Gone and Forgotten: Abraham Lincoln through the English Eyes of Tom Taylor and John Drinkwater

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The early life, legends, and political career of Abraham Lincoln and the trials and traumas of his presidency, including his martyrdom, have traditionally been the literary property of the three states that claim him and the nation over which he temporarily presided. Since the 1870s, millions of words generated from the minds, hearts, and testimonials of established and aspiring American literati—in books and articles authored by historians wrapped in scholarly respectability, as well as by laypersons whose interests in Illinois rail-splitters and Illinois politicians have led them to the realm of self-publishing online content. However, despite such a tsunami of domestic authorial activity, not all publications of Lincolnalia have come from a single state or a single nation.

Across an ocean and within the dust of the mother island kingdom lie the indistinct names of two English poets and playwrights—Tom Taylor and John Drinkwater—who rarely receive mention or attention from Lincoln scholars and popular biographers. Although most biographers note that Lincoln, on the night of his assassination, attended a popular play on American high life bearing the title *Our American Cousin* (1858), few bother to identify Taylor as the author of that piece. The coincidental relationship of Taylor’s play to the murder of the president, the history of its production, the details of the text, and even the shreds of the playwright’s life and career appear of little interest to Lincoln specialists. After all, why devote space to a dramatic production in which the substance has nothing at all to do with Lincoln? More significant, from a literary perspective, the few scholars and readers who might recognize the name of Tom Taylor appear totally unaware of or uninterested in his 1865 poem “Abraham Lincoln,” composed
shortly after the president’s death and apparently motivated by a reaction to the sporadic hostile treatment Lincoln received from the British public and the British press during his war-torn tenure in the White House.

Born at Bishop-Wearmouth, Durham, in 1817, the son of Thomas Taylor (1760–1843), a brewer, young Taylor received his education at Glasgow University and Trinity College, Cambridge (BA, 1840; MA, 1843). His career began with two academic positions—a fellowship at Trinity College (1842–44) and a professorship of English language and literature at the University of London (1845–47)—before he veered toward legal studies at the Inner Temple, London, and a license (1846) to practice law as a barrister. Apparently dissatisfied with that calling, Taylor embraced journalism as a lead writer on the London Morning Chronicle and Daily News and the principal art critic for the Times and the Graphic of London. Between 1850 and 1858, he divided his labors for those periodicals with appointments as assistant secretary and then secretary for the Board of Health and secretary to the Sanitary Department of the Local Government Board, retiring in October 1872 on an annual pension of £600. Finally, in March 1874, Taylor became the editor of Punch, directing the publication of that London illustrated weekly until his death on July 12, 1880. Most important, from 1849 until 1866, Taylor witnessed the productions of over seventy of his plays on various London stages. All but one of those have been long forgotten, and that single piece has been remembered only because of its connection to the death of an American president.1

Taylor’s poem “Abraham Lincoln,” initially published in Punch, represents a mosaic, of sorts: an emotional reaction to the president’s assassination, a commentary on how the British public and press treated Lincoln, a narrative of the deadly deed, and a tribute to the martyred leader, all in nineteen four-line stanzas, each composed of iambic pentameter lines rhyming ABAB. As for British attitudes toward Lincoln and the Union during the Civil War, a principal point of contention began with Lincoln’s blockade of Confederate ports, which suspended not only the export of English goods to those ports but also the import of cotton supplies from them. On a more subtle level, upper-class and affluent Victorian English nobility and non-titled gentry extended an understanding hand toward the South. In

their previous business dealings with that region, they perceived a common social and cultural ground between their own bearing and conduct and the genteel qualities of the Southern aristocracy. Further, the British government of Henry John Temple, Lord Palmerston, maintained strict and impartial neutrality toward the United States and the Confederacy, a decision that angered both sides.2

