



Lincoln Lore

April, 1980

Bulletin of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor.
Mary Jane Hubler, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the
Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.

Number 1706

BROWNING'S PECULIAR TURN TO THE RIGHT

Those who keep diaries often influence the writing of history far more than they influenced events in their own day. Gideon Welles occupied a position in Lincoln's Cabinet inferior to William H. Seward's and Edwin M. Stanton's, but his sourly independent diary wrecked the reputations of dozens of Washington politicians. One reason the Radical Republicans have fared so poorly in historical writing is that most of the prominent diarists around Lincoln hated them. Welles, John Hay, and Edward Bates saw them as "Jacobins," but there is little evidence that the President saw the Radicals the same way. Salmon P. Chase, whose diary might have balanced the picture over the years, never had the influence on historical writing that the conservatives had, because he did not as clearly admire Lincoln as they did. Criticizing Abraham Lincoln has never been a good way to gain the trust of historians.

The other great diarist near the Lincoln administration, Orville Hickman Browning, was also a Radical-hater. His erratic and ultimately inexplicable political course during the Civil War reveals the danger in relying too heavily on diaries, which may reflect peculiar political positions.

Browning was never much of a "Lincoln man." He had hoped that Edward Bates would be the Republican nominee for President in 1860. However, the Illinois delegation, of which Browning was a member, was pledged to Lincoln, and Browning worked for Lincoln's nomination at the convention. Even after the nomination, Browning thought that "we have made a mistake in the selection of candidates." His assistance in getting Bates to support the Republican ticket proved vital, but Browning had little luck in recommending Cabinet appointments. He wanted to see Bates become Secretary of State and Joseph Holt, Secretary of War. Browning's was one of many voices raised against Norman B. Judd's inclusion in Lincoln's official family.

Browning exercised his greatest influence on the Lincoln

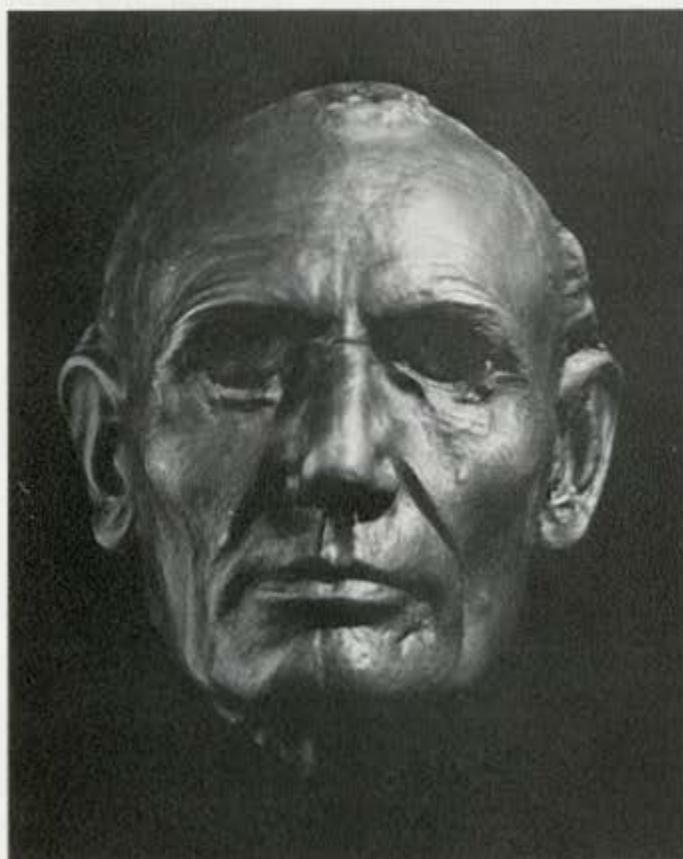
administration when he read a draft of the First Inaugural Address and suggested removing a provocative threat to "reclaim the public property and places which have fallen" in the seceded states. Browning's reasoning has often been taken as Lincoln's. He admitted that Lincoln's draft was right in principle without altering the threat to "reclaim" federal property, but, Browning explained,

In any conflict which may ensue between the government and the seceding States, it is very important that the traitors shall be the aggressors, and that they are kept constantly and palpably in the wrong.

