

## NEW BOOKS REVIEWED

### LINCOLN THE AMERICAN

ABRAHAM LINCOLN: THE PRAIRIE YEARS. By Carl Sandburg. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

In these two volumes Carl Sandburg has made a vividly human portrait of Lincoln with a richly peopled background. And sometimes the background comes out of the frame. Nevertheless with few new facts or incidents, and with no pretence of novelty of interpretation, he has drawn a picture that for vitality, realism, sympathy and discrimination, holds attention and commands respect.

The author, himself a son of the prairie, has attempted to sketch, and in a measure explain, his hero in terms of heritage and environment. By episode rather than steady narrative he brings before us the panorama of Western life, which entered into the fibre of Lincoln's habits and character. Often he suggests a bard sitting before a rude fireplace chanting his hero tale with a poet's repetitions and refrains, his sentences and characterizations recurring again and again for rhetorical effect. Then, piling stroke on stroke of fact, he will plunge into a very "catalogue of the ships" with detailed lists of crops or game animals, or an inventory of a grocery shelf, to give concreteness to his story. Some obvious slips need correction in any new edition, such for instance as a quotation from De Tocqueville ascribed to Montesquieu, and the repeated error in the name of Chief Justice David K. Cartter, who stuttered in his spelling as well as his speech. Poetic rhapsody should also restrain itself from such flights as making Nancy Hanks sing "From Greenland's Icy Mountains", when she died before Bishop Heber wrote it. The lyrical strain is at times a trifle overpowering, especially in the earlier chapters dealing with Lincoln's boyhood, with Lucy and Nancy Hanks, the romance of Ann Rutledge, and the possible roots of

the wistfulness and melancholy that so deeply tinged his nature and contrasted so strongly—was perhaps compensated with his Boeotian humor. But out of it all we get a remarkably true and understandable view of Lincoln, and of the society of which he was so much a type, both in his strength and weakness.

This prairie society in which Lincoln grew up is often spoken of as something peculiarly apart, a West that had a new meaning of humanity and a new message for the world. As a matter of fact, as Mr. Sandburg shows clearly, it was part and parcel of America. It took its aspect from pioneer conditions rather than from any new strain of character. Life there was rough. Ignorance and irreligion, fighting, drinking, swearing, were rife. But Timothy Dwight at the end of the eighteenth century could bring exactly the same indictment against the Vermont settlers just building the most thoroughly Yankee of the Yankee States. A few years later a historian of Western New York reported the saying of about 1815 that "the Sabbath had not found its way west of the Genesee River". On the other hand, the same aspiration that led John Hay's father in the West to ride forty miles on horseback to get a newly published Waverley Novel sent Minard Lafever, then a youth of nineteen, walking fifty miles to Geneva, New York, to get his first treatise on architecture.

These Illinois pioneers carried out through Cumberland Gap or along the Mohawk Valley the tradition of the Revolution. Many of them had fought in it themselves. Others were heirs of the riflemen who went with Daniel Morgan from the Shenandoah to Saratoga, or of the men who followed John Stark to Bennington. Except for a few in the older seaboard towns, the great mass of the people, whether on the New England farm or the Virginia plantation, were like them in fundamental ideas. "We lived," said Dennis Hanks, "the same as the Indians, 'ceptin' we took an interest in politics and religion." That interest in politics and religion was characteristic of the whole stock. They lived like Indians only so long as they had to. They migrated as separate families over wide spaces, and the prevailing isolation retarded the growth of ordered institutions. But the moment these were possible we see schools and churches springing up, and all the commodities of refined civilization in demand, as Mr.

Sandburg's inventory of the silks and velvets in the Springfield shops of 1837 shows.

Most of the settlers were poor, but with the poverty of new beginnings, not of degeneration, and without class consciousness. Aside from the few born pioneers who flee civilization as fast as it catches up with them, the prairie people were eager for the habits and refinements of settled society. When Lincoln at twenty-five first went to the Legislature, he laid aside his buckskin trousers and bought the best suit of clothes he could afford. He never saw a moral issue in a dress coat, or, like that later group of prairie intellectuals celebrated by Hamlin Garland, identified it as a badge of slavery to the effete East. The Illinois of Lincoln's formative years was scarcely touched by the waves of foreign immigration, while in the East the industrial organization was in its infancy. The bulk of the Eastern population was still rural; the workers in the factories were mostly the same people off the farms, or out of the small workshops. The Erie Canal had made New York the great outlet of the prairie, and linked the Middle States and the upper Mississippi Valley into a greater likeness of interest and feeling than they have perhaps ever had before or since. Anyone who can remember the more isolated country homes of New York or New England even less than fifty years ago, will see in the Illinois farmers and townfolk, as described by Mr. Sandburg, their sayings, their social customs, their business methods, their intellectual habit, enough that is familiar to feel them all essentially one people.

