—they are short.

The closing lines of "Marco Bozzaris" must have impressed Lincoln deeply and they were prophetic of his own place in history.

And even she who gave thee birth,
Will, by their pilgrim-circled hearth,
Talk of thy doom without a sigh:
For thou art Freedom's now, and Fame's;
One of the few, the immortal names,
That were not born to die.