Then came the Trent affair and the removal and detention on November 8, 1861, of two Confederate diplomatic agents, James M. Mason and John Slidell, from that British mail steamer. The American captain Charles Wilkes, of the U.S.S. San Jacinto, became an instant hero in the North and received promotion. However, the English generally considered the incident an insult to their flag. The London press clamored for war or at least a formal apology from the Lincoln administration and the release of the two envoys. Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell prepared an abrasive draft to Washington, echoing the demands of the press from which Victoria’s ailing consort, Prince Albert, removed the vitriolic language. Secretary of State William Seward did not receive Lord Russell’s dispatch until December 19, 1861, the American press did not reprint it, and the northern public had time to reflect on the negative consequences of antagonizing England. Nonetheless, Lincoln feared the political effects of yielding to British pressure. In the end, he conceded that point to the more cautious members of the political class. Seward informed Lord Russell that Mason and Slidell would be released, thus effectively channeling the Trent affair into the cubicles of Anglo-American history.3

Tensions between Britain and the United States relaxed somewhat after the Trent affair, but Lincoln’s assassination aroused, at least in certain but limited British quarters, a sense of guilt and remorse. Taylor’s poem constituted one such public expression of that sentiment. “In England,” wrote Lord Charnwood, the early twentieth-century British biographer of Lincoln, “apart from more formal tokens of a late learns regard and an unfeigned regret, Punch embodied a verse of rare


felicity and manly contrition . . . for ignorant derision in past years.”
His lordship never mentioned, however, the name of the poet—which
might allude to the piece having appeared in Punch without attribu-
tion to Taylor.  

At any rate, Taylor begins his piece with an address—a lengthy
question, if you will—wrapped tightly within a decided note of chas-
tisement to an unnamed journalist-illustrator:

[1] You lay a wreath on murder’d Lincoln’s bier,
  You, who with mocking pencil wont to trace,
  Broad for the self-complacent British sneer,
  His length of shambling limb, his furrow’d face,

[2] His gaunt, gnarl’d hands, his unkept, bristling hair,
  His garb uncouth, his bearing ill at ease,
His lack of all we prize as debonair,
  Of power or will to shine, of art to please;

[3] You, whose smart pen back’d up the pencil’s laugh,
  Judging each step as though the way were plain;
Reckless, so it could point its paragraph,
  Of chief’s perplexity, or people’s pain,—

[4] Besides this corpse that bears for winding-sheet
   The Stars and Stripes he live’d to rear anew
Between the mourners at his head and feet,
  Say, scurrile jester, is there room for you? (1–16)  

With that necessity for heaping damnation on Lincoln’s critics out of
the way, Taylor praises the work ethic of the fallen president but is
certainly not yet ready to bury him:

[8] He went about his work—such work as few
  Ever had laid on head and heart and hand,—
As one who knows, where there’s a task to do,
  Man’s honest will must Heaven’s good grace command;
(29–32)

Following general consideration of his subject’s rustic boyhood and
equally provincial upbringing, the poet dispenses quickly with his

Clarence Stedman (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1896), 450–52; all references in my text
to Taylor’s poem are from this edition. A more recent variation of that volume—The
New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Oxford University
Press, 2008)—does not include Taylor’s poem.
demise—“as he came on light from darkling days, / And seem’d to touch the goal from where he stood” (55–56),

[15] A felon hand between the goal and him,  
    Reach’d from behind his back, a trigger prest,  
    And those perplex’d and patient eyes were dim,  
    Those gaunt, long labored limbs were laid to rest. (57–60)

Taylor ends his poem with a terse comparison of Lincoln’s assassination to the murder of the Biblical Cain—“a foul crime” that “stands darkly out” (72),

[19] Vile hand, that brandest murder on a strife,  
    Whate’er its grounds, stoutly and nobly striven,  
    And with the martyr’s crown crownest a life  
    With much to praise, little to be forgiven. (73–76)

Certainly, Taylor’s “Abraham Lincoln” is a worthwhile rhetorical effort to honor the life and work of the fallen American president, to represent the British nation in mourning Lincoln’s tragic and premature death, and to establish the president’s memory in the minds and hearts of British citizens. Unfortunately, it also represents an example of a minor versifier attempting, from a distance created by the times in which he lived and wrote, to eulogize a subject about which he knew very little. The poetic result failed to achieve significant literary merit, producing instead a series of clichéd imagery that extended no farther than beyond what Taylor had presumably read or heard about Lincoln from oral and written sources available to him. Thus Taylor’s stereotypical language and uncomfortable rhythm exposed his readers to nothing that would depict Lincoln’s complex personality. Instead, he relied on such phrases as “This rail-splitter a true-born king of men” (20), “his peasant boyhood” (39), and

[12] The ambush’d Indian, and the prowling bear,—  
    Such were the deeds that help’d his youth to train:  
    Rough culture, but such trees large fruit may bear,  
    If but their stocks be of right girth and grain. (45–48)

Essentially, then, Taylor’s “Abraham Lincoln” will continue to linger in obscurity as a poetic effort that failed to reach the level of its subject’s historical significance.

Turning the critical eye on John Drinkwater’s 1918 play, also bearing the unimaginative title Abraham Lincoln, one quickly discovers that Lincoln biographers and historians, past and present, have similarly not disturbed the literary, dramatic, and theatrical hibernation of the
piece. Drinkwater created his play in the midst of a catastrophic world war and concerned himself with the traumas confronting, almost six decades earlier, a nation on the verge of an equally horrendous civil rebellion. Published and first performed more than a half-century following the composition of Taylor’s poem, Drinkwater’s piece—a combination of poetry and prose in the manner of the ancient Greeks—enjoyed mild initial success on stages in the British provinces, but it stumbled awkwardly in the theaters of London and the urban United States. The English novelist Arnold Bennett, a financial supporter of Drinkwater’s play, likened the reactions of New York audiences to their having been exposed to a hypothetical dramatic production relating to the Crimean War.6

Drinkwater holds a considerably higher literary reputation than Taylor. Born at Leytonstone, Essex, to a schoolmaster and his wife, educated at Oxford High School, and later awarded honorary doctorates from the University of Birmingham and the University of Athens, Drinkwater spent a combined twelve years as an insurance clerk in the employ of the Northern Assurance Company and various like firms at Manchester and Birmingham. Despite such nonartistic labors, he maintained his interest, practice, and prolificacy in poetry and the dramatic stage before abandoning his clerkships and devoting himself to full-time writing. In addition to having been a cofounder, in 1907, of the Sir Barry Vincent Jackson Pilgrim Players (later the Birmingham Repertory Theatre),7 he published, from 1908 to 1936, thirteen volumes of his own poems, sixteen of his original plays, eight collections of poems and plays by other hands, eighteen volumes of critical and biographical prose, and stories and plays for children. Drinkwater died at London on March 25, 1937.8

Before reading Drinkwater’s Abraham Lincoln, both students and scholars must understand two important qualities of the piece, both of which separate it from the more recognizable form and structure of

6. John Drinkwater, introduction to Abraham Lincoln: A Play (1918; rpt., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), xiii. All references in my text to Drinkwater’s Abraham Lincoln are to the 1940 edition.
7. Jackson received knighthood in 1925 for his services to British theater, the maintenance of various repertory theaters, the adaptation of plays (particularly from the continent), and the promotion of theater in general as a workshop for artistic experiment. See The Oxford Companion to the Theatre, 3rd ed., ed. Phyllis Hartnoll (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 501.
traditional dramatic production. First, Drinkwater chose to present his *Abraham Lincoln* not as a unified dramatic, biographical portrayal of his subject but rather as a series of individual episodes. In other words, each of the six scenes emerges as separate from the one preceding and the one succeeding it. Contemporary audiences could easily have viewed the work as a series of one-act plays, bound to one another only by the generic title. By way of such a scheme, Drinkwater stood free to select, from Lincoln’s life and labor, only those episodes that would best fit his intention to mold his notion of hero and savior. As for unity, he could achieve that through his central character—Abraham Lincoln.

