

**ABRAHAM  
LINCOLN: A PLAY**

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Abraham Lincoln: A Play by John Drinkwater & Arnold Bennett

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**JOHN DRINKWATER & ARNOLD BENNETT**

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LINCOLN: A PLAY**



# ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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*A Play*

By JOHN DRINKWATER

*With an Introduction by*

ARNOLD BENNETT

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BOSTON AND NEW YORK  
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

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1919

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*Handwritten notes, possibly a title or author's name, including the phrase "The Lord Charnwood".*

To

THE LORD CHARNWOOD

## NOTE

IN USING for purposes of drama a personality of so wide and recent a fame as that of Abraham Lincoln, I feel that one or two observations are due to my readers and critics.

First, my purpose is that not of the historian but of the dramatist. The historical presentation of my hero has been faithfully made in many volumes; notably, in England, by Lord Charnwood in a monograph that gives a masterly analysis of Lincoln's career and character and is, it seems to me, a model of what the historian's work should be. To this book I am gratefully indebted for the material of my play. But while I have, I hope, done nothing to traverse history, I have freely telescoped its events, and imposed invention upon its movement, in such ways as I needed to shape the dramatic significance of my subject. I should add that the fictitious Burnet Hook is admitted to the historical company of Lincoln's Cabinet for the purpose of embodying certain forces that were antagonistic to the President. This was a dramatic necessity, and I chose rather to invent a character for the purpose than to invest any single known personage with sinister qualities about which there might be dispute.

Secondly, my purpose is, again, that of the dramatist, not that of the political philosopher. The issue of secession was a very intricate one, upon which high and generous opinions may be in conflict, but that I may happen to have



*or lack personal sympathy with Lincoln's policy and judgment in this matter is nothing. My concern is with the profoundly dramatic interest of his character, and with the inspiring example of a man who handled war nobly and with imagination.*

*Finally, I am an Englishman, and not a citizen of the great country that gave Lincoln birth. I have, therefore, written as an Englishman, making no attempt to achieve a "local colour" of which I have no experience, or to speak in an idiom to which I have not been bred. To have done otherwise, as I am sure any American friends that this play may have the good fortune to make will allow, would have been to treat a great subject with levity.*

J. D.

*Far Oakridge,  
July-August, 1918*

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

*THIS play was originally produced by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre last year, and it had a great success in Birmingham. But if its author had not happened to be the artistic director of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre the play might never have been produced there. The rumour of the provincial success reached London, with the usual result — that London managers magnificently ignored it. I have myself spoken with a very well-known London actor-manager who admitted to me that he had refused the play.*

*When Nigel Playfair, in conjunction with myself as a sort of Chancellor of the Exchequer, started the Hammersmith Playhouse (for the presentation of the best plays that could be got) we at once began to inquire into the case of Abraham Lincoln. Nigel Playfair was absolutely determined to have the play and the Birmingham company to act it. I read the play and greatly admired it. We secured both the play and the company. The first Hammersmith performance was a tremendous success, both for the author of the play and for William J. Rea, the Irish actor who in the rôle of Lincoln was merely great. The audience cried.*

*I should have cried myself, but for my iron resolve not to stain a well-earned reputation for callousness. As I returned home that night from what are known as "the wilds of Hammersmith" (Hammersmith is a suburb of London) I said to myself: "This play is bound to succeed." The next moment I said to myself: "This play cannot possibly succeed. It has no love interest. It is a political play. Its theme is the threatened separation of the Southern States from the Northern States. Nobody ever heard of a play with such an absurd theme reaching permanent success. No author before John Drinkwater ever had the effrontery to impose such a theme on a London public."*

*My instinct was right and my reason was wrong. The play did succeed. It is still succeeding, and it will continue to succeed. Nobody can dine out in London to-day and admit without a blush that he has not seen Abraham Lincoln. Monarchs and princes have seen it. Archbishops have seen it. Statesmen without number have seen it. An ex-Lord Chancellor told me that he had journeyed out into the said wilds and was informed at the theatre that there were no seats left. He could not believe that he would have to return from the wilds unsatisfied. But so it fell out. West End managers have tried to coax the play from Hammersmith to*