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LINCOLN, 1832-1865**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649710126

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J. M. DENT & SONS LIMITED  
10-13 BEDFORD STREET LONDON W.C.2

E. P. DUTTON & CO. INC.  
286-302 FOURTH AVENUE  
NEW YORK

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ORATORY

SPEECHES AND LETTERS  
BY ABRAHAM LINCOLN · EDITED BY  
MERWIN ROE · INTRODUCTION BY  
THE RT. HON. JAMES BRYCE

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, born in 1809 in Kentucky and admitted to the Bar in 1837 after being brought up in poverty. Nominated by the Republicans for President and elected in 1860 on an anti-slavery policy, which led to the Civil War. On 14th April 1865 was assassinated.

SPEECHES AND LETTERS



ABRAHAM LINCOLN

LONDON: J. M. DENT & SONS LTD.  
NEW YORK: E. P. DUTTON & CO. INC.



## INTRODUCTION

NO man since Washington has become to Americans so familiar or so beloved a figure as Abraham Lincoln. He is to them the representative and typical American, the man who best embodies the political ideals of the nation. He is typical in the fact that he sprang from the masses of the people, that he remained through his whole career a man of the people, that his chief desire was to be in accord with the beliefs and wishes of the people, that he never failed to trust in the people and to rely on their support. Every native American knows his life and his speeches. His anecdotes and witticisms have passed into the thought and the conversation of the whole nation as those of no other statesman have done.

He belongs, however, not only to the United States, but to the whole of civilized mankind. It is no exaggeration to say that he has, within the last thirty years, grown to be a conspicuous figure in the history of the modern world. Without him, the course of events, not only in the Western hemisphere but in Europe also, would have been different, for he was called to guide at the greatest crisis of its fate a State already mighty, and now far more mighty than in his days, and the guidance he gave has affected the march of events ever since. A life and a character such as his ought to be known to and comprehended by Europeans as well as by Americans. Among Europeans, it is especially Englishmen who ought to appreciate him and understand the significance of his life, for he came of an English stock, he spoke the English tongue, his action told upon the progress of events and the shaping of opinion in all British communities everywhere more than it has done upon any other nation outside America itself.

This collection of Lincoln's speeches seeks to make him known by his words as readers of history know him by his

deeds. In popularly-governed countries the great statesman is almost of necessity an orator, though his eminence as a speaker may be no true measure either of his momentary power or of his permanent fame, for wisdom, courage and tact bear little direct relation to the gift for speech. But whether that gift be present in greater or in lesser degree, the character and ideas of a statesman are best studied through his own words. This is particularly true of Lincoln, because he was not what may be called a professional orator. There have been famous orators whose speeches we may read for the beauty of their language or for the wealth of ideas they contain, with comparatively little regard to the circumstances of time and place that led to their being delivered. Lincoln is not one of these. His speeches need to be studied in close relation to the occasions which called them forth. They are not philosophical lucubrations or brilliant displays of rhetoric. They are a part of his life. They are the expression of his convictions, and derive no small part of their weight and dignity from the fact that they deal with grave and urgent questions, and express the spirit in which he approached those questions. Few great characters stand out so clearly revealed by their words, whether spoken or written, as he does.

Accordingly Lincoln's discourses are not like those of nearly all the men whose eloquence has won them fame. When we think of such men as Pericles, Demosthenes, Æschines, Cicero, Hortensius, Burke, Sheridan, Erskine, Canning, Webster, Gladstone, Bright, Massillon, Vergniaud, Castelar, we think of exuberance of ideas or of phrases, of a command of appropriate similes or metaphors, of the gifts of invention and of exposition, of imaginative flights, or outbursts of passion fit to stir and rouse an audience to like passion. We think of the orator as gifted with a powerful or finely-modulated voice, an imposing presence, a graceful delivery. Or if—remembering that Lincoln was by profession a lawyer and practised until he became President of the United States—we think of the special gifts which

mark the forensic orator, we should expect to find a man full of ingenuity and subtlety, one dexterous in handling his case in such wise as to please and capture the judge or the jury whom he addresses, one skilled in those rhetorical devices and strokes of art which can be used, when need be, to engage the listener's feelings and distract his mind from the real merits of the issue.

Of all this kind of talent there was in Lincoln but little. He was not an artful pleader; indeed, it was said of him that he could argue well only those cases in the justice of which he personally believed, and was unable to make the worse appear the better reason. For most of the qualities which the world admires in Cicero or in Burke we should look in vain in Lincoln's speeches. They are not fine pieces of exquisite diction, fit to be declaimed as school exercises or set before students as models of composition.

What, then, are their merits? and why do they deserve to be valued and remembered? How comes it that a man of first-rate powers was deficient in qualities appertaining to his own profession which men less remarkable have possessed?

To answer this question, let us first ask what were the preparation and training Abraham Lincoln had for oratory, whether political or forensic.

Born in rude and abject poverty, he had never any education, except what he gave himself, till he was approaching manhood. Not even books wherewith to inform and train his mind were within his reach. No school, no university, no legal faculty had any part in training his powers. When he became a lawyer and a politician, the years most favourable to continuous study had already passed, and the opportunities he found for reading were very scanty. He knew but few authors in general literature, though he knew those few thoroughly. He taught himself a little mathematics, but he could read no language save his own, and can have had only the faintest acquaintance with European history or with any branch of philosophy.

The want of regular education was not made up for by