



# Lincoln Lore

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## LINCOLN AND JOHN LOTHROP MOTLEY

Among Boston literary men, none was a more ardent defender of Abraham Lincoln than the popular historian John Lothrop Motley. He held a diplomatic appointment from the administration, but that alone often proved inadequate to overcome in other learned Easterners a fundamental uneasiness with this uncultured Illinoisian. Charles Francis Adams comes immediately to mind as one who, though he held an important diplomatic post (London), never much cared for Abraham Lincoln. But Motley was different.

Born in a Boston suburb in 1814, John Lothrop Motley was a descendant of old New England merchant and clerical families. He had a fine education, studying Greek, Latin, French, and Spanish by age eleven. He graduated from Harvard when he was seventeen and went on to Germany for two more years of study. He returned to Massachusetts after extensive travel in Europe and in 1837 married the sister of Massachusetts writer Park Benjamin. They settled down near Boston.

In the 1840s Motley decided on diplomacy and history for his life's endeavor. His great historical work was to be a history of the struggle of the Netherlands for independence from Spain. America's infant libraries were hopelessly inadequate for such a study, and Motley worked in Europe for about three years before the publication of *The Rise of The Dutch Republic* in 1856.

Motley's subsequent work on the history of the Netherlands was aided by a traditional indirect form of patronage of the arts by the United States government: presidents often appointed literary men to government jobs that gave them a salary while they wrote or to diplomatic positions which allowed them to study in Europe. On November 2, 1860, Motley wrote home from the Hague:

I can have no doubt, writing a week before the election, of the success of the Republican

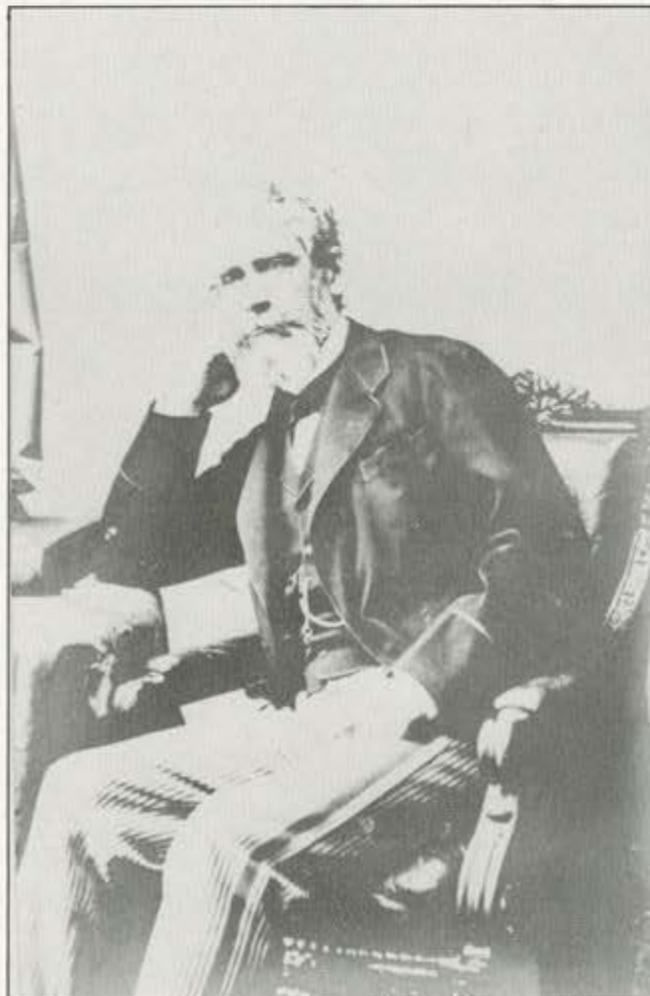
party . . . It has become necessary for me to renew my researches in the archives of the Hague, and a protracted residence there will become almost indispensable. I have thought, therefore, that the new government might be willing to give a literary man who has always been a most earnest Republican, ever since that party was organized, the post of minister at The Court of Hague.

