

History & Archaeology

Fiction as History

On an Earlier President—By OWEN DUDLEY EDWARDS



MR GORE VIDAL'S *Lincoln*,¹ is one of the literary events of our time. It is brilliant, moving, thoughtful. It has meditations of dignity and value on the human condition maintained with scientific relevance to its business of telling a story, and it should inspire such meditation on the part of others. It raises important questions about

historical matters, and its quality invites any disagreement about its arguments and suggestions to prove itself likewise constructive.

The title is *Lincoln*, and the subtitle is "a Novel." I am a little uncertain about that subtitle. Mr Vidal is concerned to show how Lincoln appeared to a few persons during the time from his arrival at Washington, D.C., just before his inauguration, down to his assassination in 1865 four years later; there is a brief epilogue set in 1867 in Paris. The action is never shown through Lincoln's eyes, save at the moment of his famous dream about his assassination shortly before that event. Unlike his earlier historical works, *Burr* (1973) and *1876* (1976), in which Mr Vidal used the vehicle of an imaginary narrator describing the conduct of real people, Mr Vidal's *Lincoln* is written in the third person, but the action is viewed through the perceptions of actual historical figures: Lincoln's Secretary of State William H. Seward, his Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, his wife Mary Todd Lincoln, his secretary John Milton Hay, and the minor accomplice in his assassination David Herold. We also get fleeting glimpses through the eyes of minor characters such as Congressman Elihu B. Washburne.

Where my doubts about the classification creep in is that by this method the work is far more firmly anchored to fact than even the most generous frontiers of the novel customarily allow. Hitherto Mr Vidal has been to many pains to get his history right, or at least probable for the most part and possible for the rest. His *Burr* aroused great controversy, but this was

because of the views of Washington, Jefferson and others put in the mouth of Burr. The portrait of Washington was bad; but Burr is unlikely to have produced a good one. The portrait of Jefferson was very hostile; but Burr's would have been very hostile, and Mr Vidal made the point that it was more hostile than his own. He relied heavily on the researches and knowledge of Dr Mary-Jo Kline, editor of the Burr papers; *1876*, about the disputed election of President Rutherford B. Hayes, drew on the advice of a great historical authority on that period, Professor Eric L. McKittrick. But in both cases the overall view was through the eyes of the imaginary Charles Schuyler, who had only a shadowy basis in reality for the first book and none at all for the second.

This time the only fictional treatment of a narrator-figure is in the case of David Herold. Little is known of the real Herold save that he seems to have been mentally deficient to a considerable degree. Mr Vidal keeps him on this side of human rationality, and paints a wholly credible if coldly pathetic study in self-delusion. The intended effect is clearly to show the squalid and contemptible character of the espionage and assassination conspiracies which finally took Lincoln's life, a healthy corrective for the romance which crept around the conspirators after their deaths. Mr Vidal's terms of reference will not even permit them their martyrdom; when Lincoln is dead, their interest for him is over. Herold is finally shown fleeing with his revered John Wilkes Booth, who has just murdered Lincoln. We do not see Booth's death—as to reality, it is unclear whether he was shot by the authorities who had surrounded his hide-out or, more likely, committed suicide—nor do we see the abject surrender of Herold which preceded that event. But both follow logically from our last vision of them.

Most of the Herold part of the work has to be fictional. There is a creepy relationship here with the narrative figure of Schuyler in the other books. Herold and Schuyler are unimportant men, who see a good deal of low life—and what a service Mr Vidal does for social history in his outstanding presentation of that, as well as showing great events and figures through the eye of that essential chief protagonist planted firmly in the historical novel by Sir Walter Scott, the marginal, highly impressionable, enthusiastic juvenile. (Schuyler is of course quite old by *1876*, but he still retains his youthful appeal to the reader.) Mr Vidal has written so well

¹ *Lincoln*. By GORE VIDAL. Heinemann, £9.95; Random House, \$19.95.

about the explicitly sexual aspects of homosexuality that it is natural for him to exhibit masterly quality in the use of that standard, non-sexual homosexual relationship in literature, the youth through whom the reader sees the action and the older man who comes to dominate his horizon. Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver, David Balfour and Alan Breck, Tinker and Sexton Blake, Huckleberry Finn and Nigger Jim, Ginger and Biggles, practically the entire corpus of G. A. Henty, and, consciously drawing on the entire genre, Luke and Ben in the film *Star Wars*: Charlie Schuyler and Aaron Burr are a logical addition. (The ultimate discovery that they are son and father detracts nothing from this: the whole principle is one of surrogate paternity, satirised in *Star Wars* when the victim of the joint endeavours proves to be Luke's real father.) And now to these must be added David Herold and John Wilkes Booth.