The first attempt that is made to furnish supplies or reinforcements to Sumter will induce aggression by South Carolina, and then the government will stand justified, before the entire country, in repelling that aggression, and retaking the forts.

After Fort Sumter fell, Browning imputed his own reasoning to Lincoln. "Upon looking into the laws," he told the President on April 18, "which clothe you with power to act in this emergency, I am not sure that you expected, or desired any other result."

Browning was a conservative by nature, but war brought out a radical streak in him. If Baltimore stood in the way of troops coming to protect Washington, he told Lincoln, it should be "laid in ruin." Before April was over, he thought it likely that slaves would flock to the Union armies and inevitably "rise in rebellion." "The time is not yet," he added, "but it will come when it will be necessary for you to march an army into the South, and proclaim freedom to the slaves." Browning celebrated General John C. Frémont's proclamation freeing the slaves of rebels in Missouri in the late summer of 1861, and he thought the President wrong to revoke it. Frémont's proclamation did "not deal with citizens at all," Browning remonstrated, "but with public enemies." Citing precedents in international law, he insisted that war abolished society and



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. Browning recalled that sculptor Leonard W. Volk had worked in a marble yard in Quincy, Illinois, Browning's home. Lincoln's friend thought Volk's bust of Stephen A. Douglas "decidedly a work of genius." Volk is better known for his famous life mask of Lincoln. Dr. O. Gerald Trigg allowed the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum to photograph his superb bronze casting of the mask with the striking result above. For more information on the mask and on Volk's famous castings of Lincoln's hands, turn to the second article in this issue of *Lincoln Lore*.

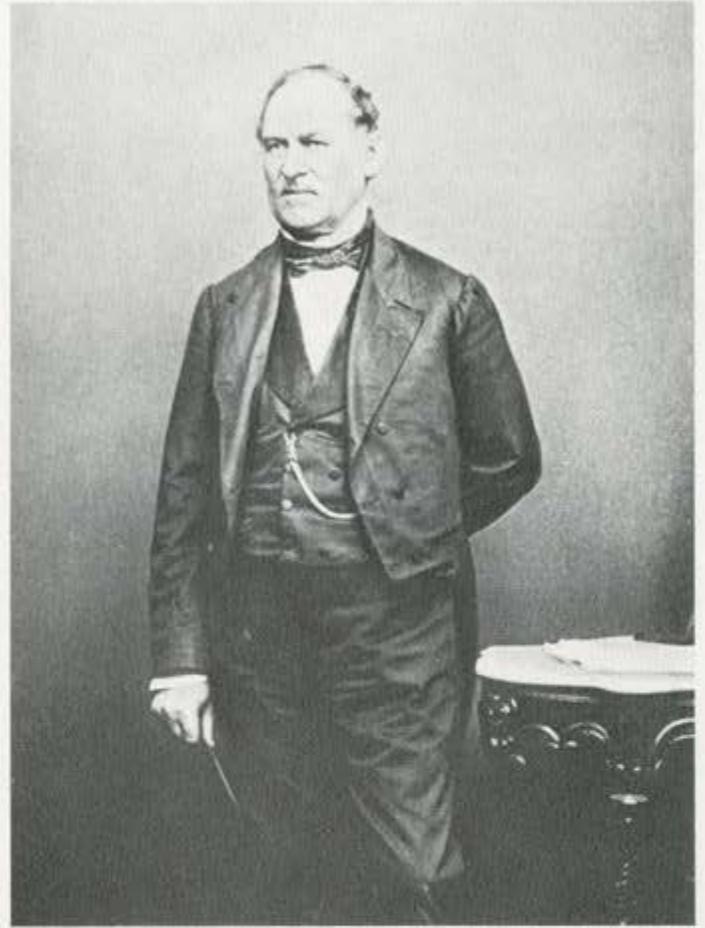
gave "liberty to use violence *in infinitum*." "All their property," Browning said, "is subject to be . . . confiscated, and disposed of absolutely and forever by the belligerent power, without any reference whatever to the laws of society." Lincoln disagreed sharply.

