

Abe Lincoln in Washington

BY ALLAN NEVINS

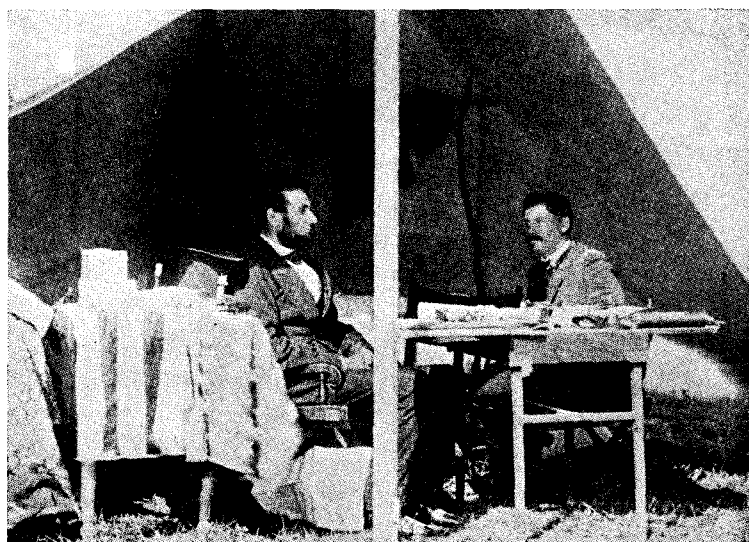


Photo by Brady, from the Barrett collection.

The chief magistrate confers with the commander of the Army of the Potomac, October 1862.

LINCOLN, asked how long a man's legs should be, replied that they should be long enough to reach the ground. If it takes four volumes to delineate Marshall, or Lee, or the war years of Lincoln, then four are none too many. Indeed, the largeness of these men, the eventfulness of their times, the dramatic force of the roles they played, and the permanent significance of their work, not only justifies but demands something cyclo-ramic, with ample background, and full of color, incident, dialogue, and struggle. Lincoln suffers from any book that is excessively brief. Nicolay and Hay gave the due effect of largeness, but their ten volumes had the defects of most "authorized" biographies.

Mr. Sandburg's huge work*—four volumes, 2500 pages, fully one and a quarter million words—at once suggests comparison with Douglas S. Freeman's "Lee," its great counterpart for the Civil War period. Both the Northern and the Southern heroes of the conflict have now received monumental depictions. Yet two books more unlike in salient respects it would be difficult to find. Mr. Freeman carefully restricted his field of view to what directly pertained to Robert E. Lee. Even in treating battles and campaigns, Lee's action alone was fully described; enemy movements were omitted except in so far as an account of them was needed to illuminate Lee's ideas and labors. But in this larger work every point of view is given; the material is caught together with a catholic, comprehensive, and encyclopedic grasp; everything that relates to the period, the government,

and the field operations, is mirrored in enormous detail. Mr. Sandburg's canvas stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Canada to the Gulf, from Cabinet room to newspaper office, from party convention to battleground. In Freeman's "Lee" again, the treatment is carefully analytic, the attention paid to proportion and emphasis is always scrupulous. But Mr. Sandburg's method is the method of Niagara. He has caught the drainage of the whole vast historical watershed of the Civil War as Niagara catches the Great Lakes, and he pours it forth in a thundering flood.

Apart from these differences, however, the comparison is essentially valid. The same amplitude, the same panoramic quality, the same exhaustiveness of research, mark both works. The same grandeur of effect is produced, albeit by very divergent methods. Both are biographies on the titanic scale. Like Beveridge's "Marshall," both demonstrate that a tremendous canvas, copiously filled in, and both crowded and exact, is requisite to the presentation of a great maker of history.

When Sandburg took up his pen the time was ripe for just the work he has accomplished. Forty years ago, when Miss Tarbell wrote, many supposed that the Lincoln theme was approaching exhaustion. Actually the torrent of histories, memoirs, biographies, and special articles was just beginning. Even the great diary of Gideon Welles did not become available until 1911; the letters and diary of John Hay until 1908, with a supplementary volume last year; the diary of Edward Bates until 1930, and that of Lincoln's friend Orville H. Browning until 1927-33. The stream of materials on lesser political figures, on battles and military leaders, on political events, on foreign

affairs, was at flood in the years 1900-1935. Such an encyclopedic treatment as this would not have been possible at an earlier date. Mr. Sandburg, with the indefatigability of the scholar no less than the divination of the poet, has made the most of every lode in this mountain-range of fact. He commands five rays of light on the man and his times to every one that a writer of a generation ago would have possessed.

