

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor  
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 601

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

October 14, 1940

## THE BEWILDERING BLUNDER

Several years ago a brochure was published under the title of *A Beautiful Blunder*. The book developed the story of someone's blunder in advising Lincoln that five sons of the Widow Bixby were war casualties, which information caused Lincoln to write his famous letter of condolence. Nicholas Murray Butler in his new book, *Across the Busy Years*, has written one chapter which might well be entitled "The Bewildering Blunder." Among other strange conclusions he states that Lincoln was not the composer of the Bixby letter.

This is the most bewildering statement with reference to Lincoln's writings which has thus far been given wide circulation, and its publication seems to be an extremely unfortunate blunder. The published statement by Dr. Butler will cause people for all time to look with suspicion on the genuineness of the most famous of Abraham Lincoln's letters. We are further bewildered by the statement of Butler that "Abraham Lincoln wrote very few letters that bore his signature," and he continues that "Hay was able to imitate Lincoln's handwriting and signature in well-nigh perfect fashion." If Butler is also correct in this last assumption, of what value are the thousands of almost priceless letters, supposedly written and autographed by Lincoln, which have found their way into the treasure boxes of individuals and institutions. The genuineness of all of Lincoln's holograph writings during Hay's incumbency are challenged by Butler's statement.

This is the comment about the Hay authorship of the Bixby letter as it appears verbatim in Dr. Butler's book:

"It is now possible to make public the fact that the famous Bixby letter which has been the subject of praise, of discussion and of debate for three-quarters of a century was not written by Abraham Lincoln at all, but by John Hay."

The integrity of any one of the three distinguished men, John Hay, John Morley, or Nicholas Murray Butler, whose testimonies have contributed to this misunderstanding, cannot be questioned, but memories are not always infallible.

While on a visit to America in 1905 John Morley had the Bixby letter called to his attention by Theodore Roosevelt. Morley called upon Secretary of State Hay and brought up the subject of the Bixby letter. According to Morley, as remembered by Butler, Hay said "that he had himself written the Bixby letter." Also Hay is said to have asked Morley to keep this fact "strictly confidential" as long as he (Hay) should live.

During Butler's visit to London in 1912 he heard the story of the Bixby letter from Morley who tried to recite it as Hay had related it to him. Butler was pledged to secrecy while Morley lived.

Despite the desire for secrecy in the matter, there has been current for many years rumors that John Hay claimed to have written both the Bixby letter and the Gettysburg Address. E. V. Lucas published in 1934 a version of the Hay authorship of the Bixby letter in his work, *Post-Bag Diversions*. He reveals that Hay had confided his part in the Bixby episode to the American Ambassador to England, William Hines Page. Little attention has been paid to this version of the story.

The Bixby letter was written in 1864 when John Hay was but twenty-six years old. As far as we can learn he kept secret for over forty years his authorship of Lincoln's most remarkable letter. At sixty-six years of age, when he did decide to reveal the secret, he chose an Englishman of his same age as the medium through which the world some day might learn this bewildering fact.

John Hay passed away in 1905, the year following his revelation to Morley. This was the same year that the

Bixby letter was widely advertised through a facsimile said to have been placed on the walls of Brasenose College, Oxford, and cited as "a specimen of the purest English and most elegant diction." Surely Morley must have been informed about this Bixby facsimile story, and although Hay died that year and Morley was no longer bound to secrecy, he failed to reveal the alleged authorship of the letter until seven years later.

Eleven years after Butler heard the story from Morley, the Englishman died and Butler was relieved from his obligation of secrecy in 1923. Although he admits that the Bixby letter has been under discussion for three-quarters of a century, Butler chose to wait for seventeen years, until he had reached seventy-eight years of age, before advising the general public of this startling fact.

The Bixby letter was written seventy-six years ago next month. Just what Hay told Morley about the writing of this letter forty years after the actual writing occurred is problematical. Just how accurately Morley remembered what Hay had told him in a casual conversation, when he took Butler into his confidence eight years later, is also problematical, and we may also wonder whether or not after a lapse of twenty-eight years Butler has remembered verbatim the statement of Morley. Recalling that all these men were pledged to secrecy, it is not likely they made written memorandums of what was said.

It appears that Hay might have been discussing with Morley the genuineness of the facsimile copies which were just then appearing and that Hay commented that the facsimiles would not be from the original because he wrote it. This would not mean, necessarily, that he composed the letter, but that it may have been dictated to him by Lincoln. There is the other alternative that he may have sketched a brief outline for a reply, and then Lincoln himself wrote it out in his own way.

On the same day the Bixby letter was written Abraham Lincoln wrote a note of appreciation to Deacon John Phillips, the authenticity of which seems not to have been questioned. One fact appears probable, that the person who composed the letter to Deacon Phillips wrote the note to the Widow Bixby. Both letters are printed on this page for comparison.

Executive Mansion  
Washington, Nov. 21, 1864.

To Mrs. Bixby, Boston, Mass.

Dear Madam:

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,  
A. Lincoln.

Executive Mansion, November 21, 1864.

Deacon John Phillips.

My Dear Sir:

I have heard of the incident at the polls in your town, in which you acted so honorable a part, and I take the liberty of writing to you to express my personal gratitude for the compliment paid me by the suffrage of a citizen so venerable.

The example of such devotion to civic duties in one whose days have already been extended an average lifetime beyond the Psalmist's limit, cannot but be valuable and fruitful. It is not for myself only, but for the country which you have in your sphere served so long and so well that I thank you.

Your friend and servant,  
Abraham Lincoln.

\*Butler, *Across the Busy Years*, vol. 2, p. 390.