After the death of Senator Stephen A. Douglas in June of 1861, Governor Richard Yates appointed Browning to finish his term. In the Senate, Browning defended the administration's arbitrary arrests and voted for the First Confiscation Act. He voted to emancipate slaves in the District of Columbia.

After April of 1862, Browning turned suddenly to the right. He opposed the Second Confiscation Act and urged Lincoln to veto it. It was a test "whether he [Lincoln] was to control the abolitionists and Radicals or whether they were to control him." He praised Lincoln's letter in answer to Horace Greeley's "Prayer of Twenty Millions" for emancipation, and he bitterly opposed the Emancipation Proclamation that fall. Browning was campaigning for Congressional candidates in Illinois when he heard it had been issued, and he practically stopped in his tracks. He slowed down his campaigning, and he twice pleaded with Lincoln to alter the Proclamation.

There is no explanation for the suddenness of Browning's change. In principle the Emancipation Proclamation was little different from Frémont's proclamation, and Browning had quarreled with Lincoln for revoking that. Lincoln's assault on slavery seemed to be legitimate by the very precedents in international law which Browning had called to Lincoln's attention. The Illinois Senator was disappointed that the President had not appointed him to the United States Supreme Court. He wanted the job so badly that he wrote Lincoln a somewhat embarrassed letter asking for it outright, admitting that it was "an office peculiarly adapted to my tastes." By the spring of 1862, Lincoln still had not filled the position, and many thought Browning was still in the running. Lincoln did not decide to appoint David Davis until July, and Browning had already turned to the right by that time.

Politically, Browning became increasingly disaffected from the administration. There was much doubt by 1864 that he would support Lincoln's reelection. Browning told a friend in September that he had "never . . . been able to persuade myself that he [Lincoln] was big enough for his position." No one knows how he voted in November. Browning's Civil War politics are an enigma to this day.



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 2. Orville Hickman Browning remained personally friendly to Lincoln even after their political disagreements. Gustave Koerner, a fellow Illinois Republican, always remembered Browning's "conspicuous . . . ruffled shirt and large cuffs." Their relations were pleasant enough, but Koerner would "have liked him better if he had been a little less conscious of his own superiority."