THERE IS A VERY CLEVER TWIST on the structure of *Burr* here. The basic point about *Burr* was that Mr Vidal, sardonically amusing himself and his readers as the United States was gearing itself up to the big brouhaha of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, invited us to look at the unquestionably brilliant and more questionably sacrosanct Revolutionary generation through the eyes of the schoolroom villain of the period, Aaron Burr. Burr in the novel proves to be much less of a villain than had been assumed, as Dr Kline and others have since forced historians to realise. He was also more squalid and more pathetic than he appears in the novel, but, as Mr Vidal would remind us, it is Charlie Schuyler whose view we see there. Now, in his new book, Mr Vidal really shows us the squalor and pathos of a supposed hero—a pathos very much rhyming with bathos—reeking through the panegyrics of his admirer as David Herold is drawn inexorably into the role of disciple of John Wilkes Booth. At the same time, having said “this supposedly bad man is not bad: let me show him through the eyes of an independent observer who slowly discovers him”, Mr Vidal is now saying exactly the converse by the same method. Burr's wickedness turns out to be comedy, realism and creation; Booth's is tragedy, delusion and destruction. Herold's journey towards the discovery of Booth is a long, inconclusive and almost mindless drifting before they finally meet, while Schuyler's Odyssey to the reality of Burr is a journey into the mind of a man he meets at the outset.

The contrast is significant: the Schuyler voyage is intellectual, the Herold progress is animal. But the method is the same, and even some of the means by which Herold possesses the mind of the reader are the same: the appeal of vulnerability, the need to see events through inexperienced eyes, and so forth. Dispassionate and sardonic Mr Vidal likes to appear, but he is no Evelyn Waugh wanting to torture his characters (he has indeed termed Waugh “unspeakable”), and there is a tenderness in his view of Schuyler, inside and outside the novels. There is almost a lump in the throat in the note following 1876 which ends with Charlie Schuyler's death: “by now Charlie seems very real to me.” But David is very real too, and

was, of course, much more real than Charlie. As Gerard Manley Hopkins observed, “Abel is Cain's brother and breasts they have sucked the same.”

THE WHOLE DAVID HEROLD SUB-PLOT is away from Lincoln himself and can throw little light on Lincoln. But the other chief protagonists through whom we follow events are in almost daily association with the President. And here Mr Vidal is very rightly conscious of the constraints of historical reality. John Hay and Salmon P. Chase kept diaries and wrote many letters. Chase and Seward kept substantial collections of papers. And as we shall see, Mr Vidal had unrivalled opportunities for getting Mary Todd Lincoln right, and, I believe, got her fairly right. The result is that the fictional element is heavily imprisoned. The real Seward or Chase dictates what Mr Vidal can say much of the time. The real John Hay is a more wayward prison-warder. Hay wrote a great deal about Lincoln, including a ten-volume biography with his fellow-secretary John George Nicolay. But that was the product of mature years and intense respectabilisation; and while it is not possible to divide the work between its two authors, Hay's most obvious individual contribution seems to have been covering Lincoln's early life. Moreover, Mr Vidal rightly stresses that the two secretaries at the time were decidedly less reverent, if not less affectionate, towards their great chief than they appear in their *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (1890). And if, as Mr Vidal tells us, he has “invented a low-life” for David Herold, he has also ascribed a generously wide education to John Hay. The result is a figure who seems once again to have a little more in common with the fictional Charlie Schuyler than with the real John Hay, and certainly suggests a much more likeable figure than the future diplomat, élitist journalist, self-conscious man of letters, Anglophile Ambassador, and Secretary of State.

But the high politics of the thing rest with Chase and Seward, and if Mr Vidal had chosen to pepper his text with footnotes the results would leave us sneezing very violently. The same is if anything even more true of the passages through the eyes of Mary Todd Lincoln, on whom the author has evidently combed a myriad of sources under the most expert of all professional guidance.

That these results are part of a very conscious decision may be seen by the fact that the third noteworthy member of Lincoln's Cabinet, his second Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, is very visibly present through much of the action but we do not see it through his eyes. There is an excellent reason for this, from an historian's standpoint. Stanton is an even more mysterious figure than Lincoln himself, and has excited wild controversy over the past century, even to the point of being charged with Lincoln's murder, a charge taken seriously in its day by some distinguished historians who should have known better. Stanton has now received a good biography researched by Benjamin Thomas and completed by Harold Hyman,² but it frankly confesses that much of Stanton still remains a mystery. As far as we can determine, Stanton really was a very easily dislikeable person who genuinely came to like Lincoln very much, and they formed a close relationship in which Lincoln

² Benjamin Platt Thomas and Harold Melvin Hyman, *Stanton: The Life and Times of Lincoln's Secretary of War* (n.e. Greenwood Press, 1980).

found it useful to play the friendly policeman while relying on Stanton to be the nasty policeman. Stanton had little use for civil liberties, and seems positively to have enjoyed their erosion. But since we do not know Stanton's secret mind, Mr Vidal, who cares deeply about civil liberties, ascribes such enthusiasm to Seward largely by means of day-dreams. Here we probably are mostly in the realm of fiction, although the fact of government leaders rejoicing in the making of a police state is well worth asserting. It still is probably somewhat rough on Seward, especially when so much of the real Seward is present. This is not to say that Seward could not have had such dreams, merely that Mr Vidal's insistence on limiting himself to narrative through characters of whose views a great deal is known can by his interpolations hurt the originals who have, however involuntarily, helped their recreator so well.