The most distinctive qualities of Mr. Sandburg's work are two. First, its pictorial vividness, a product of his graphic style, love of concrete detail, and ability to recreate scenes imaginatively in a few sentences; second, the cumulative force of his detail in building up, step by step, an unforgettable impression of the crowded times, with crisis jostling crisis, problems rising in endless welter—and, *pari passu*, an impression of Lincoln patiently finding his talents, learning to endure the storm, and finally mastering it with sad serenity. These two qualities of pictorial vividness and cumulative force are complementary. Neither could have its full effect without the other. In Beveridge's two volumes on the early career of Lincoln we had the enormous accumulation of detail without the vividness. The result was instructive—in presenting Lincoln the politician, it was almost revolutionary. But it lacked the engrossing quality that Sandburg's full-blooded, pulsing, variegated narrative possesses. Not that Mr. Sandburg falls into rhetori-

Next  Week

FIGURES OF TRANSITION

By GRANVILLE HICKS

Reviewed by R. Ellis Roberts

SO YOU WANT TO BE A WRITER

By SHERWOOD ANDERSON

*ABRAHAM LINCOLN: THE WAR YEARS. By Carl Sandburg. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1939. 4 vols. Vol. I, 660 pp.; Vol. II, 655 pp.; Vol. III, 673 pp.; Vol. IV, 515 pp. \$20 the set. De luxe, autographed edition (525 sets) \$50 the set.



Lincoln two days after his second inauguration.

cal flourishes and effects. He is as intent upon the naked fact as was Beveridge. But he has a graphic, vital fashion of setting his facts on paper, and a cinematographic ease in glancing from point to point, idea to idea, event to event, which Beveridge lacked. And of course Sandburg possesses one great advantage in theme over his predecessor. The Lincoln that Beveridge painted was not as yet great; but the later Lincoln that Sandburg draws is one of the greatest of Americans, one of the few really great men of modern times.

Doubtless from Sandburg's pages many readers will for the first time gain a clear comprehension of this greatness. For it is impossible to realize either Lincoln's intellectual or moral stature without understanding the innumerable difficulties which be-thorned and quagmired his path, which harried and perplexed him to the melancholy verge of despair. His great central problem was that he had to captain a peace-loving democracy, its governmental machinery and whole political system totally unadapted to war purposes, in the most stubborn and costly conflict that mankind had known for centuries. Any terrible and prolonged war, if waged with real efficiency, requires a dictatorship or quasi-dictatorship. But neither in Lincoln's soul, nor in the organization of the republic, nor in the temper of the American people, did there exist the prerequisites of a dictatorship; and to carry the Northern aims to victory demanded the most agonizing adjustments in every field. A leader less sagacious, less cautious, less gifted with the power to mould opinion and to forge a united national will that finally became as of tempered steel, would have involved himself and the nation in disaster. For proof of that fact

we need only look back to Madison.

What a chaos it was this Illinois lawyer was called to ride! Never has it been made so immediate, real, and overwhelming as by Mr. Sandburg. The army was crippled by favoritism and partisanship, full of political generals and selfishly ambitious tyros, befuddled by confusion. The national capital was full of place-hunting politicians and quarreling cabals. Lincoln had in his own Secretary of the Treasury an endlessly intriguing competitor for the Presidency. He shortly faced in Congress a group of heedless radicals who abused him foully, lost few opportunities to discredit or thwart him, and meddled with damaging pertinacity in the conduct of the war. In half the State capitals governors and legislators were either showing excessive zeal, or using the flexible power of the States to coerce and humiliate him. The Abolitionists at one extreme, the Copperheads at the other, filled the air with reproaches, slanders, hysterical outbursts, and demands that he do everything but what he was doing.

The mid-term elections of 1862 went against him. A party of defeatists arose, and with Greeley at its head demanded a stoppage of the butchery, a truce equivalent to surrender. The Cabinet broke into openly antagonistic factions, Seward glowering at Chase, and Montgomery Blair and Stanton at swords' points. General after general went down in defeat. After Fredericksburg the leaders of the Senate—with the Northern people turning aghast from the casualty lists—demanded that the Cabinet be instantly remade upon a Congress-controlled model. Financial problems, foreign problems, and the Negro problem at times took on a complexity which made each seem absolutely insoluble. A great section of the press was licentious and defamatory,

and recked little whether it gave information of military value to the enemy or not. The country went upon a conscription basis with such muddled legislation (against which Lincoln wished to protest sharply but dared not) that a wave of justified rioting swept the North; its initial handling of contracts could not have been worse if prescribed by Jeff Davis; its financial expedients worked with creaking unfairness, so that while greenbacks fell and prices rose, the rich grew richer and the working-man's loaf smaller. There were moments when government of the people, by the people, for the people, must have seemed even to Lincoln a hopeless mess of selfishness, shortsightedness, corruption, and quarrelsome inefficiency.

All this in general terms we have long known. But it takes Mr. Sandburg's Niagara of details, drawn from ten thousand sources, condensed, classified, and set down with vehement intensity, to bring out the bewildering confusion of the time, the soul-chilling uncertainty and fear, and the searing human agonies. In these 2500 pages, a distillation from a whole library, we have perhaps the best picture of a nation in racked travail yet written by any pen. Not that it is a somber picture; it has far too much vitality for that. We gain the impression of a nation not only nerved by determination and often exalted by heroism, but of a people who stopped to gossip, jest, and laugh in the grimmest times. The stage Mr. Sandburg sets before us, with its thousands of faces, its endless incidents, its quick shifts of joy and sorrow, ease and strain, triumph and defeat, has a liveliness for which we must turn to literature if we seek its like; it is the vitality of Walt Whitman's long catalogue-poems, of

(Continued on page 20)



"The Proclamation of Emancipation," painted by Carpenter during six months' residence in the White House.