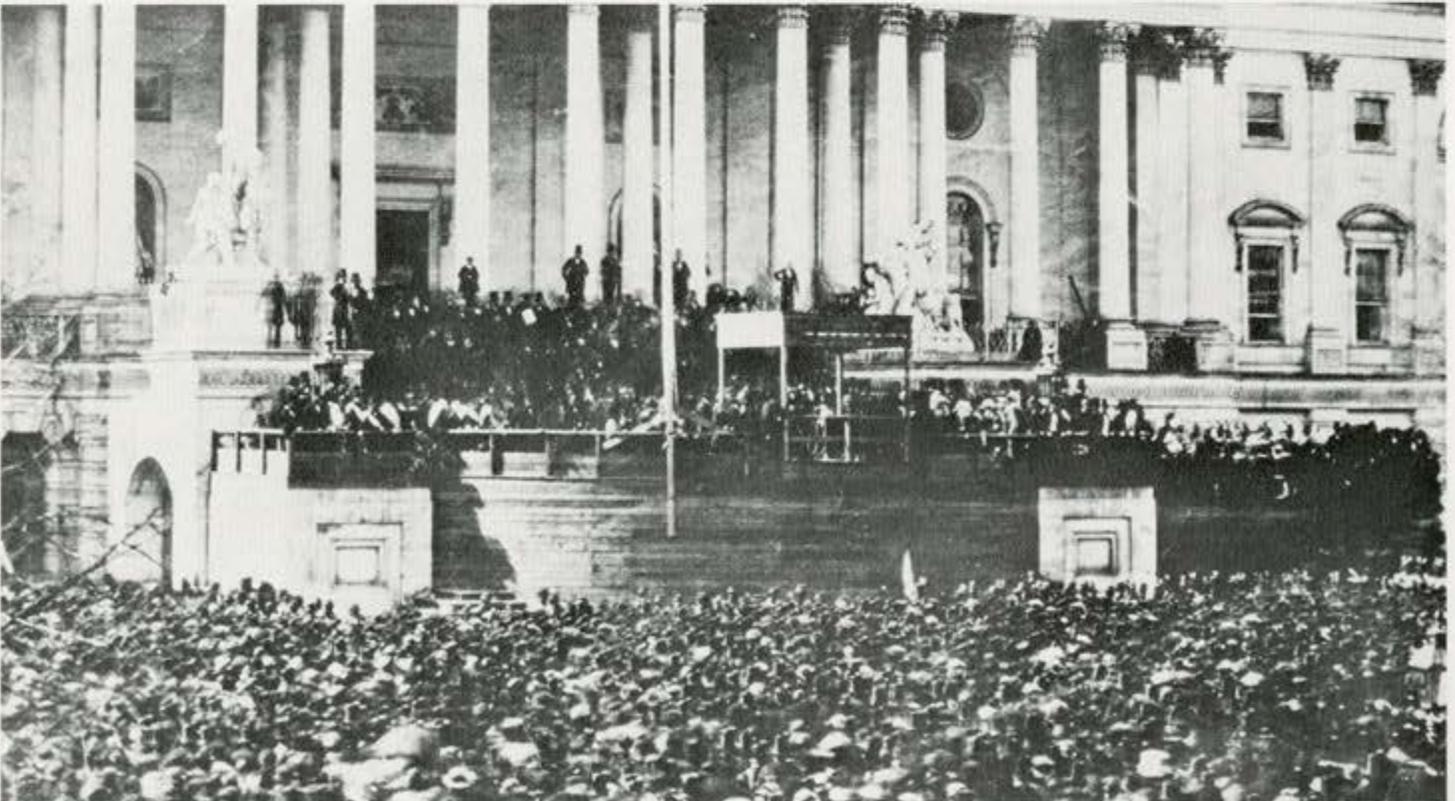


FIGURE 3. Lincoln's first inauguration.

From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

THE BERCHEM CONNECTION

When Dr. O. Gerald Trigg found the superb casting of Leonard Volk's life mask of Lincoln now in his possession (see *Lincoln Lore* Number 1701), he also discovered a crucial aspect of the history of Volk's famous mask, the role of Jules Berchem. Berchem was a Frenchman, born in Grenoble in 1855. Volk's junior by twenty-seven years, Berchem was indentured to learn bronze work six years after Volk made his original plaster mask of Lincoln. The young Frenchman came to America in 1882 and established his own foundry three years later. Volk's son sold the original mask in 1886, but, sometime after Berchem's arrival in this country, Volk lent the original mask to the French foundry-man. Dr. Trigg's mask was in all likelihood cast before 1886 and is, therefore, the oldest extant bronze copy.

It occurred to Dr. Trigg that Berchem probably also made bronze copies of Volk's castings of Lincoln's hands. By discovering the Berchem connection, he was able to conduct

an intelligent search for the hands that surely existed somewhere. Contacts with Berchem's descendants soon bore fruit, and Reverend Trigg now owns bronze castings of the hands as well. Like the mask, the right hand has an "M" on it, probably designating it as a master copy.

The massive bronze fists are important artifacts, peculiarly revealing of characteristics that do not show in Lincoln's face. The right hand is conspicuously different from the left because it is swollen and puffy from handshaking. These are the hands of a politician. These are the hands, too, of a healthy man. They show the results of a youth spent grappling with the wilderness: robust strength. They also give the lie to the sensational, but rather silly, theories that Lincoln suffered from Marfan's Syndrome. Doctors call this congenital disease "arachnodactyly," a name derived from the spidery fingers of the disease's victims. Many descriptions of these fists would be apt, but "spidery" is not among them.



*From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum*

FIGURE 4. The right hand of the Trigg bronze castings bears an inscription similar to the one on the bottom of the mask. It also bears an "M" at the base of Lincoln's thumb like the one in the ear of the mask. At Volk's request, Lincoln held a stick in his right hand, part of a broom handle which Lincoln himself cut for the casting. Volk made plaster casts of Lincoln's hands the day after the official committee came to Lincoln's home to notify him of his nomination for the Presidency. "The committee," Volk remembered, "and the vast crowd following passed in at the front door, and made their exit through the kitchen door in the rear, Mr. Lincoln giving them all a hearty shake of the hand as they passed him in the parlor."