On the other hand, if Mr Vidal is prepared to allow governmental day-dreams of the kind which induce popular nightmares to wander from one power-drunk head to another, he has no intention of letting any of his august victims pull the wool over his eyes, if he can avoid it. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles also kept a diary; but we are not made privy to his emotions, and for a very good reason. Welles subsequently rewrote his diary. In any case, he clearly looked more interesting than he was. Mr Vidal gets a good deal of fun out of his hair, which was even more spurious than his diary.

THERE IS SO MUCH OF HISTORY in these perceptions ascribed to Seward and Chase that it is necessary to look fairly narrowly on points where Mr Vidal might have embroidered. Here it must be said at once that the points where the historical novelist customarily lets rip, in descriptions of social events, house decoration, individual appearances and so on, show every sign of being as soundly based as they could possibly be. The book breathes of documentary evidence; but there is no halitosis to be warned against. Mr Vidal wears his learning very lightly. What is a little suspicious is the degree to which high politics, as reflected by Chase and Seward, is so nakedly a business of power for its own sake. In the case of Chase, it is hard to see much violence done to the truth. Mr Vidal is quite right in saying that both men had ambitions to ensure that Lincoln would be a one-term President and that he would be succeeded by Seward or Chase as the case might be; and that in the interim they proposed to run the government which obviously could not be managed by the poor hick from Illinois. Seward very quickly realised that Lincoln was not to be managed, moved into the role of a junior partner without further ambitions, and actually enjoyed it. Chase intrigued against Lincoln again and again, was consistently outmanoeuvred and finally disposed of when his undoubtedly impressive talents had ceased to be useful in excess of his nuisance value.

But high politics is not only hunger for power, even if Mr Vidal is again correct in seeing that hunger as eroding more altruistic commitments. Both men had started in life as passionate reformers. Chase ostensibly remained a reformer, and thought of himself as one, but power swamped his real reform impulse: all of which Mr Vidal truly shows. Seward gave much more of an impression of cynicism and intoxication in

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political management. But here Mr Vidal's normal sense of irony seems to have been dulled by his own belief in the readiness of reformers to succumb to the blandishments of power. He is not, of course, showing us the young Seward any more than he is, save by anecdote from individual characters, letting us see the young Lincoln. But Seward, contrary to appearances, really cared deeply about social victims, and was unusual among Northern reformers in looking at social deprivation in the North as well as in the South. That was not all dead by the time of the Lincoln administration, and while it is reasonable to reflect the cynicism of speech with which Seward offset the noisy rhetoric of Congressional radicals like Charles Sumner, there was more cynicism in Seward's mouth than in his mind. It was sensible and right to indicate Seward's extraordinary desire to unite the warring sections of the United States by means of foreign wars and adventures. But even that reflected a genuine idealism, if of a very dangerous kind.

Mr Vidal has a fairly unbridled sense of humour when he likes, but there is very little evidence of it letting matters get out of control. There are perhaps rather more references to the Confederate leader John C. Breckinridge than is entirely justified by the economy imposed by a work of even this size, and he weaves and bobs in and out of the narrative a little inexplicably for the ordinary reader; but constant readers of Mr Vidal's work will expect slightly unusual behaviour from Breckinridges. Anyhow, the real John C. had unusual experiences, including, after the war, being mistaken for an applicant for the post of butler by an English society lady who demanded his credentials from previous employment. He cited his high offices for the Confederacy, thereby probably providing the best classification of them yet made.

THERE IS PERHAPS LESS EXCUSE for gratifying the constant reader, to say nothing of the constant author, by references explicable from Mr Vidal's other writings. Charlie Schuyler, despite, or because of, the variations on him here, is somewhat pointlessly resurrected in person in the last chapter to take part in a conversation reflecting Lincoln's similarity to Bismarck. Actually John Hay, with whom he converses, was shortly to go to Vienna in reality at that stage, and would there be *chargé d'affaires* replacing the historian John Lothrop Motley. Mr Vidal missed a trick here: Motley was a very old friend of Bismarck, had a highly important correspondence with him during the American Civil War while in Vienna, and could have offered some interesting points of comparison had Mr Vidal enabled him to have the conversation with Hay about the two men which they probably did not have. Motley's memories of hair-raising episodes in drunken student life with Bismarck at Göttingen and Berlin would have supplied interesting parallels to Lincoln's lively early life in Indiana and Illinois, of which latter Hay had had some account as depicted here. And Motley had, however briefly, been "in Abraham's bosom", as he phrased it, which was more than Charlie Schuyler could claim, having been kept out of America by his creator from 1837 to 1876 in earlier edicts.