Lincoln himself would have listened with understanding to them all. He shared their habits of political thought and he likewise shared, not their theological dogmas, which at the time they were so given to quarreling about, but their common religious aspirations, with a deep spiritual feeling. He was of the blood of North and South and East. The New England Lincolns were his ancestors. Lincolns from Massachusetts and Pennsylvania fought in the Revolution. In his veins was also the blood of the Middle States Quaker and Virginia planter. His people were good stock. Pioneer conditions had meant to them poverty and ignorance, but they carried with them over the mountains the ideas of the Declaration of Independence. With almost

no schooling and few books Lincoln was "always a learner", and what he learned amid difficulties was that same foundation of American ideals and English culture on which they all stood. *Æsop's Fables*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and above all, the Bible, sank deep into his mind and shaped the austere grandeur of the Gettysburg Address and the splendid cadences of the Second Inaugural. He wrote verses, like, and as bad as, those of the other young men of his day. He studied and in earlier years affected Websterian eloquence; and, despite his later directness and his love of folk talk and the racy story, he could still inject into a hard-headed, argumentative letter to a political convention from the White House such a poetic flight as: "The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea."

This Lincoln that we see so much alive in Mr. Sandburg's pages grew up in the Jeffersonian tradition, which was the common faith of practically all of America; but in the application of that doctrine, though a pioneer and poor, he turned to the conservative, constructive side under the inspiration of Henry Clay, and early became a leader among the Whigs, pleading for a protective tariff, and internal improvements, and sound banking. In the Legislature his ambition was to be "the De Witt Clinton of Illinois". From Webster he learned that conception of Union and the Constitution that moderated even his fight for freedom and made him finally the preserver of American Nationality. No man gave greater sympathy. John L. Scripps wrote in 1860 that he had "an exquisite sense of justice", and sometimes it stood in his way as a lawyer. Yet neither poverty, nor pity, nor indignation could make him a fanatic. He was simple to the end, in some ways crude, homely and rugged with the indelible marks of rail splitter and flatboatman on him; but no one who has ever seen the nobility of his face as it appears, for instance, in the Leland daguerreotype, taken about the time of the Presidential nomination, can think with patience of pictures and statuary that depict him as a sort of "Man with the Hoe", in the attempt to glorify the clodhopper as a caste. There was nothing of the proletariat about him. He was the typically shrewd, ambitious American, modest yet eager for distinction; intellectually honest, high principled and courageous, yet a velvet footed, opportunist

politician, whom his lifelong friend, Leonard Swett, called "a trimmer, and such a trimmer as the world has never seen". His intellect was not extraordinary. A Springfield associate at the bar said that in him "passion or sentiment steadied and determined an otherwise indecisive mind", and his critics in the Civil War often complained of that indecision. But it was made up for by patience, benevolence and an unswerving determination to steer right, when he could find out which way was right. His course was marked by steady growth in character and power and influence. His neighbors recognized him as one of themselves, and one of the best of themselves. His rise was not fortuitous. He led, but, more than leading, typified the aspiring, freedom loving, justice seeking spirit of the whole race "who speak the tongue that Shakespeare spake". There was nothing miraculous about his development on prairie soil from poverty. Hundreds of others came to mastery from as unfavorable surroundings. The miracle of Lincoln was his soul, and such a soul is as much a miracle when it appears in Athens or among Hebrew prophets as in a Kentucky clearing.

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### A GREAT TEACHER

THE LETTERS OF SIR WALTER RALEIGH, 1879-1922. Edited by Lady Raleigh, with a Preface by David Nichol Smith. Two volumes. New York: The Macmillan Company.

It appears that Oxford already is putting to the test the place that Sir Walter Raleigh will hold among literary critics, for it has been chosen as the subject of a University Prize Essay—and perhaps no one thing could be more of a tribute to the faith he placed in youth than that youth should be asked to give its estimate of one who, as George Gordon, in *The London Mercury*, says, "seemed always, by his own paths, to have reached the next stile, and to be leaning there, as the young wits and adventurers climbed over." Almost at random amongst the letters written during the War will one come on this supreme belief in youth, and what it was