Second, the poet-playwright chose not to restrict his substance firmly to historical fact. His principal concern was to craft a dramatic work intended for an English audience. Drinkwater held a vision of his subject’s greatness; he sought an epic hero for a work dominated by epic imagination. Thus emerged a drama in the form of chronicle play, which first attained popularity among late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century audiences, complete with eight poetic chronicles. Seven of these episodes comprise lengthy lyrical choruses in eight-line verses, each with two chroniclers, or narrators, to begin and end the play, to divide one scene from another, and to transport the substance of the hero’s dramatic thoughts and actions into realms that initially appear to approach levels of unreality. For the eighth chronicle, Drinkwater injected into the middle of scene 5 a single eight-line verse, recited by only one of the two chroniclers.

For example, toward the end of scene 2, in the midst of a cabinet meeting, Lincoln receives messages from Major Robert Anderson and General Winfield Scott, requesting supplies, provisions, and twenty-five thousand men for the defense of Fort Sumter, to which William Seward interjects,

“We have n’t ten thousand ready.” Lincoln replies, “It remains a question of sending provisions. I charge you, all of you, to weigh this thing with all your understanding. To temporise now, cannot, in my opinion, avert war. To speak plainly to the world in standing by our resolution to hold Fort Sumter with all our means, and in a plain declaration that the Union must be preserved, will leave us with a clean clause, simply and loyally supported. I tremble at

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9. Neither Robert Anderson nor Winfield Scott (actual persons) appear as characters in the play. They are only mentioned by other characters, and even then Drinkwater provides only their military ranks and surnames.
the thought of war. But we have in our hands a sacred trust. It is threatened. We have had no thought of aggression. We have been the aggressed. Persuasion has failed, and I perceive it to have been our duty to resist. To withhold supplies from Anderson would be to deny that duty. Gentlemen, the matter is up to you.” (46–47)

The president requests a vote, in which he and two other members elect to provision Fort Sumter. Five cabinet officers vote for immediate withdrawal, to which Lincoln responds, “Gentlemen, I may have to take upon myself the responsibility of over-riding your vote. It will be for me to satisfy Congress and public opinion. Should I receive any resignations?” (47). He receives only silence, dismisses the Cabinet, and shortly thereafter the curtain falls. Enter the two Chroniclers, who together begin their recitation:

[1] You who have gone gathering
   Cornflowers and meadowsweet,
   Heard the hazels glancing down
   On September eves,
   Seen the homeward rooks\(^{10}\) on wing
   Over fields of golden wheat,
   And the silver caps that crown
   Water-lily leaves;

[2] You who know the tenderness
   Of old men at eve-tide,
   Coming from the hedgerows,
   Coming from the plough,
   And the wandering caress
   Of winds upon the woodside,
   When the crying yaffle\(^{11}\) goes
   Underneath the bow; (49–50)

The beginning verses come forth as competent poetic renderings of a peaceful, almost idyllic scene contrasted to and seemingly totally disconnected from the immediately concluded tense cabinet meeting in Washington. Nevertheless, they leave the reader wanting a sign of transition between the close of scene 2 and the opening of scene 3, which is set two years later. Instead, Drinkwater offers his audience

10. Rooks: black raucous-voiced European and Asiatic birds that nestle in colonies, can be found in the northern parts of Britain, and are commonly referred to as “crows.” The term has also been applied to human beings within an abusive or disparaging context.
11. Yaffle: the green woodpecker.
three more verses of the same, complete with “the flowing / Of sap upon the May-time”; “Of harvest and hay-time”; “courtesies / With your fellows at the gate”; and “gospels bright / Shining on your day” (50–51). Not until the final verse, when the Chroniclers transform their pastoral harmonies into a benediction from the altar of their rural sanctuary (deriving the substance of their holy theme from Matthew 5:7 and Acts 8:1–12), do they open their poetic door to a glimpse of what will follow:

[6] Blessed are the merciful. . . .12
   Does not every threshold seek
   Meadows and the flight of birds
   And compassion still?
   Blessed are the merciful. . . .
   Are we pilgrims yet to speak
   Out of Olivet the words
   Of knowledge and good-will?13 (51)

to which the First Chronicler, poetically paraphrasing the “Benediction” from Jude 24–25,14 concludes,

   Two years of darkness, and this man but grows
   Greater in resolution, more constant in compassion.
   He goes
   The way of dominion in pitiful, high-hearted passion. (52)

Clearly, Drinkwater applied his poetic talents to elevate the historical importance of his epic hero, even raising him to biblical stature as a political and spiritual savior of his nation.