Similarly, the Sanford family have to be dragged in here to

remind us of Mr Vidal's novel about their descendants, *Washington, D.C.* They do little to incite readers to race in quest of it. Mr Vidal will insist that *Washington, D.C.* forms part of this series of novels, although admitting in his afterword to *1876*, "I have a deep mistrust of writers who produce trilogies (tetralogists are beyond the pale)." *Lincoln* stands perfectly well on its own: Mr Vidal had no business to climb over that pale, and it is not useful to be asked to think about it in any larger sense. He has made a great case for Lincoln's having resembled Bismarck in refashioning his country into a nation-state by means of a peculiarly terrible and hitherto unprecedented form of warfare. But *1876* does not particularly isolate the phenomena of that remaking which are so well pointed up in *Lincoln*, and it is, in fact, a much shallower work. If Mr Vidal itches to make a series, it would be fascinating to read him on American Reconstruction, or even on the years before the Civil War. Dred Scotts are more interesting than Sanfords.

ON THE OTHER HAND, Mr Vidal's insistence on dragging his disgusting promiscuous syphilitic homosexual William de La Touche Clancey into every book is here as always a hilarious contribution. He insists that the character is fictional, and those who know will point to the similarities in all but promiscuity, syphilis and homosexuality to one of Mr Vidal's dearest enemies. Perhaps Mr Vidal could argue that the fleeting references serve the purpose of reminding us of the continuities of American history.

Mr Clancey alone crosses the sexual frontier. Hay and Herold visit houses of prostitution; well, the high and the low did. Kate Chase is shown as loving her father probably more than she loved herself, which is certainly true: the love is not suggested as incestuous. (In *Burr*, it is implied that there was an incestuous element in Burr's relationship with his daughter Theodosia: again, it is not impossible in that case, whereas it would seem wholly impossible for the Chases.) Mr Vidal in an essay on Lincoln reprinted in his book of admirable essays *Pink Triangle and Yellow Star* (1982) wonders if Lincoln in his youth contracted syphilis and was thereby responsible for his wife's insanity, or feared he was: the book *Lincoln* does not open up that question, except by the remotest inference, and here again the author's self-discipline is praiseworthy. Herold obviously becomes romantically obsessed by John Wilkes Booth, but the sex-life of each of them is presented as firmly heterosexual. Once again, this is a rejection of cheap interest in favour of serious and largely convincing narrative.

And Mr Vidal clearly wants to be taken seriously. He has maintained times without number that literary criticism has gone to hell in a handcart since Edmund Wilson and V. S. Pritchett, and is given over to what he terms, a little snobbishly, as "the hicks and hacks of Academe"; but he wants a cheer from the historians if he can get it. No doubt nobody laughed more heartily than he when after the publication of *Burr* certain prominent historians not a thousand miles away from the University of Virginia stumped the country for fat fees to say that Jefferson was the second father of his country but certainly not of its slave population. But there is no sign of such harrying of the groves in this work.

VERY MUCH TO THE CONTRARY, Mr Vidal's opening words nail his historiographical seriousness of purpose to the mast: for the first words are "Elihu B. Washburne." Now, Elihu B. Washburne is unlikely to send the man just off the street flocking to the bookshop-till without further examination on his own. He means no more to the average American than he does to the average Briton. Even his name suggests the arcane: the original Elihu was the only comforter of Job who talked anything like theological sense, and he is now regarded as a later interpolation (probably, did we but know it, by someone called Elihu). In American history there was the blacksmith Elihu Burritt, who campaigned for the cause of peace, and there was the statesman Elihu Root, McKinley's Secretary of War and Theodore Roosevelt's Secretary of State, who received the Nobel Prize for Peace. But who remembers Elihu B. Washburne? Even historians primarily think of him for the odd reason that he wanted to have been Secretary of State, and so Grant made him Secretary of State, on the understanding that he would promptly resign, which he did, and the business was handed over to Hamilton Fish, who knew what to do with it. But historians will be impressed with a fine mastery of obscurity of this kind. Mr Vidal has been imbibing archival dust. Start with Elihu B., and you get taken seriously.

Even though the first thing Elihu B. does, having rung up the curtain, is to have a nasty argument with a cab-driver, with some offensive allusion to his blackness, there is nothing here to cause the historian to purse his lips and shake his head. It is a good point. Elihu B. was a Republican Congressman from Illinois, and, for all the anti-slavery origins of the Republican Party which had already driven several states out of the Union by the time of this supposed incident, it is sound history to emphasise that anti-slavery sentiment, especially in the West, often coexisted with dislike of blacks. The cry "Free Soil", fashionable some years earlier, meant to many "soil free of blacks", as the great literary historian Henry Nash Smith observed.

The theme is pointedly asserted to provide useful background to Lincoln's anxiety to settle the slaves, when freed, outside the United States. Mr Vidal goes on to make much of this, and quite correctly. In fact, he is kind in not making as much as he might do, for Lincoln produced some extraordinarily inept management of an attempt to put it into practice, as even Nicolay and Hay record. And if it be wondered why Lincoln should think blacks and whites could not coexist, it is here being asserted that he based himself, as almost certainly he did, on his Illinois experience, so there is Elihu B., representing Lincoln's congressional district in this as no doubt in so much else, firmly planking the issue front and centre stage before we are one page older.

Thirty years earlier a Washburn also rang up the curtain of a novel, in this case *Death in the Fifth Position* by Edgar Box, a pleasant little murder in a ballet company if not up to the authoritative anarchy of Brahms and Simon's *A Ballet in the Ballet*; and Edgar Box, as they are kindly telling us now, was Gore Vidal. Nor are the questers for symbolism sent empty away, however much our author may despise them. Does not the name of Elihu symbolise peace-loving blacksmiths and peace-Nobelling prizewinners? For the opening third of the

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book is a very effective replay of the argument on Lincoln's responsibility for the onset of the Civil War. And Mr Vidal, very circumspectly, asserts that Lincoln manoeuvred the Confederates to fire the first shot, that he bitterly regretted it, but that he saw no alternative afterwards to fighting on to the end. The focus on Washington, D.C., means that we see relatively little of the besotted romanticism and self-admiration which drove the Confederates to reject the obvious alternative to firing on Fort Sumter: ignoring it. But heady romanticism had produced secession, and it was dependent on imagined chivalric invincibility for the core of its being. The idiotic David Herold and his associates convey something of this at first hand, and so do Mary Todd Lincoln's pro-Confederate relatives, and at greater distance the perceptions of Lincoln's associates. Lincoln's own recognition that he could gamble on such a reaction is partly, and shrewdly, muted by the use of the undoubted fact that Seward and the others deemed him far less intransigent than most of his party where he was in fact much more. The dawning realisation among his followers of what steel he was made of is one of the most effective and instructive themes in the book.

THIS REMINDER, that the war which broke out with the firing on Fort Sumter was avoidable, has importance for us on two levels. Firstly, Mr Vidal comes initially by his knowledge of high politics and Southern realities from the grandfather whose name he bears: Senator Thomas Pryor Gore. Gore was born in Reconstruction Mississippi in 1870 and although blind was elected Senator from Oklahoma several times. Mr Vidal's novel *Creation*, dedicated to his memory, is about a blind Persian diplomat contemptuously telling his Hellenised nephew about the cosmopolitanism of the régime defeated by the Greeks in the wars of Darius and Xerxes. The book *Lincoln* does not make a case for that cosmopolitanism of the old South, but it does clearly argue that an old order was swept away by the Civil War. Again, the focus on Washington, D.C., prevents any sight of the way in which the South's obsession with the defence of slavery had stifled freedom of speech and the press in the last years before the war, although the conspiracies against Lincoln as shown by Mr Vidal display the twisted legacies of that obsession. And there is the main title of Senator Thomas Gore to a place in history: the famous Gore-McLemore resolutions of 1916 which sought to deepen American neutrality by warning persons who sailed on belligerent ships that they would do so at their own risk. In vain; the protests of Gore were swept aside, his colleagues even took advantage of his blindness to trick him from consolidating his campaign, and Wilson, having been elected a second time on a peace platform, went to war within a month of his second inauguration. Clearly, Senator Gore's grandson would disagree with his grandfather about much: *Creation* (1981) would tell us that, even if we did not have other testimony from him. But in the defence of peace, and in his suspicion of

governmental duplicity in placing it at risk, he has the courage and intransigence of his grandsire.

The other point is that Mr Vidal's *Lincoln* is a remarkable reflection of the changing moods of historiography over the past century. Without going to the limits of Edmund Wilson in his study of the literature of the Civil War, *Patriotic Gore*, which saw the conflict as almost meaningless in its origin, he seems to subscribe to the fashionable view of historians of the 1920s and 1930s that it was a needless war, an opinion greatly exacerbated by the memory of the more recent conflict from which Thomas Gore sought to preserve his country, the First World War. He goes back to William Henry Herndon, Lincoln's partner, for what he sees as responsible witness for events in Lincoln's Illinois years, but is firmly modern in rejecting Herndon's depiction of Mary Todd Lincoln as a designing hellion. And it is here as in so much else that we have to consider the historian from whose writings Mr Vidal asserts himself to have learned so much and whom he thanks for correcting his manuscript: David Herbert Donald.

PROFESSOR DONALD, of Harvard, wrote biographies of Herndon and of Charles Sumner; and he is also the author of a little book, *Lincoln Reconsidered*,³ which is a masterly exercise in that literary art-form Mr Vidal so loves and in which he generally regards his countrymen as so deficient—the seminal essay. It is an exciting volume, to its readers and (as his critics have learned) to its author. There is great stress on Lincoln's consummate political skill, and on his use of the old doctrine of the American Whig party that in time of war the powers of the President were dramatically increased; and Mr Vidal makes skilful use of this, with Lincoln far outstripping that other former Whig Seward in his use of the doctrine, rather to Seward's amusement. It is not clear whether after the war was over Lincoln would have quietly subsided to the other Whig principle of the peace-time President as Presiding officer, reigning rather than ruling. Presumably Reconstruction could have been construed by him as arising out of the war and hence also under war powers. Certainly Reconstruction was in full flood by 1869 when Lincoln, had he lived, would have left office; on the other hand Mr Vidal assumes he was for a quick and easy Reconstruction, and if he got it, he would in theory have been reduced to declaring this or that foundation-stone well and truly laid. Perhaps Seward would have had that foreign war after all. There is a clear implication that Lincoln intended to make the maximum use of power once he was in office, and hence he needed the Civil War. I would tend to agree with Mr Vidal and Professor Donald, but as the professor has shown elsewhere, the war-powers doctrine was in many mouths, not all of them former Whigs. Donald's first volume on Charles Sumner,⁴ a Republican but former Democrat, ends with Sumner at the outbreak of civil war going to Lincoln to point out that he has the war powers to free the slaves: which Lincoln, deeply alive to the danger of Maryland seceding and hence isolating Washington from the world, was very careful not to do for the better part of two years—and Mr Vidal keeps us on chair's edge while he conveys that fragile survival of Washington, D.C.

