

# LINCOLN LORE

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## AN APPRECIATION OF LINCOLN'S ORATORY

Seldom does one find a finer appreciation of Lincoln's oratory than a tribute in a magazine article, "Personal Recollections of President Lincoln," written by Moncure D. Conway, for the first issue of *The Fortnightly Review*, published in London, on May 15, 1865.

The author was born in Virginia in 1832, studied law at Warrenton in the same state, and while there wrote for the *Richmond Examiner*. He contributed to the *Southern Literary Messenger*, later became editor of the *Boston Commonwealth*, went to England in 1863, and became the London correspondent of the *Cincinnati Commercial*. He was the author of *The Rejected Stone*, and many books on politics, religion and slavery.

Excerpts from his contribution to the *Fortnightly Review* follow:

"It has been my lot to be amongst those Americans who have been, in some degree, politically alienated from the President on account of what they considered his dangerous hesitation to hurl slavery, utterly and for ever, into the pit which it had digged for the Union; and to me this lot has been very painful, because I had rarely seen and known a man whom I could more admire personally. . . .

"It was during this memorable political struggle, which presently led the champions to address public meetings far beyond the limits of their State, that I first saw and heard Abraham Lincoln. It was at Cincinnati, in the State of Ohio, an important point as being at the very centre of the country, and on the line separating the free from the slave states. Across the Ohio river, narrower than the Thames, rise the hills of Kentucky, and one may (or could) stand in the streets of Cincinnati and see slaves at their work. From the towns of Newport and Covington, on the Kentucky side, hundreds of persons were in the habit of coming to the political meetings of the city, or to witness the performances of their favorite actors, among whom may have been Wilkes Booth. To the great delight of the Kentuckians, and of the Democracy, so-called, Mr. Douglas had delivered a public address there advocating what he used to call his 'gur-reat principle' that the newborn territories should be allowed to arrange their own institutions—and especially to introduce or exclude slavery—as freely as full-grown States. Mr. Lincoln was soon after invited to the city. The meeting was in a large public square, and two or three thousands of persons were present, possibly more, to hear this new man. Party feeling was running very high, and there were adverse parties in the crowd who had come with the intention of disturbing the meeting. Mr. Lincoln appeared on a balcony in the clear moonlight, and without paying the slightest attention to the perturbations of the multitude, began his address. I had at first paused on the skirts of the crowd, meaning to leave soon; but an indefinable something in the tones of the man's voice induced me to go closer. Surely if there were to be chosen a figure-head for America it must be this! There was something undeniably grotesque about the face, and yet not a coarse line; it was battered and bronzed, but the light of an eye, both gentle and fiery, kept it from being hard. The nose was a good strong buttress—such as Bonaparte would have valued—to a solid brow; and the forehead rose to its greatest height in the region assigned to the benevolent and the conscientious organs, declining along those of firmness and self-esteem

into what I should call a decidedly feeble occiput. But never was there a case in which the sage's request—'Speak, that I may see you'—had more need to be repeated; for a voice more flexible, more attuned to every kind of expression, and to carry truth in every tone, was never allotted to mortal. Although he seemed to me oddly different from any other man whom I had seen, he seemed also related to them all, and to have lineaments characteristic of every section of the country; and this is why I thought he might well be taken as its figure-head. His manner of speaking in public was simple, direct, and almost religious; he was occasionally humorous, but rarely told anecdotes as he did in private conversation; and there was no sarcasm, no showing of the teeth. I had not listened to him long, on the occasion to which I refer, before I perceived that there was a certain artistic ability in him as a public speaker, which his audience would least recognize when it was most employed. Early in the address some adverse allusion to slavery brought a surge of hisses, but when it broke at his feet, there was the play of a faint smile on his face as he gathered from it the important knowledge of the exact proportion of Kentucky which he had to deal with on the occasion. I have often wondered that Mr. Lincoln's power as an orator—surpassed as it is by that of only one other American—is so little known or thought of in Europe; and I have even found the impression that he was, as a speaker, awkward, heavy, and ungrammatical. It is a singular misjudgment. For terse, well-pronounced, clear speech; for a careful and easy selection of the fit word for the right place; for perfect tones; for quiet, chaste, and dignified manner—it would be hard to find the late President's superior. . . .

"Mr. Lincoln answered well Frederick the Great's definition of a prince—'the first of subjects.' His confidence in the people was as simple and unhesitating as his loyalty to them was perfect. He believed that there was under all parties a substratum of patriotism; and I never saw his eye shine more than when some one told of a town in Ohio where, up to the time of the war, two party-flags had been flying, and whose inhabitants, when they heard of the attack upon Fort Sumter, cut down the two poles with their flags, and making the two into one, hoisted it with the stars and stripes alone at its head. . . .

"Mr. Lincoln was a gentleman, he was incapable of rudeness; he was benevolent in small things; and he had humility. In manners and personal bearing he gave the impression of fine blood, which could speak through his cheeks on occasion; and when one looked upon his towering form, moving through the fashionable crowd at his receptions with awkward ease, he might well say—as the Yunai sage said of Zoraster—'This form and this gait cannot lie, and nothing but truth can proceed from them.' His conversational powers were extraordinary, and his wit, with a quaint and fresh way he had of illustrating his ideas, made it a delight to be in his society. The simple Theism, which I believe, without knowing a great deal about his religious opinions, to have been the substance of his faith, was real to him; and it is worthy of remark that all the religious deputations, representing all sects, which have crowded the President's house for four years have not prevailed to evoke any utterance from him savouring of cant or narrowness."