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The Books that Lincoln Read

Lincoln, "to an amazing degree, is the books he read." Such is the opinion of Talcott Williams as set forth in an article in the Review of Reviews on "Lincoln the Reader." This explains, according to Mr. Williams, how a man who wrote nothing worthy in his early life—not even while a member of congress in his forties—could attain such heights of eloquence and simplicity as did Lincoln in his Gettysburg address. The special cause of it was his late reading, the reading of such solid works as Plutarch's Lives and Homer in 1860.

Lincoln, like Roosevelt, to follow the same authority, was a rapid and embracing reader. Lacking the opportunities of school training, reading was his education. Every book was a discovery. Every author ruled over a realm of gold. And first of all came the Bible, to which and through which he was piloted by his tender, gentle step-mother, Sally Johnson.

Those were the days when it was the custom to read the Bible through in a year—three chapters every week-day and seven on Sunday did it. Besides, not only verses and chapters, but whole gospels were memorized. Lincoln astonished his later friends by quoting long passages from the Bible. "The supreme verse of the Psalms was his, the gift of simple and ordered narrative, prose unsurpassed in our annals, terrible as an army with banners, stately as the march of the skies."

Examine Lincoln's prose and the fruitage of this reading will appear. None other of our day came so near the accent and flavor of Elizabethan prose, once he had shaken himself loose from the artificial rhetoric begun by Samuel Johnson and made worse by his imitators. For this, of course, he owed a great deal to Shakespeare, for Shakespeare came early. Lincoln is our only president who read Shakespeare constantly, and read it out loud in conference with men.

The easy quickening of Lincoln's mind came from books like Aesop's Fables, Robinson Crusoe and Pilgrim's Progress. The fables meant more to him than in these days of the zoo, the circus, the newspapers, the movies and illustrated natural-history books. To a man who knew intimately so many creatures, both wild and domestic, the fables seemed natural. "If you have shared the warmth of the cowbarn of his day for half-frozen bare toes and

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aching fingers, it does not seem so passing strange that animals should talk, and the cows kneel Christmas night." Lincoln's own anecdotes, "never long but sometimes broad"—as Mr. Williams characterizes them—are lineal descendants of Aesop's fables.

More solid works, like Euclid's geometry and "Flint and Gibson on Surveying", figured in Lincoln's early studies. History he learned at first hand. He knew men who had fought in the Revolution, and he defended them in lawsuits. But of inestimable value to him was the written federal constitution. This he learned by heart, like many men of his time.

Herein the American has a great advantage over the Englishman, whose unwritten constitution—a network of practice and traditions—requires a lifetime, even two or three life-times, for the learning. The great pilot of the Civil war could have had no better reading than this for the great and unknown future before him. The reading of Blackstone's commentaries on the English "common law" also marked an epoch in his life.

In the matter of history, Weems's "Washington" and Franklin's "Autobiography" stand out most prominently in Lincoln's list. He also had, in his youth, Ramsay's "Washington" and a life of Henry Clay, "the William Jennings Bryan of Lincoln's young manhood." And the "Kentucky Preceptor" must not be overlooked. This school-book contained such extracts as Pitt's "Speech on the Slave Trade."

But it was the later reading that counted for most in the style and elevation of Lincoln's own writings. After returning from congress in 1849 he started in to make up for his lack of a liberal education. He learned to read Spanish, German and French, and he also read Gibbon's history of Rome. But it was not until 1859 that he read Plutarch's Lives for the first time, and it was during the same year and the year following that he read the wonderful epics Homer's Iliad and Odyssey.

While president he showed a great liking for humorous works. He read Artemus Ward to his cabinet, to the disgust of some of the dignified members like Seward and Stanton. He crossed the White House in his night-shirt to read a passage of Don Quixote to John Hay. It was, however, the reading of the Greek classics that changed his style and gave him the "Attic simplicity and Hellenic elevation of his closing and deathless utterances."