The next summer Motley was in Washington, forced to return to the United States to lobby for his appointment. Other political considerations had dictated sending Republican journalist James Shepherd Pike to the Netherlands, so Motley enlisted

the aid of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner in gaining the appointment as minister to Austria. Secretary of State William H. Seward gave him the Vienna job on August 12, 1861, despite some opposition from persons who felt too many such appointments had gone to Massachusetts men.

American diplomatic appointments often went to political hacks in the nineteenth century, and Motley's qualifications were far above average for the day. He spoke the necessary foreign languages, was familiar with the greater world, and had a suitable education.

On his way to Austria, Motley stopped in England, where he had conversations with the British Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell and with the Queen. He wrote two long letters to the *London Times* which were quickly republished in England and America. There he laid out most of the standard constitutional arguments for the Northern cause. To these he added a few clever twists of his own, pointing out, for example, that "the restless, migratory character of the [American] population, which rarely permits all the members of one family to remain denizens of any one state, has interlaced the states with each other, and all with the Union to such an extent that a



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FIGURE 1. John Lothrop Motley.



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FIGURE 2. Senator Charles Sumner.

painless excision of a portion of the whole nation is an impossibility." Though an ardent Republican, Motley was a free trade advocate, and he predicted that an independent South would quickly erect tariff barriers. He reasoned that without the protection of the Fugitive Slave Act, slaves would flee the border states whose rivers would soon be dotted with wool and cotton mills requiring tariff protection from England. The Southern dream, he claimed, was to "establish a great Gulf empire, including Mexico, Central America, Cuba, and other islands, with unlimited cotton fields and unlimited negroes," the latter supplied by a reopened African slave trade.

In addition to the 236 official dispatches Motley sent home during his tenure in Vienna, he also wrote two private letters to President Lincoln. The first, dated July 25, 1863, cheered the recent victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg and saw in their proximity to the Fourth of July renewed reasons for national celebrations of that day in the future. "These are the days," Motley reassured Lincoln, "which try man's faith in Man. They who believe in the capacity of the People to govern themselves, will find their belief strengthened when our great ordeal shall have been passed, and they who hate the People will then be powerless to injure our Republic."

Motley wrote a more interesting letter on November 28, 1864, congratulating Lincoln on his reelection. "I do not intend any insipid compliment," he told the President, "but merely the renewed expression of a thought which I have a hundred times expressed before, that the American people felt to the core of its heart that it had found in you a most fitting and fortunate impersonation." This idea that Lincoln was the embodiment of the American character was to have numerous adherents among the New England intellectuals, but it was not without an element of condescension.

Daniel Aaron, in *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War*, detected the condescension with which even Lincoln's defenders among the literary elite regarded him. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, urged his colleagues to "accept the results of universal suffrage and not try to make appear that we can elect fine gentlemen. We shall have coarse

men, with a fair chance of worth and manly ability, but not polite men to please the English or the French." Aaron says that literary men generally failed to uncover "the complicated self behind the melancholy and genial masks of Uncle Abe." They failed to gauge him accurately.

It is true that even Motley, probably Lincoln's most fervent partisan among the men of letters, praised the President in a somewhat condescending way. "The great mass of loyal and patriotic citizens," Motley wrote Lincoln, "have seen their own simple and unsophisticated sentiments embodied in the honest, dispassionate but sagacious and resolute policy of your government." One wonders how flattered Lincoln felt to be called not only honest and sagacious but also simple and unsophisticated.

Aaron quite properly calls attention to this aspect of New England thought on Lincoln, but in doing so he also obscures the source of such thinking. In Motley's case at least it is quite clear that the depiction of Lincoln was a function not only of character analysis flawed by the limits of the intellectual's own social and educational prejudices but also of a larger theory of the social and political meaning of the Civil War.

Motley's version of that theory was colored by his residence abroad. "Living at this distance from home," he wrote, "and in a hemisphere where so many representatives of what is called public opinion are never weary in reviling with tongue and pen the noblest cause for which brave men have ever contended, I can honestly say that never for an instant since the war began have I faltered in my faith as to the triumphant result, however long it may be delayed." Distance had given Motley a particular appreciation for America:

A people, properly so called, exists no where in the world but in America, yet the democratic element is potent even in Europe where it exists only in solution and in hidden combination with other elements. In our land it is omnipotent. The People there has never known a feudal superior and is simply and calmly unconscious of the various fictions by which certain individuals and certain classes of human creatures have been set apart, as if by primordial selection, as the natural superiors of their fellow men.

Like most Republicans, Motley was apparently a firm believer in what has come to be called "the slave power conspiracy." Extending that view to the Civil War, he saw that conflict as "the eternally renewed fight between democracy and oligarchy, between liberty and privilege." From his European vantage point, Motley could see the futility of an attempt on the part of the South to establish aristocratic rule without a genuine feudal past to make the superior class seem so by primordial selection. "It is for this reason," he told Lincoln, "that I have always felt that the Southern oligarchy — a sham aristocracy based upon negro slavery — had undertaken a hopeless task, when it attempted to destroy the American democratic commonwealth. I believe that it would be as hopeful an experiment to send legions of soldiers to uproot the Rocky Mountains."



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FIGURE 3. A cynical European view of emancipation.

To see the Civil War in that way was, strangely enough, to make the destruction of slavery a secondary goal of the war. Motley considered its extinction "inevitable" from the very beginning of the conflict; it was "but an incident in the vast controversy."

As the lesser is enclosed in the greater, so is the complete emancipation of an unhappy race of men, which the American People, from a perverted view of national duty, has so long permitted to exist as beasts, a necessary condition of our own emancipation. We have long been false to ourselves in attempting to believe that liberty and slavery could continue to form essential parts of one polity.

Motley had watched the "sham aristocracy" be "cheered on in its unholy efforts by the sympathy of all the privileged classes in the world, by moral and material assistance from all those who hate and fear the People and who instinctively dread the great Republic whose shadow is thought to be projected more and more ominously every day, from beyond the sea across the antiquated systems of the older world." From this unhappy experience, he argued, America had now learned "to be indifferent to their smiles or frowns." It disgusted him to see the "wretched equivocations" descended to by antislavery Europeans attempting to "reconcile their affected aversion to slavery with their genuine and most efficient encouragement to the insurgent slaveholders." Even now, Motley said, after the Emancipation Proclamation and the 1864 Republican platform pledge to abolish slavery forever by constitutional amendment, Europeans still spoke as if the South were fighting for liberty. But "the great, voiceless, toiling masses of mankind have never faltered," he said. "We have the sympathy of the uncounted millions of mankind throughout the civilized world, who would be left without a hope if the great transatlantic commonwealth should go down in this struggle."

The European context of the American intellectual's standards in the middle of the nineteenth century helped dictate the depiction of Lincoln as simple and unsophisticated (in Motley's view) or coarse (in Emerson's). Even viewed in strictly domestic context, Lincoln was easily seen as a yeoman foil to the "sham aristocracy" of the South. There was more at work in this than personal prejudice and educated snobbery.

Thus the outpouring of sympathy and grief which followed Lincoln's assassination may well have been as sincere in the case of the intellectuals as in that of simpler folk. The Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum recently acquired John Lothrop Motley's private letter of condolence written to Mary Todd Lincoln on May 1, 1865. Surely it is the work of a man who accurately gauged the character behind Lincoln's masks of melancholy and humor.

I make no apology for venturing to intrude upon the sacredness of your grief, for I cannot help feeling that every loyal American, whether at home or abroad, has the right to mingle his tears with yours. For alas! we are all stricken to the heart by the blow which has deprived the nation of its wise, tender & benignant father.

I do not affect to offer words of consolation, for I know that comfort comes only from GOD whose will it was that this blow should descend upon you & upon us all through the hand of the vilest of assassins. Here in this isolated American household there has been grief such as is only felt for the loss of the nearest personal relatives. My wife who had never the happiness of looking on the President's face weeps & laments as if for the dearest of friends. Most truly then can we understand what the misery must be in your heart & in those of your children — I know that with time the proud consciousness of having belonged by the closest of ties to one whom not only America but the whole world reverences will bring solace to your mind but these consolations are now premature. Yet there must be something grateful in the thought that a whole great nation is unaffectedly weeping with you — sincerely bewailing its own loss as well as your own. I am afraid to trust myself to speak of him as I feel, lest even to you I should seem overenthusiastic in his praise. But as I have never hesitated whilst he was living to express on all proper occasions my sense of his character, I do not see why I should be silent now when he has become one of the blessed martyrs of history — It has always seemed to me that he was the good angel of our country. I had never the honour of much personal intercourse with him but on the very first interview I was impressed with that great characteristic



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**FIGURE 4. Mary Todd Lincoln, the shattered recipient of Motley's letter.**

of his, the noblest with which man can be endowed, a constant determination to do his duty — A single phrase in his inaugural address of this year — "firmness in the right as GOD gives us to see the right" — is as good a summary of his own characteristics from his own lips as could be made by a lengthened eulogy — And truly GOD gave him to see the right whilst on the earth, & what innumerable benefits have flowed to our nation for these our own days & for ages to come from that simple persistence in the right, that devotion to duty which marked his whole career!

I should trespass on your attention far more than I have the right to do should I express even a very slight portion of the thoughts & the emotions which the name of Abraham Lincoln excites within me. No country has ever been blessed with a more virtuous chief magistrate. Most painfully have I studied almost his every act & utterance during the momentous period in which his name has been identified with that of his country & day by day has my veneration increased for his integrity, his directness of purpose, his transparent, almost childlike sincerity & truth. So much firmness has rarely been united with such tenderness of heart. And while these moral endowments were so remarkable in him it was an additional source of pride for us all to watch how his intellect seemed daily to expand & to become more & more robust as the load upon it in such an unparalleled epoch became ever more severe. And this is the surest test of a great mind. Truly in his case statesmanship might seem an easy lesson to learn, for with him "simple truth was highest skill", and yet how much nobler a world it would be if all rulers & lawgivers had studied in the same school.

I do not hesitate to say that his power of placid deliberation in the midst of a sea of troubles, the rare sagacity which ever seemed to divine the right course amidst conflicting opinions & passions, the gift to compare the judgments of the wisest & the best informed and yet to retain his own — that this was political genius, an inspiration from above which could no more be acquired by education than could his gentleness of nature or his truth of heart.

I dare not contemplate the possible consequences to the country & to the world of his loss at such a time. Just as his whole soul was filled with thoughts of reconciliation, of amnesty, of kindness towards those who have plunged the country into all this bloodshed & misery he is murdered by the vilest of assassins & traitors. How much good might have been effected if the misguided population of the South, the masses who have been the dupes & the victims of ambitious & desperate leaders could have learned to know him as we of the loyal states have long known him, could have discovered how his pure & lofty nature had been systematically traduced!

It was for this reason that although I shuddered at the possible consequences to his personal safety I was glad of his visit to Richmond, for it seemed to me that the sooner the enemies of the country could see & hear the man who had been so maligned & who was to represent for several years to come the government of the whole American People, the better for us all.

How often in ages to come will the picture of that entrance of the President of the Union into the capital of the "confederates" be dwelt upon by all who love the great Republic & the human race!

Abraham Lincoln in the plainest of citizens' costume walking up from the landing place, holding his little boy by the hand, attended by a friend or two & shaking hands & exchanging kind words with all he met & followed by a throng of grateful blacks who almost worshipped him as their deliverer, — such was the triumphal entrance of the conqueror & the Tyrant into the vanquished capital!

