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In Words That Live

THE LIVING LINCOLN: The Man, His Mind, His Times, and the War He Fought, Reconstructed from His Own Writings. Edited by Paul M. Angle and Earl Schenck Miers. 673 pp. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press. \$6.95.

By DAVID DONALD

"I AM not master of language," Abraham Lincoln said modestly, but history has returned a different verdict. The words of no other American President are so often read and quoted. The never ending interest in Lincoln's utterances, even those of the most trivial sort, led to the publication in 1953 of "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln," a massive eight-volume set (an index volume appeared later), edited by Roy P. Basler and others, which contains the definitive texts of all known authentic writings of the Civil War President. At once accepted by scholars, the collected works, because of their size, detail, and costliness, have not been accessible to the general reader and student. Now two distinguished Civil War specialists have come up with the happy idea of condensing all the significant personal and political papers in the eight-volume set into one handy volume.

"The Living Lincoln," then, is an abridged edition of Lincoln's writings, chronologically arranged so as to reveal the development of the man's mind and the events of his career. Skillfully selecting the most important and eloquent passages from Lincoln's several "campaign lives," letters, speeches and public papers, Paul M. Angle and Earl S. Miers have strung them together with accurate and concise editorial comments to form a kind of Lincoln autobiography, which is both a revealing and a touching document. Not so varied as Mr. Angle's "The Lincoln Reader" nor so colorful as Mr. Miers' "Gettysburg" (prepared in collaboration with R. A. Brown), "The Living Lincoln" conforms

to the high standards of editorial excellence set by these previous books, and it has one major advantage which they lacked—an author who was one of the great nineteenth-century American prose stylists.

The intelligent pruning practiced by Mr. Angle and Mr. Miers does much to eliminate the trivia of legal practice and local politics which so cluttered the collected works and brings to proper prominence the dominant themes of Lincoln's thought. Standing at what he regarded as a crossroads of history, where the decision must be made to save or lose "the last, best hope of earth," Lincoln's own course, as these writings so eloquently reveal, was set by his reverence for the past and his respect for the rights of man.

REPEATEDLY he eulogized the leaders of the American Revolution, who set a precedent which he tried to follow. "I have never had a feeling politically," he declared, "that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." As a result he abominated the moral wrong of slavery. Simply, he summarized his position: "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." Some authors have written of Lincoln as politician, as pragmatist, indeed, as opportunist—and a case can be made for all three judgments. But "The Living Lincoln" reveals, in the President's own words, that he was also something more, a moralist closely identified with the most basic and decent tradition in American life.

It is important that such a tradition be preserved and that Lincoln's writings be carefully studied. Specialists will continue to consult the collected works, but most readers will find "The Living Lincoln" the most usable compilation of the President's writings. Mr. Angle and Mr. Miers have performed a service in preparing a book which belongs in every public and school library in these United States.

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