

'Inseparably a Part of Lincoln's Spirit'

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN. The Abraham Lincoln Association, Springfield, Ill. In 9 vols. (including a still unpublished Index volume). Roy P. Basler, Editor; Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, Assistant Editors. Illustrated. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press. \$115 the set.

By DAVID C. MEARNS

WITH the publication of "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln," we have for the first time a truly definitive edition of the writings of our foremost statesman. To be sure, we have had, for almost sixty years, successive recensions of his "complete works," sometimes presented under august and austere auspices. Yet these earlier compilations have not, in fact, approached completeness, but rather have been characterized by unaccountable omission, expurgation more sensitive than sensible, lapses into careless transcription, unsatisfactory annotation, a dismaying tendency to refine and to improve upon the original text, and the correction of consistently eccentric spelling. These errant acts of piety could only have disturbed the fastidious Lincoln. "The text," he once wrote, "should be preserved, but there should be a note stating the error."

It may seem strange that the appearance of the Lincoln canon has been so long delayed. Actually, three factors prevented its earlier production. In the first place, there was the obstruction of cost. The gathering and editing of "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln" represents an investment of more than \$100,000. This was borne by Springfield's Abraham Lincoln Association, generously and substantially aided by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation. (This figure is exclusive of the expense of publication assumed by the Rutgers University Press.) In the second place, it was necessary to mark time until the Library of Congress could release the extensive Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln. They became available in 1947. In the third place it was important to await further treatment of record groups for the period of the Civil War deposited in the National Archives. And to these considerations might be added a fourth: the need of agreement upon the requirements of scholarship.

For more than a quarter century the Abraham Lincoln Association had projected the publication of a *textus receptus*. It initiated a passive policy of procuring photostat reproductions of Lincoln holographs which came to its notice. By 1946, with many difficulties removed, the association began dedicating (and, perhaps, exhausting) its every resource to

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the purpose, and dissuading the Federal Government from undertaking a similar and competing enterprise.

A year later, with the designation of Roy Prentice Basler as editor, the preparation entered its final period. Mr. Basler is an authority outstanding in a densely populated field, and for this assignment was the unanimous choice. Circularization of all known repositories, libraries, archives and private collections was completed in 1947, and every possible follow-up correspondence and searching was concluded by 1948.

A YEAR ago, Mr. Basler announced that "Although we have made as yet no specific count of the hitherto unpublished items which will appear in 'The Collected Works,' the accretion of separate items of all kinds—letters, endorsements, speeches, memoranda, and what-not—seems to run somewhere between 40 and 50 per cent more than have appeared in the so-called 'Complete Works' edited by Nicolay and Hay or in the various collections of additional items made by Ida Tarbell in her 'Life of Abraham Lincoln,' Gilbert A. Tracy in 'Uncollected Letters of Abraham Lincoln,' Paul M. Angle in 'New Letters and Papers of Abraham Lincoln,' and Emanuel Hertz in 'Abra-

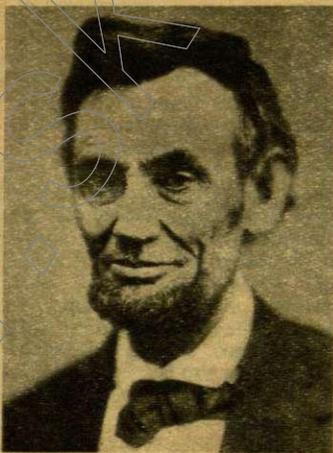


Illustration from "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln," Vol. VIII. President Lincoln, 1865.

ham Lincoln: A New Portrait." And he ventured a guess: "I do not believe more than 1 per cent of Lincoln's writings can have been missed, either in public institutions or in private collections."

This statement is the more remarkable because some 300 endorsements and letters, once mysteriously extracted from the files of the War Department, appeared in the market early in 1952; these were added to the corpus. When, within recent months, Mr. Lincoln's messages to his Secretary of State, long impounded by William H. Seward's family, passed into the possession of the Fred L. Emerson Foundation, of Auburn, N. Y., and thus surprisingly became accessible, it was necessary completely to reset one of the volumes of "The Collected

Works" which was already in type.

It should not be supposed that "The Collected Works" is in the strictest sense an "omnium gatherum." It is not. Lincoln's law cases have been omitted, along with receipts for fees, affidavits, writs, etc. These may one day be treated in a special series. Neither does the adopted scope permit the intrusion of acts of Congress, treaties, commissions, authorizations, appointments, pardons, land grants, checks, ships' papers, certificates of service, credences, discharge papers, military and draft orders, pro forma letters, routine endorsements and documents bearing no more than a validating signature.

However, all that is inseparably a part of Mr. Lincoln's spirit has been found eligible, from his surveying exercises (reproduced in colotype facsimile) to six variants of the remarks at the Gettysburg cemetery; from his copybook verses to the card of admission written for George Ashmun at half-past eight in the evening of April 14, 1865, as the President and Mrs. Lincoln were leaving the White House for Ford's Theatre; from memories of childhood and imperishable state papers to a testimonial for a podiatrist, a tribute to the efficacy of Professor Gardner's soap, and (buried among the undated items) an uninhibited essay in hog-latin.

THE scholarly apparatus is excellently conceived and admirably executed. In the case of nearly every item the source from which the text was taken has been supplied, but by some curious accident the location of the first draft of the Gettysburg Address has disappeared from the footnote. (The first draft is in the Library of Congress.) Persons mentioned in the course of a communication are identified. Obscure allusions are explained. Related documents are cited. There are bibliographical references to published studies.

An appendix to Volume VIII lists those writings for which no surviving text has been found, forgeries and spurious or dubious items attributed to Lincoln, certain routine communications issued on Lincoln's authority, and mere endorsements. This will prove valuable to the progress of Lincoln studies. Meanwhile, we can be grateful to Mr. Basler and his associates for having established the false as well as the authentic Lincoln.

To Mr. Lincoln writing was "the great invention of the world." It was "great, very great in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and of space." Those who accept his conviction will realize the meaning of "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln." Out of these volumes emerges the Indisputable, the Indispensable American. His countrymen will run to meet him.

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