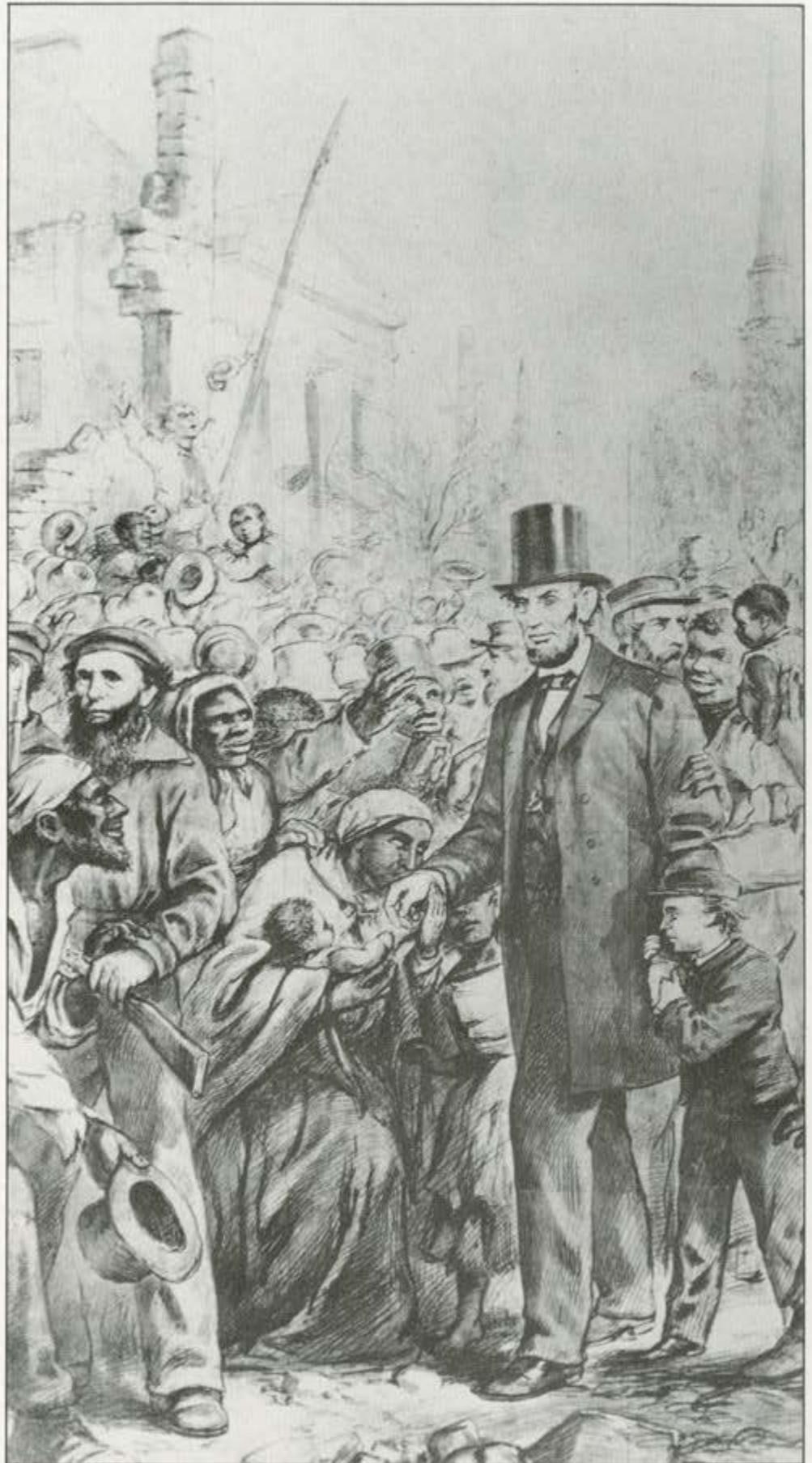
I hope that you will pardon me for saying so much at such a time. God knows that I would not willingly intrude upon your grief. As I know from what I have seen of his public career how large a part of his nature was occupied by the affections I can well understand how he must have been idolized within the sanctity of his own household.

Praying that GOD may support you & your children in this your hour of trial & of the nation's trial

I pray you to believe me Madam most sincerely & respectfully yours

J Lothrop Motley.  
Mrs. Abraham Lincoln.

P.S. Although writing from abroad I have not thought it necessary to dwell upon the horror felt throughout the civilized world at the crime which has been committed. The universal respect & admiration felt for Mr Lincoln & the distress at his death are only inferior to what is felt in America.



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FIGURE 5. This is the scene which so impressed Motley — Lincoln's entry into the capital of the conquered Confederacy. From the perspective of the Vienna court, this hardly seemed the way that a "tyrant" (for so Lincoln's opposition called him) would make a grand triumphal entrance.