12. In the King James Version (KJV), Matthew 5:7 reads: “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.”

13. Olivet / the Mount of Olives: the two-and-a-half-mile mountain range that towers over the eastern side of Jerusalem. Acts 1:8–12: “But ye [the apostles] shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. / And when he [Jesus Christ] had spoken these things, while they [the apostles] beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. / And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; / Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. / Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a Sabbath day’s journey.” (KJV)

14. “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy; / To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever, Amen.” (KJV)
Concerning Lincoln as spiritual savior, critical commentators on Drinkwater’s *Abraham Lincoln* would have difficulty attempting to discover, and then explicate, significant religious elements within the play itself. In his own commentary, Drinkwater emphasized his primary role as dramatist, disavowing all claims as historian or political philosopher. He sought for the “purposes of drama a person of wide and recent a fame as Abraham Lincoln” and labored to “shape the dramatic significance of [his] subject.” Further, he focused on “the profoundly dramatic interest” of Lincoln’s character and “the inspiring example of a man who handled war nobly and with imagination” (x–xi).

Drinkwater’s epic hero certainly recognized his place and that of all human beings on the hierarchical chain of existence, as proven by his last words in the play (a combination of Lincoln’s First Inaugural and the Gettysburg Address):

> It is the proudest hope of my life that I may be of some service in this work [reconciliation]. Whatever it may be, it can be but little in return for all the kindness and forbearance that I have received. With malice toward none, with charity for all, it is for us to resolve that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth. (110)15

Yet questions remain: Can Lincoln’s assassination on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, signify the fall and rise of Drinkwater’s “hero”? Did Drinkwater even consider a connection between the religious celebration and the death of Lincoln? Can political assassination be equated with crucifixion? One certainly might discuss reasonable responses to those questions, but the answers will not be found in Drinkwater’s text.

Scene 3 takes place nearly two years later, in a small reception room in the White House. The audience awaits the signs of resolution, compassion, and dominion, and Drinkwater does not leave them wanting. In a presidential audience with Mrs. Goliath Blow and a Mrs. Otherly, the latter asks Lincoln, “Isn’t it possible for you to stop this war? In the name of a suffering country, I ask you that.” Lincoln responds, “It is a perfectly right question, Ma’am, I have but one thought always—how can this thing be stopped? But we must insure the integrity of the Union. In two years war has become an hourly bitterness to me. I believe I suffer no less than any man. But it must be endured. The

15. My emphasis.
cause was a right one two years ago. It is unchanged” (58). Three words underscore Lincoln’s role as the hero and savior of the nation—bitterness, suffer, and endured. They place Lincoln on a biblical pedestal of Drinkwater’s own triune construction:

(1) “Therefore,” declared Job (7:11), “I will not refrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.” (2) “But I say unto you,” addressed Jesus Christ to his disciples (Matthew 17:12) as he came down from the mountain, “that Elias has come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him what soever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.” (3) “What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known,” exclaimed Paul (Romans 9:22), “endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath filled to destruction” (all quotations from KJV).

Drinkwater, as though himself reflecting on the bellicosity of his own historical present, immediately assigns to Abraham Lincoln the role of serious thinker speculating on the grave matter of war and thus the necessity of delivering a strong message on that subject: “I too believe war to be wrong. It is the weakness and the jealousy and the folly of men that make a thing so wrong possible. But we are all weak and jealous and foolish. That’s how the world is, and we cannot outstrip the world. . . . I believe that the world must come to wisdom slowly. It is for us who hate aggression to persuade men honestly and earnestly against it, and hope that, little by little, they will hear us. But in the mean time there will come moments when the aggressors will force the instinct to resistance to act. Then we must act earnestly, praying always in our courage that never again will this thing happen” (59–60).

With those words, Drinkwater allows his title character to transcend his historical moment. This “thing” would happen again, and Drinkwater could have parlayed history and contemporary events to support his point. The “thing so wrong [made] possible” brought about the deaths of approximately 360,000 Union and 258,000 Confederate soldiers—a total of 618,000 American lives lost. Writing his play during 1917–18, the playwright certainly gave considerable thought to the conflict in which his own nation had been engaged for the past four years. “I am an Englishman,” claimed Drinkwater in his introductory notes to the play, “and not a citizen of the great country that gave Lincoln birth. I have, therefore, written as an Englishman, making no attempt to achieve a ‘local colour’ of which I have no experience” (xi). As an Englishman, therefore, he must have known
the stark details of war that affected the spirit of his own nation and perhaps had taken literary license for an imaginative glimpse of the United States as well: Approximately 980,000 soldiers representing the various nations and possessions of the British Empire would lose their lives in the “war to end all wars,” while in just twenty months of combat, the American Expeditionary Force would suffer no less than 48,900 battle deaths and 230,100 wounded. The question thus arises: Did the ongoing twentieth-century world war affect Drinkwater as he wrote his play about a nineteenth-century American president?

A careful reading of the text reveals Drinkwater had no room for such vital statistics within his dramatic character study of a heroic American president. He had no intention of shocking his audience with the horror, cost, and waste of it all. Instead, he chose to cast the immediate consequences of civil war in a positive light, filtering his beams of hope and healing through the images generated from within his prose and poetry. In the closing moments of the final skirmishes, with a war-weary Lincoln asleep on two chairs while awaiting news of General Lee’s surrender, the First Chronicler steps on the stage to offer a terse summary of the past four years:

Under the stars an end is made,  
And on the field the Southern blade  
Lies broken,  
And, where strife was, shall union be,  
And where was bondage, liberty.  
The word is spoken. . . .  
Night passes. (98)

The Chronicler never completes his thoughts. Night passes into what? What will the morning bring? Will the light of a new day merely limit its focus on immediate reconstruction, or will it extend across the generations to reveal an even greater degree of bondage, of slavery replaced by segregation? Will the new day uncover an even greater extent of carnage brought on by an even wider conflict known as world war? Those are only two reflections from Drinkwater’s play to which thoughtful readers and playgoers might have reacted. Nonetheless, those readers and playgoers could only have speculated on the playwright’s intentions beyond his forthright declaration of being a dramatist, not a political philosopher.

The play comes to an end, inevitably, with Lincoln’s assassination, an event that Drinkwater crowded into three paragraphs of stage directions, ending the piece proper with Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton’s classic statement: “Now he belongs to the ages” (111). Then
follows the First Chronicler again, pronouncing the poetic summary lesson of the entire tale:

Events go by. And upon circumstance
Disaster strikes with the blind sweep of chance,
And this our mimic action was a theme,
Kinsmen, as life is, clouded as a dream. (112)

One might recall that on the publication of Alexander Pope’s edition of Homer’s *Iliad*, Richard Bentley, master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and the most significant classical scholar of his age, sarcastically argued that though “it is a pretty poem, Mr. Pope, you must not call it Homer.”16 Without the sarcasm or the ridicule one might accurately label John Drinkwater’s *Abraham Lincoln* not as a “pretty” play but as a competent combination of dramatic prose and poetry that provides, through language and form, an interesting variation on a significant American historical figure at a significant moment in the history of his nation. Further, the play offers a political moral for those wishing to extend the playwright’s message beyond the boundary of his text. But we must not call it biography.

Although both Tom Taylor’s “Abraham Lincoln” the poem and John Drinkwater’s *Abraham Lincoln* the play honestly rank, at best, as minor works of poetry and drama, both pieces deserve occasional airings from their closets of obscurity. If nothing else, discussion and analysis of each piece contributes to understanding the imaginative reactions of British literati to the life and times of Abraham Lincoln. As a play, Drinkwater’s effort can always undergo an occasional revival for a performance or two, given the proper political occasion. Unfortunately, finding the right moment or place to air Taylor’s poetic effort might strain the imagination. Nonetheless, each work raises a series of interesting questions: Did such British poets and playwrights (and even writers of prose fiction) as Taylor and Drinkwater really understand and appreciate Lincoln as a mid-nineteenth-century American person and politician? Were they merely heaping more of the same words and more of the same pages on the extant fires of romanticism surrounding the image of an American martyr? Were two British writers striving hard, with certain of their counterparts in the United States, to express their own sorrow—as well as the collective sorrow of their nation—at the tragedy of the demise of an American hero? There might well exist an effective, efficient, and obvious answer to

