

LINCOLN LORE

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DRINKWATER'S ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The winter season each year brings on a renewed interest in dramatic art, which calls to mind the probability that Abraham Lincoln has more often been impersonated than any other American historical character. His unusual appearance, which has set him apart from all other well-known personages, has allowed almost any exceedingly tall man of somber visage and a false beard to at least approach a resemblance of him.

The man who wore a high beaver hat above a sad, dark, bearded face, whose lean, lengthy body was draped with a black frock coat has become almost as familiar a figure, as the jovial, white whiskered, short robust fellow dressed in red, who each year makes his appearance about Christmas time.

Strange to say, however, that Frank McGlynn, the man who, without makeup, resembled Lincoln the least of all his impersonators, probably has become the best known of the many artists who have played the Emancipator.

But a paradox even more pronounced is the fact that McGlynn's playwright, John Drinkwater, who was not an American, but an Englishman, has produced the most widely accepted dramatic portrayal of the Martyred President. This absurdity is accentuated by the knowledge that Drinkwater used a Lincoln story as the source material for his play by the English biographer, Charnwood.

The printed text of the Drinkwater play was also first published in England, in October, 1918, with a second impression the same month. A month later the type for the book was reset and from then on it continued to be reissued several times a year. In 1923 there had been eighteen impressions of the English edition.

The first American edition came from the press in 1919 and the play continues to be favorably received by the book-buying public. The last American printing, at hand, bears the notation, eighteenth impression, and it is said that 38,000 copies of the American edition have been distributed. There is also the Riverside Literature Series in several editions. The first edition before the editor, just now, bears the autograph of John Drinkwater.

The English origin of the play is supplemented also by the acceptance and promotion of the drama, due largely to Arnold Bennett, another Englishman. It was first shown in Birmingham, England, on October 12, 1918, at the Repertory Theatre, built on a side street, back of the Central Station. Up to the time "Abraham Lincoln" was presented, no play had run for more than a week at the theatre, but this American drama ran for six weeks to crowded houses. The play was moved to the Lyric Theatre, in Hammersmith, a London suburb, where it was shown continuously for almost two years, and finally on July 6, 1921, it opened at the Lyceum in London for a six months' engagement.

Mrs. William Harris, Jr., living in Paris at the time, saw the production in London and immediately purchased it. She cabled her husband, a producer, "Come at once, I've bought a play for you." It was William Harris, Jr., who brought the play to America.

The tremendous success of the play in this country soon brought Drinkwater, the playwright, here for a series of lectures. His interpretation of his masterpiece had much

to do with hushing much adverse historical criticism, with respect to certain episodes in the play, which were of pronounced English flavor.

Drinkwater was especially well received in Boston where he appeared under the auspices of the English Speaking Union. He made it plain in his Boston lecture that it was not the fact that Lincoln saved the Union that was of supreme importance as he put it. "The interest in Abraham Lincoln cuts across boundaries and is shared by men who know little or nothing about the history of the United States." He also dismissed the idea that the fact that Lincoln freed a race from subjugation was the motivating factor that inspired the production. He even discounted the anthology of Lincoln stories, had stirred the imagination of the author as "they were in fact related to characteristics rather than to character."

The inspiration to write the play came to him from the fact that "Lincoln's life was a life of public service." Drinkwater said: "Nearly all great poets at one time or another have written about this phenomenon of public service. Its history is strewn with the tragedies of men who, when called to leadership, have shown themselves not big enough and have broken under the strain. Of the troops of men who have been leaders during the past 500 years, are there a dozen who mean anything to us today? But from time to time a man arose who, in the midst of his trials, never lost the ability to maintain day after day intimate contact with the men and women, behind the affairs with which he was called upon to deal. Oliver Cromwell was such a man. Lincoln was another, and a greater, in the sense that he had a larger imagination and a keener intellectual edge. Here was the fundamental significance of Lincoln's character. He was able through daily contact with men and women to invest executive office with a presiding moral idea. It was this controlling idea of public service that, in the view of the dramatist, aroused world-wide interest in Lincoln."

On the same itinerary in 1920, Drinkwater reached Springfield, Illinois, the home of Lincoln during his mature years. Coming from a playwright, his concluding appeal to the citizens of the city should find a sympathetic response from all students of Abraham Lincoln everywhere. He remarked:

"The legend of Lincoln is secure; its beauty and its meaning for the world will grow from age to age and these will have their reverence in the spirit of man. But the environment from which the legend sprang will have its own durable significance, and now is the time to see that it is preserved with all the added glamor of authenticity, so the imagination can work freely upon and make its own symbols finely from recorded facts, whatever their medley, but it is impoverished when it has no basis other than mere travelers' fog-bound gossip."

It is doubtful if in any of the various fields of Lincoln literature one work more definitely overshadows the others in its respective group than Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln*. Possibly this is partly due to the fact that his play begins with the nomination of Lincoln for the Presidency and does not necessitate the playwright becoming involved in the many controversial episodes of Lincoln's early life. Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln* is one of the world's enduring exhibits of dramatic art.