

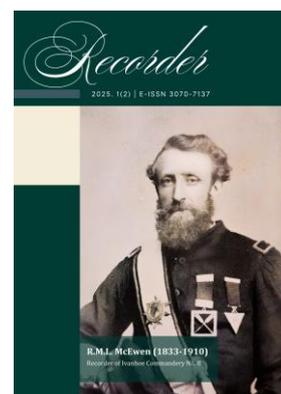
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Benjamin Brown French ‘A Letter and Short Poem, on the Death of Abraham Lincoln’

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Abstract. Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870) was a distinguished American public official and a leading figure in nineteenth-century Freemasonry. A politician, telegraph pioneer, Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, and Public Commissioner of Buildings in Washington, D.C., he also served as Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA from 1859 to 1865. French personally knew President Abraham Lincoln and valued their friendship deeply. In the year of his death, a small brochure was published containing his letter and poem reflecting on Lincoln’s assassination. This publication—now a historical rarity—is presented here for the reader’s consideration.

Keywords: Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870), Abraham Lincoln, Knights Templar, Grand Encampment, Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA, 19th-century Freemasonry, historical brochure, letter and poem.

Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870) was a politician, telegraph pioneer, Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, Public Commissioner of Buildings in Washington, D.C., and a very prominent Mason. At the height of his career, he served as Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA from 1859 to 1865 (Fig. 1). He personally knew President Abraham Lincoln and was proud of their friendship.

In 1870, the year of Benjamin Brown French’s death, a small brochure (Fig. 2) was published containing a letter and a poem by French related to the death of Abraham Lincoln. It is this brochure that we would like to present to the reader.



Fig. 1. Benjamin Brown French. 1865.

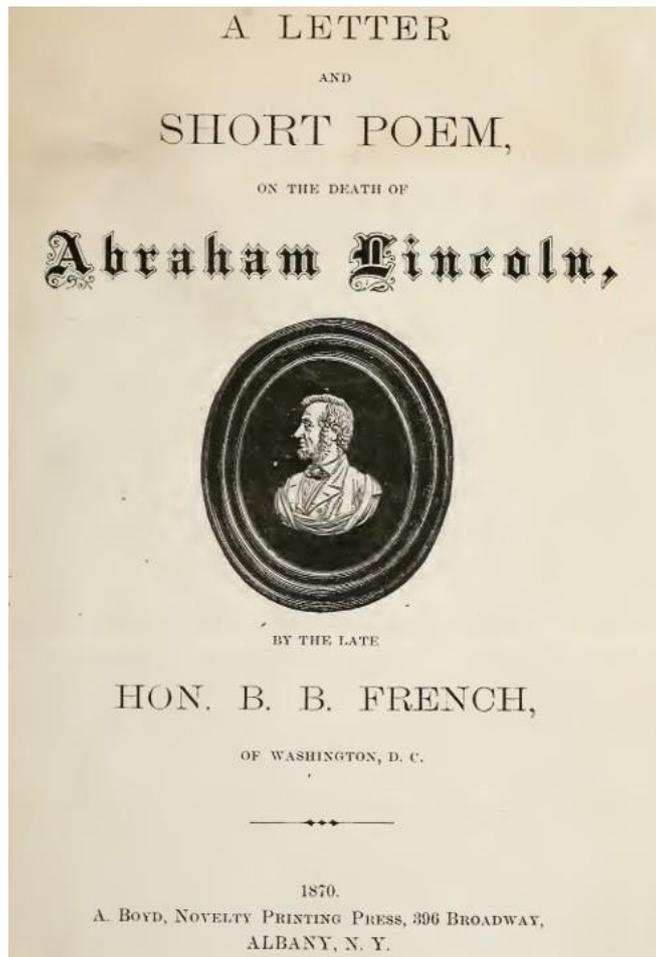


Fig. 2. Brochure cover.

Washington, October 27th, 1869.

Andrew Boyd, Esq.,
Albany, N. Y.,

My Dear Sir: —

Your elegantly printed copy of the poem from the London Punch of May 6, 1865, reached me to-day. The poem I had, but your elegant and feeling preface I had not, and most sincerely do I thank you for it. I believe there are but few men who cherish the memory of Abraham Lincoln as I do, but, judging from the remarks in your preface to that poem, I am led to believe that you are one of that few.

On Sunday, April 30th, 1865, sitting in an arbor in my garden, with my journal before me, I wrote on a blank leaf in it, with a pencil, the following:

“A jewel from our crown—
A pearl from out the Nation’s diadem—
A life torn out by traitorous, murderous hands—
Crushed—trampled down!

A people’s hearts all riven
With grief—with horror—that their Chief is dead;
A Nation plunged into the abyss of woe!
A Martyr gone to Heaven.

Great God! why was it done?
Thou knowest why—Thou did'st the deed permit:
And while we weep, we bow to Thy decree;
And kneel before Thy throne—

Humbly we kneel, and pray—
Who hold'st the power in our great Martyr's stead,
May wield it to Thy glory and our good
For many a happy day.

May ages still pass on,
And in one Union bind the land we love,
May blessings mark the years with happiness,
And joy the Union crown.”

I do not copy this as worthy of any particular note, but only to show you how my mind ran on the memory of that good man.

On the 19th of February last, I delivered a lecture before the faculty and students of Pennsylvania College, at Gettysburg, by invitation. That lecture was opened by the following language:

“I do not, I cannot, forget how I came here on the 19th of November, 1863, and lent my feeble aid to the consecration of the noble cemetery, which now holds the thrice honored dead, who, on those memorable days of July, died that their country might live. How I stood at the side of our great and good President, and heard the silvery voice of Everett, as he bound all his hearers, as it were, in the silken cords of his surpassing eloquence; and how I listened, as many of you did, to that brief, terse, touching address of the President, in which he so truly said: “We cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.”

“When I call to mind these events—when I remember how that President fell a martyr in the very arms of that victory which gave this nation ‘a new birth of freedom’ and an assurance ‘that the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth,’—my memory cannot but go back, and cause my mind to wonder how a severely stricken people lived through that awful tragedy, that bathed the Executive Mansion in blood, and caused a wail of woe throughout the republic.”

You see, that in divulging to me the fact that you loved Abraham Lincoln in life and honor his memory, you have waked up a person who may bore you more than you bargained for!

You will, however, find me always ready to respond whenever you desire anything from me that I can furnish, relative to that great and good man.

Truly and Fraternaly Yours,

B. B. FRENCH

Resurse: French B.B. (1870). A Letter and Short Poem, on the Deeach of Abraham Lincoln. Albany, N.Y.: A. Boyd, Novelty Printing Press.