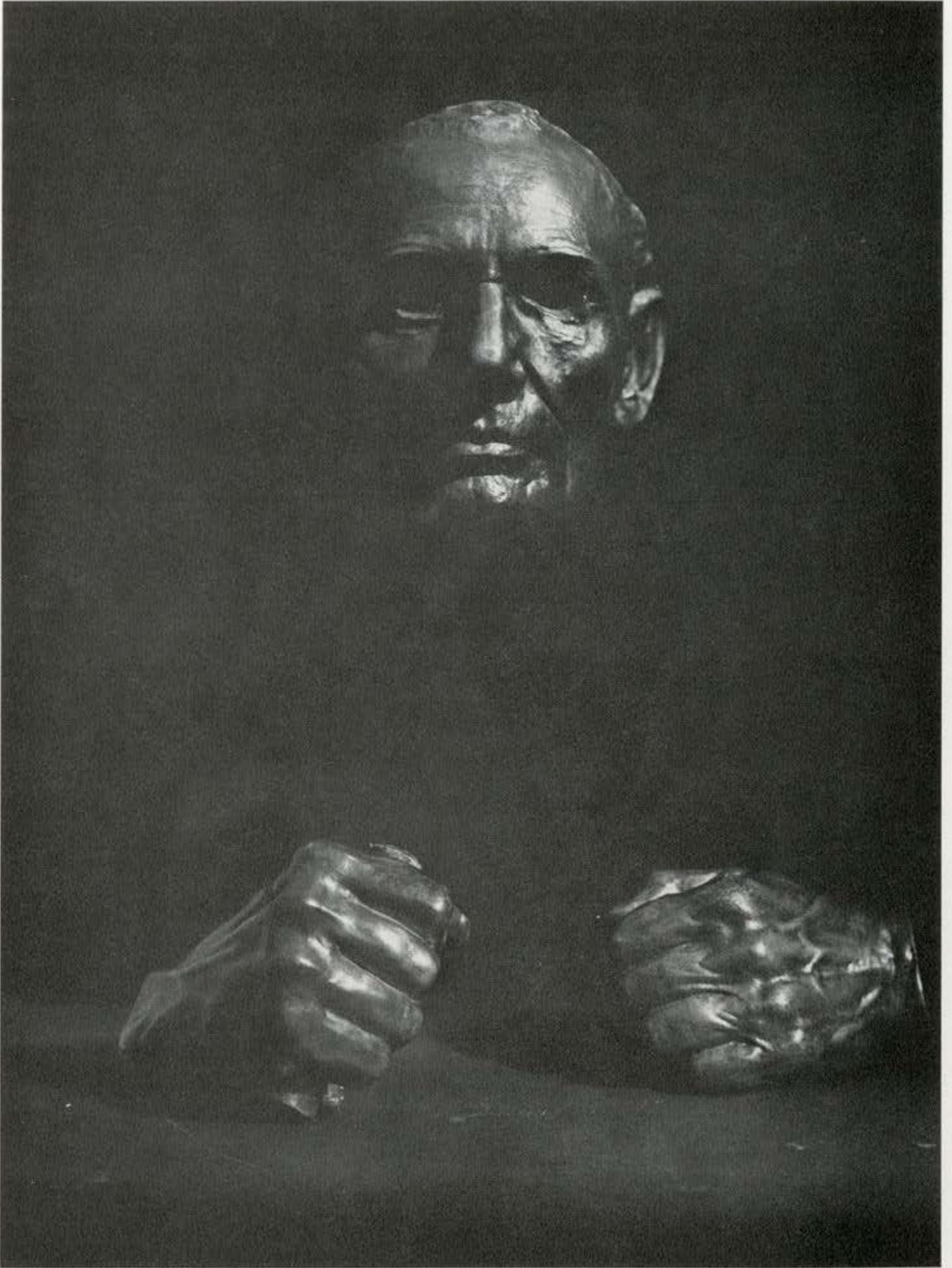


FIGURE 5. The Trigg mask and hands.

*From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum*