

# 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 909

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

September 9, 1946

## POEMS LINCOLN ADMIRER

One hundred years ago this month Lincoln wrote one of his series of letters on poetry to a friend named Andrew Johnston and enclosed some verses in harmony with the melancholy days which were approaching. The theme was a sad one about a schoolmate who had become violently insane. The incident was recalled by Lincoln upon a visit to the community of his childhood home. It was in one of Lincoln's letters to Johnston that he enclosed the poem "Mortality", which his friend implied Lincoln had written. After assuring Johnston he was mistaken about the authorship Lincoln commented: "I would give all I am worth, and go in debt, to be able to write so fine a piece as I think that is."

This should be sufficient evidence to show that Lincoln loved poetry and it is doubtful if any of our Presidents have been able to recite from memory more of the fine poetry of the masters. The emphasis placed upon his interest in humor has to some extent obscured his deeper and more enduring appreciation of good poetry, although some of the selections he enjoyed were ludicrous. He spent much time in reading verse but more time in memorizing those pieces which appealed to him.

Now, after one hundred years have elapsed we are beginning to appreciate the fact that when an assassin robbed the nation of its chief executive in 1865 he also removed from the field of literature a genius in the use of words. Lincoln then was but fifty-six years of age and on the very threshold of what promised to be a fruitful literary adventure. The ink was scarcely dry on the second inaugural when the author of this state paper, written in blank verse, became the central figure in America's most lamentable tragedy.

Lincoln's untimely death, however, released a veritable flood of poetry and in all these years its flow has not diminished. There is scarcely an American poet of note since Lincoln's day who has not contributed a sonnet or some commendable verse on the Emancipator, and in some instances the production has been considered the author's best work. An anthology of poems on Abraham Lincoln, approaching anything like completeness is not available and it is doubtful if such a tremendous task will ever be undertaken.

The compiling of poems about Lincoln however is not the purpose of this bulletin but to call attention to poets Lincoln esteemed and poems which were his favorites. There is evidence that Lincoln read, in part at least, the works of these poets:

Browning, Bryant, Burns, Byron, Campbell, Cook, Cowper, Emerson, Goldsmith, Gray, Halleck, Heemans, Holmes, Homer, Howitt, Keats, Knox, Longfellow, Lowell, Milman, Milton, Moore, Peterson, Poe, Pope, Read, Rogers, Scott, Shakespeare, Southey, Whitman, Whittier, Willis, and Wolfe.

More important than the listing of the names of the poets is the mentioning of the specific poems which Lincoln admired, many of which he memorized: The most important follow with name of poet, title and first line:

- Bryant, William Cullen—*Thanatopsis*  
"To him who in the love of nature holds"
- Burns, Robert—*A Man's a Man for a' That*  
"Is there, for honest poverty"
- Byron, Lord—*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*  
"To sit on rocks, to muse o'er flood and fell,"  
*Dream*  
"Our life is twofold: Sleep hath its own world."

- Cowper, William—*On Receipt of My Mother's Picture*  
"O that those lips had language! Life has pass'd."  
*Charity*  
"Fairest and foremost of the train that wait"
- Gray, Thomas—*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*  
"The curfew tolls the knell of parting day."
- Halleck, Fitz-Greene—*Burns*  
"Wild Rose of Alloway! my thanks:"  
*Fanny*  
"Fanny was younger once than she is now,"
- Holmes, Oliver Wendell—*The Chambered Nautilus*  
"This is the ship of pearl which poet's feign,"  
*The Last Leaf*  
"I saw him once before"  
*Lexington*  
"Slowly the mist o'er the meadow was creeping"
- Hood, Thomas—*The Haunted House*  
"Some dreams we have are nothing else but dreams."  
*Faithless Sally Brown*  
"Young Ben he was a nice man."  
*Miss Kilmansegg and Her Precious Leg*  
"To trace the Kilmansegg pedigree"  
*The Lost Heir*  
"One day, as I was going by"
- Heemans, Felicia Dorothea—*Casabianca*  
"The boy stood on the burning deck"
- Knox, William—*Mortality*  
"Oh! why should the spirit of mortal be proud?"
- Longfellow, Henry W.—*Psalm of Life*  
"Tell me not in mournful numbers,"  
*The Building of the Ship*  
"Thou, too, sail on, O ship of State"
- Poe, Edgar Allen—*The Raven*  
"Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered,  
weak and weary,"
- Pope, Alexander—*Essay on Man*  
"Awake, my St. John! have all meaner things"
- Read, T. Buchanan—*The Oath*  
"Ye freemen, how long will ye trifle?"
- Shakespeare, William—*Macbeth*  
"When shall we three meet again"  
*Hamlet*  
"Who's there"  
*King Richard the Third*  
"Now is the winter of our discontent"
- Willis—*Pharrhasius*  
"There stood an unsold captive in the mart."
- Wolfe, Charles—*The Burial of Sir John Moore*  
"Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,"  
An excerpt from a letter written on November 27, 1866 by Oliver Wendell Holmes might offer an appropriate conclusion for this monograph:  
"Governor Andrews once told me that the President recited 'The Last Leaf' to him, entire, from memory . . . It will insure the memory of that poem, at least, and if everything else I have written shall be forgotten I think it will be long before a poem that such a man loved to repeat will be read with indifference . . . It would certainly be very grateful to me to have that poem of my youth embalmed by association with the memory of the best loved man of our generation: I might almost say of our history."