

Again, Lincoln

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We love to think of the Great as flawless. We yearn in our imperfection toward Perfection—sinful, we envisage Righteousness.

As a result of this, no sooner does a great man die than we begin to whitewash him. We seek to forget all that was small and mean and unpleasant and remember the fine and brave and good. We slur over and explain away his inconsistencies and at last there begins to appear, not the real man, but the tradition of the man—remote, immense, perfect, cold and dead!

This sort of falsehood appeals to some folk. They want to dream their heroes true; they want their heroes all heroic with no feet of clay; and they are astonished, angered, hurt if some one speaks the grim, forgotten truth. They can see but one motive for such digging up of filth, for such evil speaking of the dead—and that is prurient love of evil.

Thus many of my readers were hurt by what I said of Lincoln in the July CRISIS.

I am sorry to hurt them, for some of them were tried friends of me and my cause—particularly one like the veteran, wounded at Chickamauga and a staunch defender of our rights, who thinks my words “unkind and uncalled for.”

First and foremost, there comes a question of fact. Was what I said true or false? This I shall not argue. Any good library will supply the books, and let each interested reader judge. Only they should remember that, as one of my naive critics writes, “I know that there are among his early biographers those who say something to the same effect”; but against these he marshals the later words of those who want to forget. I leave the matter there. If my facts were false, my words were wrong—but were my facts false?

Beyond this, there is another and deeper question on which most of my critics dwell. They say, What is the use of recalling evil? What good will it do? or as one phrases, “Is this proper food for your people”? I think it is.

Abraham Lincoln was perhaps the greatest figure of the nineteenth century. Certainly of the five masters,—Napoleon, Bismarck, Victoria, Browning and Lincoln, Lincoln is to me

the most human and lovable. And I love him not because he was perfect but because he was not and yet triumphed. The world is full of illegitimate children. The world is full of folk whose taste was educated in the gutter. The world is full of people born hating and despising their fellows. To these I love to say: See this man. He was one of you and yet he became Abraham Lincoln.

Some may prefer to believe (as one correspondent intimates) that he was of Mayflower ancestry through the “Lin-coins of Hingham!” Others may refuse to believe his taste in jokes and political maneuvers and list him as an original abolitionist and defender of Negroes. But personally I revere him the more because up out of his contradictions and inconsistencies he fought his way to the pinnacles of earth and his fight was within as well as without. I care more for Lincoln’s great toe than for the whole body of the perfect George Washington, of spotless ancestry, who “never told a lie” and never did anything else interesting.

No! I do not love evil as evil; I do not retail foul gossip about either the living or the dead; but I glory in that crucified humanity that can push itself up out of the mud of a miserable, dirty ancestry; who despite the clinging smirch of low tastes and shifty political methods, rose to be a great and good man and the noblest friend of the slave.

Do my colored friends really believe the picture would be fairer and finer if we forgot Lincoln’s unfortunate speech at Charleston, Illinois, in 1858? I commend that speech to the editors who have been having hysterics. Abraham Lincoln said:

I will say, then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races—that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to inter-marry with white people; and I will say in addition to this, that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I, as much as any other man, am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

This was Lincoln’s word in 1858. Five years later he declared that black slaves “are and henceforward shall be free.” And in 1864 he was writing to Hahn of Louisiana in favor of Negro suffrage.

The difficulty is that ignorant folk and inexperienced try continually to paint humanity as all good or all evil. Was Lincoln great and good? He was! Well, then, all evil alleged against him are malicious lies, even if they are true.

“Why should you wish to hold up to public gaze those defects of character you claim he possessed, knowing that he wrought so well?”

That is the very reason for telling the Truth. That is the reason for painting Cromwell's mole as it was and not as some artists conceive it ought to have been.

The scars and foibles and contradictions of the Great do not diminish but enhance the worth and meaning of their upward struggle: it was the bloody sweat that proved the human Christ divine; it was his true history and antecedents that proved Abraham Lincoln a Prince of Men.