

LINCOLN LORE

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AN AMERICAN QUADRUPLE OF ENGLISH ELOQUENCE

Within a period of approximately a year and a half, there came from the pen of Abraham Lincoln four masterpieces of literature which in their respective fields have not been surpassed. This group of compositions consisting of a proclamation of Thanksgiving, an oration of dedication, a letter of condolence, and an inaugural address were all produced between October 3, 1863 and March 4, 1865. In referring to these writings they might be called, an American Quadruple of English Eloquence.

The proclamation written on October 3, 1863 was the first annual national Thanksgiving proclamation, the oration of dedication was delivered at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, the letter of condolence was written to the Widow Bixby on November 21, 1864 and the inaugural address, the second one, was delivered on March 4, 1865.

These writings are also unusual examples of brevity in expression. The longest address contains but 700 words and it can be read in five minutes. The shortest manuscript runs about 130 words and can be read in one minute. The four writings combined total but 1600 words and only eleven minutes would be required for a careful reading of all the documents.

Two of these writings were directly associated with the Thanksgiving season and a third one was composed and delivered in the very atmosphere of the harvest festival. As might be expected, a very definite patriotic-religious sentiment permeates these three manuscripts, but in reality, it is the fourth document entirely disassociated with Thanksgiving, which sounded the more definitely religious tone and has been referred to as Lincoln's "Sermon on the Mount."

It is almost sacrilegious to take excerpts from the two longer compositions, but the printer's rule does not stretch, and selections from the quadruple appear on this page.

A Proclamation of Thanksgiving

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of almighty God. . . . Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield, and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

No human counsel hath devised, nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the most high God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American people. . . .

An Oration of Dedication

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty,

and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

A Letter of Condolence

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 words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to 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.

An Inaugural Address

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it—all sought to avert it. . . . Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would rather make war than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came. . . . Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. . . . Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.