³ David H. Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War* (n.e. Greenwood Press, 1981).

⁴ David H. Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1960).

Professor Donald was trained by James G. Randall, very much a figure of the 1930s who saw the war as the result of a blundering generation, and Lincoln as much too intransigent in its outset. The professor has moved far from his mentor, how far his drastic revision of the latter's classic *Civil War and Reconstruction* shows.⁵ But he may have been led to look with a somewhat indulgent eye on Mr Vidal's allowance of long shadows for Randall's approach. And what is greatly perpetuated here is the legacy of Randall's wife, Ruth Painter Randall, who during her husband's years of toil on Lincoln accompanied him by writing studies of Lincoln's wife, and of his children.⁶ Professor Donald vigorously supported her vindication of Mary Todd Lincoln, and helped it by showing how much of the legend of the loveless marriage was cooked up by her enemy Herndon. Mr Vidal follows suit. It is a loving, not a loveless, marriage: elsewhere Mr Vidal is contemptuous of the American revival in sanctification of the family, but he will not rob the Lincoln family of the love so long questioned. Mary Todd Lincoln's extravagance and bouts of insanity are recorded with insight and sympathy, and Mr Vidal—how he would hate me for saying it—preaches a great sermon to mankind in showing how readily Mary Lincoln came to be hated by her contemporaries from Hay to Kate Chase, and how blame-

less she was for so much of the rancour she excited. It is an eloquent essay demanding compassion for mental instability, where so many commentators at the time and later were savage in the extreme. As a result, despite the much smaller evidence for her view of her husband on a day-to-day basis than those of Seward and Chase,⁷ this is a bold, confident revelation of Mary's Abraham, and as near as anyone is likely to get. Professor Donald has served Mr Vidal very well here, and has ably perpetuated the work of the Randalls.

MR VIDAL IS ON SOMEWHAT SHAKIER GROUND in his excited response to another Donald essay in *Lincoln Reconsidered*, that on "Refighting the Civil War." One can quite see why he liked it; military history has seldom been made so informative, so perceptive and so amusing at one and the same time. It does a good day's work to revive Professor Donald's discovery that the opening moves in the war show the generals on both sides advancing almost with Jomini's textbook in hand; Professor Donald ends by arguing that while Grant did not read military manuals—after all, there was all that drinking to be done—he carried out in practice what Clausewitz had preached in theory. But Mr Vidal will have Lincoln reading Clausewitz. It pushes it a bit: one feels Lincoln will be catching up on his homework by reading Mr Vidal next. Still, it's a good device to show that one problem of the war was the necessary revolution in military strategy and tactics, and if anyone of the time saw the need to cut loose from the conventional wisdom on most matters, it was Lincoln, so why not here as elsewhere?

⁵ James G. Randall and David H. Donald, *Civil War and Reconstruction* (1961).

⁶ Ruth Painter Randall, *Mary Lincoln: A Biography of the Marriage* (1953); *Lincoln's Sons* (1956).

⁷ See David H. Donald, ed., *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase* (1954).

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Anyhow, Mr Vidal himself is the driving force behind his emphasis on Lincoln's enthusiasm for Shakespeare, and good luck to him: certainly, Lincoln did not draw out of nowhere the Gettysburg address, surely the greatest speech ever made. The delivery of the speech is one of the brightest, hardest gems in the book, and Mr Vidal vigorously supports his argument that the text was a little different from the common form now regurgitated. The case is surely strong that Shakespeare was the Clausewitz of his best oratory, not as a quotation source, but as a craftsman; so perhaps we may indulge Mr Vidal on the military self-tutorial. Certainly Lincoln learned some craftsmanship of war from somewhere. His trouble for most of the war, as Mr Vidal stresses, was that his generals were nothing like as adventurous.

Mr Vidal will from time to time revert to being Mr Vidal, as when Lincoln sniffily complains that the Irish are the most cowardly of his troops. This is one in the eye for Irish-American pieties about the fighting race, and clearly intentional: Mr Vidal is blue-blooded enough to feel excluded, and hence disdainful, where the lower ethnicity flaunts its luck-charms. Actually, he—and his Lincoln—are paying the Irish a compliment. Why on earth should they have been anything but cowardly? They had fled from famine conditions in Ireland; they volunteered as an escape from the vile jobs to which they had been consigned. I am all in favour of being part of a nation of good soldiers Schweyk, and Mr Vidal does them a much greater service than those Irish-American publicists who seemed to assume it reflected well on the Irish to be credited with a particular pleasure in disposing of as many members of the human race as possible. Maybe Senator Gore's grandson did mean it as a compliment, turned in his own style to be sure. I will be belaboured with intelligence about their Light Brigade performance at Fredericksburg in 1862, and so will Mr Vidal: nevertheless, there must have been many Schweyks.