all of those questions, although it lies, prominently, where we do not
like to see it—blaring forth at the very outset of Lord Byron’s satiric
epic Don Juan:

I want a hero: an uncommon want
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying\(^\text{17}\) the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one: \((1:1:1–4)\)^{18}

However, Byron and his love-seeking and adventuresome Don Juan,
although expressing a truth, cannot bear the sole burden for the con-
clusion to this discussion. That poet sought not a legitimate hero but
merely a thin persona for his satire, scorn, and ridicule. Although both
Taylor and Drinkwater did indeed seek to wrap the character and
conduct of Lincoln in the garb of hero, their model for the American
president would appear, more likely, to have been found in Thomas
Carlyle’s definition of “Great Men,” in his lectures On Heroes, Hero-
Worship, and the Heroic in History:

Great men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We can-
not look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining
something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which is good
and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has
enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled
lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the light
of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original
insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness;—in whose radiance
all souls feel that it is well with them.\(^\text{19}\)

No matter the literary shortcomings of Taylor’s poem and Drinkwa-
ter’s play, both writers managed to convey to their readers and audi-
ences not only a sense of Lincoln’s greatness but also the reasons why
his name and his actions would endure as lasting and ever-popular
aspects of the ongoing history of the American nation. For Taylor,

\[13\]
So he grew up, a destined work to do,
And liv’d to do it; four long-suffering years’
Ill fate, ill feeling, ill-report liv’d through,
And then he heard the hisses change to cheers,

\(^{17}\) Cloying: filling, weighing down.
\(^{18}\) George Gordon Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, introd. Louis Kronenberger (New York:
[14] The taunts to tribute, the abuse to praise,
And took both with the same unwavering mood,—
Till, as he came on light from darkling days,
And seemed to touch the goal from where he stood. (49–56)

Drinkwater, initially allowed his Lincoln to utter the words that would define his own greatness, albeit couched in the speaker’s ever-present sense of humility:

As events have come before me, I have seen them always with one faith. We have preserved the American Union, and we have abolished a great wrong. The task of reconciliation, of setting order where there is now confusion, of bringing about a settlement at once just and merciful, and of directing the life of a reunited country into prosperous channels of good-will and generosity, will demand all our wisdom, all our loyalty. It is the proudest hope of my life that I may be of some service in this work. (110)

There is a similarity of sense between the final line of Taylor’s two verses and Lincoln’s monologue. At any rate, Drinkwater the poet, following Lincoln’s death, gave the final words of his play—the last comment on Lincoln’s character—to the choral chant of his Chroniclers:

[1] Events go by. And upon circumstance
Disaster strikes with the blind sweep of chance,
And this our mimic action was a theme,
Kinsmen, as life is, clouded as a dream.

[2] But, as we spoke, presiding everywhere
Upon event was one man’s character
And that endures; it is the token sent
Always to man for man’s own government. (112)

Although both Taylor’s poem and Drinkwater’s play appear terribly flat—meaning they lack sufficient substance, originality, emotion, and strong dramatic appeal—they nonetheless manage to reflect various aspects of Carlyle’s notion of the ideal hero: the “great man,” from whom the world has gained “something.” That “something” about Lincoln assumes various combinations of heroism, endurance, trust, decisiveness, humanity, and humility—qualities that indeed promote comfort and confidence. And so this discussion comes round to its beginning. The image of Abraham Lincoln, far above any one of his fifteen predecessors and twenty-eight successors, invites all persons of rank, station, and intellect to stand in awe of him, to honor him, and to write books about him. Within the confines of a single sentence, “he belongs to the ages.”