

Abraham Lincoln

by
H.L. Mencken

Some time ago a publisher told me that there are four kinds of books that seldom, if ever, lose money in the United States --- first, murder stories; secondly, novels in which the heroine is forcibly overcome by the hero; thirdly, volumes on spiritualism, occultism and other claptrap, and fourthly, books on Lincoln. But despite all the vast mass of Lincolniana and the constant discussion of Old Abe in other ways, even so elemental a problem as that of his religious ideas - surely an important matter in any competent biography - is yet but half solved. Was he a Christian? Did he believe in the Divinity of Jesus? I am left in doubt. He was very polite about it, and very cautious, as befitted a politician in need of Christian votes, but how much genuine conviction was in that politeness? And if his occasional references to Jesus were thus open to question, what of his rather vague avowals of belief in a personal God and in the immortality of the soul? Herndon and some of his other early friends always maintained that he was an atheist, but the Rev. William E. Barton, one of the best of the later Lincolnologists, argues that this atheism was simply disbelief in the idiotic Methodist and Baptist dogmas of his time - that nine Christian churches out of ten, if he were live today, would admit him to their high privileges and perogatives without anything worse than a few warning coughs. As for me, I still wonder.

Lincoln became the American

Mencken on Lincoln

solar myth, the chief butt of American credulity and sentimentality. Washington, of late years, has been perceptible humanized; every school boy now knows that he used to swear a good deal, and was a sharp trader, and had a quick eye for a pretty ankle. But meanwhile the varnishers and veneers have been busily converting Abe into a plaster saint, thus making him fit for adoration in the Chautauquas and Y.M.C.A.'s. All the popular pictures of him show him in his robes of state, and wearing an expression fit for a man about to be hanged. There is, so far, as I know, not a single portrait of him showing him smiling - and yet he must have cackled a good deal, first and last: who ever heard of a storyteller who didn't? Worse, there is an obvious effort to pump all his human weaknesses out of him, and so leave him a mere moral apparition, a sort of amalgam of John Wesley and the Holy Ghost. What could be absurd? Lincoln, in point of fact, was a practical politician of long experience and high talents, and by no means cursed with inconvenient ideals. On the contrary, his career in the Illinios Legislature was that of a good organization man, and he was more than once denounced by reformers. Even his handling of the slavery question was that of a politician, not that of a fanatic. Nothing alarmed him more than the suspicion that he was an Abolitionist. Barton tells of an occasion when he actually fled town to avoid meeting the issue squarely. A genuine Abolitionist would have published the *Emancipation Proclamation* the day after the first Battle of Bull Run. But Lincoln waited until the time was more favor-

Mencken on Lincoln

able - until Lee had been hurled out of Pennsylvania, and more important still, until the political currents were safely running his way. Always he was a wary fellow, both in his dealings with measures and in his dealings with men. He knew how to keep his mouth shut.

Nevertheless, it was his eloquence that probably brought him to his great estate. Like William Jennings Bryan, he was a dark horse made suddenly formidable by fortunate rhetoric. The Douglas debate launched him, and the Cooper Union speech got him the presidency. This talent for emotional utterances, this gift for making phrases that enchanted the plain people, was an accomplishment of late growth. His early speeches were mere empty fireworks - the childish rhodomontades of the era. But in middle life he purged his style of ornament and it became almost badly simple - and it is for that simplicity that he is remembered today. The Gettysburg speech is at once the shortest and most famous oration in American history. Put beside it, all the whoopings of the Websters, Summers and Everetts seem gaudy and silly. It is eloquence brought to a pellucid and almost child-like perfection - the highest emotion reduced to one graceful and irresistible gesture. Nothing else precisely like it is to be found in the whole range of oratory. Lincoln himself never remotely approached it. It is genuinely stupendous.

But let us not forget that it is oratory, not logic; beauty, not sense. Think of the argument in it! Put it into the cold words of everyday! The doctrine is simply this: that the Union

Mencken on Lincoln

soldiers who died at Gettysburg sacrificed their lives to the cause of self-determination -- "that government of the people, by the people," should not perish from the earth. It is difficult to imagine anything more untrue. The Union soldiers in that battle actually fought against self-determination; it was the Confederates who fought for the right of their people to govern themselves. What was the practical effect of battle of Gettysburg? What else than the destruction of the old sovereignty of the States, i.e., of the people of the States? The Confederates went into battle an absolutely free people; they came out with their freedom subject to the supervision and vote of the rest of the country -- and for nearly twenty years that vote was so effective that they enjoy scarcely any freedom at all. Am I the first American to see the fundamental nonsensicality of the Gettysburg address? If so, I plead my aesthetic joy in it in amelioration of the sacrilege.