HOW DID LINCOLN PLAN to reconcile the South after the war? The traditional picture is one of clemency, and while Professor Donald has knocked a few nails into the coffin of this thesis, he has changed his mind quite a few times on Reconstruction. If he is intolerant to contradiction from others, he has no objection to contradicting himself from time to time, and it lends additional excitement to his historical writing. In any case, Mr Vidal has felt free to have Lincoln assert that he was not in favour of the harsh plan that Stanton drew up at the end of the war for military control of defeated Southern states, although Professor Donald has shown in his revision of Randall that the evidence as to Lincoln's view of the plan could go either way. When I was a graduate student in Johns Hopkins, there was on the library stacks a cover without a book inside: accident or vandalism had removed the text of William B. Hesseltine's *Lincoln's Plan of Reconstruction* (1960). There was a symbolic truth in this: the Hesseltine thesis is that Lincoln did not have a plan. He was very much a man to be swayed by events, while forceful in carrying out what he did

decide: and where he stuck by a theory against the dictates of reality, as with Negro colonisation, events proved him wrong. On such points he is given more of the Vidal dogmatism than the Lincoln flexibility.

In any case, Lincoln's proposals for Reconstruction during the war were intended to show that the Union had not perished, and contained the hope that the Confederacy would fall to pieces while pro-Union régimes spun themselves into reality around nuclei. The war's end would see the Union visibly in existence, rising from the ashes of the Confederacy, the nuclei having attracted substantial support from defectors induced to abjure the Confederacy by Lincoln's clemency. But by the end of the war, nothing of the kind had happened. The Confederacy had hung tough, and only went down before the superior weight of Union numbers and technology, and such appalling forms of warfare as General Sherman's scorched-earth policy in Georgia and South Carolina. So Lincoln confronted, not an enemy whose individual members had accepted mild terms, but an enemy wounded to the heart of its considerable vanity and with its old delusion of chivalric invincibility torn to pieces before its eyes.

On the sheer level of security, in whose name Lincoln had so spectacularly violated the Bill of Rights during the war, the former Confederates could be given no chances. With the removal of slavery there also would go the clause in the Constitution which had members of the House of Representatives chosen in ratio to the population, voting or not, apportioned on the assumption that a slave was three-fifths of a person; and hence the South would now be vastly increased in representation in the House of Representatives. The House resembles the British Commons in its power over finance bills; and the Republicans feared that the ex-Confederates and their Northern Democratic allies would use their new strength to repudiate the Union debt, or honour the Confederate debt. Indeed, ultimately their fears led them to write a ridiculous clause into the Fourteenth Amendment prohibiting either action.

There is no reason to think Lincoln was exempt from such perceptions. Professor Kenneth Stampp has argued that Lincoln, as an old Whig, wanted to revive the Whig party and ally with business-minded elements in the ex-Confederate South.⁸ Seward certainly did. But there is no reason to believe that Lincoln had the same reason as Seward for reviving the Whigs. Seward had done well out of the Whigs, as Governor and Senator. Lincoln's Whig career had won him but a single term in the House of Representatives: it was the Republican Party which gave him his glory. And while for tactical reasons he ran on a coalition ticket for re-election in 1864, there is no reason to assume he would have rejoiced in the disappearance of the party which made him. Nor had he any intention of risking in peace the victories which had been gained with such dreadful cost in war.

MY GUESS IS THAT if he had lived, Lincoln would not have been simply vindictive, as many Republicans were, but that he would have been inflexible in preventing the former Confederacy from posing any risk to security. His Second Inaugural is often paraded as a promise of clemency, but Mr

⁸ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1864-1877* (1965).

Vidal somewhat revealingly omits from his quotation of it, both here and in his essay, the following passage:

"If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled up by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.' "

This is terrifying stuff—and in my view necessary reading for white persons who claim that no guilt accrues to them for the black inheritance of the effects of slavery: here and in the USA, those who say this are not so ready to dispense with their own inheritance of prosperity which in the past slavery helped to build up.

MR VIDAL, OF COURSE, is unlikely to care for the passage. He is an anti-Christian, and he goes to great lengths to deny Lincoln's Christianity, almost certainly correctly. He does note that the Second Inaugural ignores Christ. But God here is a symbol, a form of shorthand, a new language device. Mr Vidal is correct in seeing Lincoln as hostile to slavery but animated from first to last by the need to preserve the Union and, he feels, consolidate it.

And Mr Vidal enjoys Julia Ward Howe's *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. But outside the White House that hymn had become the expression of the war's transformation into revolution in the eyes of so many during the conflict itself. It gave Lincoln's armies a sense of holy war of the kind which had vanished from the white world when Monmouth's men were cut to pieces at Sedgemoor. Where most troops marched to battle on rollicking ditties celebrating sexual urges which romped in defiance of the omnipresence of death, the Union armies won their victory by chanting "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." Mr Vidal can say that the world of Lincoln and Stanton remained immune from these things. But Lincoln, the cunning politician Mr Vidal shows him to be, was attuned to the new rhetoric, and here he spoke it directly. And he meant, I think, that to bring the war to an end reconciliation could only take place when military rule had done its work of extirpating the last shadows of ex-Confederate sedition.

But we really don't know. I may think this, Mr Vidal may imply that, and Professor Donald, perhaps, go on in the future to insist on the other thing. Lincoln died, and we will never know how he would have coped. And on this Mr Vidal does

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have the last word. He implies through the mind of John Hay in his very last lines that Lincoln

“in some mysterious fashion, had willed his own murder as a form of atonement for the great and terrible thing that he had done by giving so bloody and absolute a rebirth to his nation.”

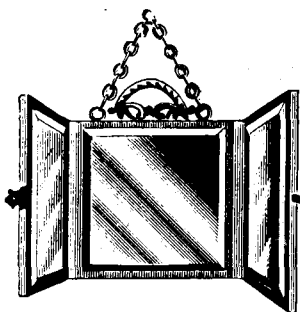
On that level the argument about the Reconstruction he intended becomes futile, and he knew it would. And if he did will it—and we have that dream to contend with—he would also have known that the Second Inaugural would be the

testimony that his followers would remember.

MAYBE *LINCOLN* IS A NOVEL. It is certainly a use of fiction to enhance history and from time to time, often justifiably, to supply attractive guesses for matters hidden from history. It is still much closer to real history than, say, *War and Peace*, provided that we remember Mr Vidal's history is that of men and Tolstoy's of mankind, and prefer the more old-fashioned approach of Mr Vidal. There is much to be said for old fashions.

Peering through the Privet

British Historical Writing—By VERNON BOGDANOR



“HISTORIANS”, snapped Mr Khrushchev in 1956, “are dangerous, and capable of turning everything topsy-turvy. They have to be watched.” From the earliest times, men of power have sought to harness history to the purpose of the state, requiring of the historian that he endorse

the officially approved exegesis of the past. But it is in the ideological dictatorships of the 20th century that the past has been most efficiently subordinated to the needs of the present. In the countries of the Communist bloc, the historian is, as it were, forbidden to remember, for the régime which their rulers seek to create is one without memory, an ideal almost achieved in contemporary Poland or Czechoslovakia. Indeed, it is Gustav Husak, Czechoslovakia's seventh President, who is known, so Milan Kundera tells us, as “the president of forgetting.”¹

This hostility to history and to historians is hardly surprising. For it is a pre-condition of effective government in such countries that memory of the past be erased—no mention of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, no allusion to the Nazi-Soviet pact in Jaruzelski's Poland, and—supreme irony—only two mentions of Stalin in the Soviet history textbooks of the Khrushchev era. A nation without history is a nation unable to challenge the official version of events. Deprived of a past, it is bereft of alternatives for the future, and therefore also of hope.

But democracies also have their problems with history. They too have their national myths and fables, which the historian—a natural sceptic if ever there was one—is bound to challenge. Of course, the velvet glove of the democrat is vastly preferable

to the iron fist of the tyrant, but it can, on occasion, prove far more insidious. Marc Ferro, in his endlessly stimulating book *The Use and Abuse of History*, subtitled *How The Past is Taught*,² is concerned to catalogue the distortions which arise from nationalistic history. These distortions condition the way in which we approach the world, and, in particular, the way in which we come to understand the experience of other countries.

“Our image of other peoples, or of ourselves for that matter, reflects the history we are taught as children. This history marks us for life. Its representation, which is for each one of us a discovery of the world, of the past of societies, embraces all our passing or permanent opinions, so that the traces of our first questioning, our first emotions, remain indelible.”

Ferro's examples are chosen from democracies as well as dictatorships, from the United States as well as Soviet Russia, India as well as Nazi Germany, France as well as Poland. In almost every human society, history has been taught as a celebration of national values, its essence coming to be submerged in the grand design of educating the young to become good citizens.

The encouragement of national conceit, it may be suggested, is hardly a present risk in the democracies of the West. The danger, rather, may be one of paying insufficient attention to those aspects of a country's historical experience which fit uneasily, or not at all, into the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. So far as the United States is concerned, Ferro pinpoints the 1960s as the decade when “good-fortune History”, depicting America as “tolerant, level-headed, lively and critical”, came to be replaced by the deconstruction and indeed balkanisation of “white history”, with each minority seeking “a version of American history that will give it a privileged position. . . .” The melting-pot, he tells us, has become a salad-bowl, and it becomes more and more difficult for the historian to isolate what it is that is distinctively American about the history of the United States.

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Faber, 1982), p. 158.

² *The Use and Abuse of History*. By MARC FERRO. Routledge, £15.95.