Painters and Sitters

SOME OLD PORTRAITS. By Booth Tarkington. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1939. 249 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

ONCE in those remote days when, for a time, I watched the young Par-Americans at the Dôme, the Rotonde, and later the Petite Chaise, the days when American fiction had not yet found the Hemingway, and none knew whence or whither *transition* was going, but all hated to miss the bus, I was praising Mr. Booth Tarkington to a young poet who was in, but not of, that elite. Challenged to prove or eat my words, I told her to read "Alice Adams" and "Seventeen": a little chastened, when she had taken my prescription, after preliminary complaints against Mr. Tarkington's lucidity, entertainment value, and hopeless traditionalism, my friend exclaimed, "But, you know, he's wise." It was just, that verdict: and the quality of wisdom in literature is not so common that we can neglect to pay it tribute. There is plenty of cleverness, style, technique, sophistication (superficial), knowledge, and latterly some pity; there's a surplus of sentimentality, tough or tender, but all cut from the same carcass: but there's precious little wisdom in our modern literature. And wisdom, whether in Thoreau or Thurber, Melville or Agnes Repplier, Santayana or Dorothy Parker, in the end weighs most and lasts longest. What is it, wisdom in literature? Roughly, the conscious exercise of that old specific human faculty, looking back and forward, a sense of tradition, and a hold on hope. If you look far enough back you will never see only blackness and despair when you look into the future.

This new book of Mr. Tarkington's should be read not as a whole, but as fifteen separate essays, connected only by the fact that each is written round a painted portrait of an historical character. They are studies in the painters, their art and their lives, in the people painted, and in human nature as it was shown by the men and women portrayed, seen by the men who painted the pictures, and interpreted, sometimes too kindly, by a man of experience and sensitiveness who has studied and loved the pictures, studied and assayed the characters.

The subjects range from Elizabeth's Essex and Charles's Nellie Gwynn to Thomas Moore and George IV; among the painters of whom Mr. Tarkington writes are William Dobson, Godfrey Kneller, Peter Lely, John Riley, Gains-

borough, Reynolds, Lawrence, Copley, and Gilbert Stuart. His method has its dangers. He puts into words the sitter's character as it is, he thinks, revealed in the portrait. He is fully aware of the chief danger—that as he knows, from history, the characters of Essex, of James I, of William Blackstone or Moore or George IV, he may see in the painting what he knows rather than what the painter knew or saw in his sitter. In some of his characterizations, I think, he is too confident about the content of the portrait; more rarely he misses what is there. For instance, here is his



"A proud, brave young man" . . .

brief sketch of Essex as seen in a contemporary painting:

It says that he was a proud, brave young man, handsome, a tremendous swell. It says that his pride was of great and simple proportions, not intricate or contorted like vanity; that his bravery was inordinate; that his belief in his aristocratic supremacy was a conviction unable to be questioned. It says that he was imperious, therefore fretful; and that he was not pliable. Such a man can be kind to his inferiors in worldly position; in superiors he will perceive only official accidents and with them he will consequently be unruly.

It may be my fault that I cannot see all that: but how did Mr. Tarkington miss the sensuality of the lips and the stupidity visible in the eyes?

There is not one of the essays which has not its own peculiar merits. Those on Kneller, as painter of Queen Anne's "Mrs. Freeman," that Duchess of Marlborough who might have rivaled Elizabeth or Catherine the Great had she reigned alone, is a fine piece of historical reconstruction; so is the essay on Lely, and the charming tribute to

the modest John Riley who painted Isaac Newton. Mr. Tarkington is at his best and most tender in the paper on John Jackson—readers of Haydon's Autobiography will remember him—and his subject, Tom Moore. Of all the essays, however, I like best those on Gilbert Stuart and on Gainsborough. He treats of Gainsborough as a man's man, a painter of men, taking as his peg the superb portrait of Blackstone, the jurist. Of Gilbert Stuart, that fine painter and great snuff-taker—he used half a pound a day if John Quincy Adams is to be believed—Mr. Tarkington writes with loving and amused understanding.

Here is a book in which pictures and their painters come splendidly alive. A word of praise must be given to the illustrations; the fourteen in color are so good that I could not help wishing greedily that the other eight reproductions, excellent as they are, were also in color.

Fighting Words

IDEAS ARE WEAPONS. By Max Lerner. New York: The Viking Press. 1939. 553 pp., with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT BIERSTEDT

MUCH has Mr. Lerner traveled in the realms of public law and economics, and widely has he roamed in the fields of literature, history, and sociology. Now he recounts his travels during the past seven years so that all may examine them in one place. The book represents a miscellaneous collection of reviews and essays which yields to none in their heterogeneity.

Although one might regret that the author has not provided an organized treatment of any one of the major issues which confront him, only a superficial reader would attribute to them a total absence of integration. For whatever the subject, Mr. Lerner, who thinks it is later than you think it is, runs the gamut of political theory from Marx to Lenin, the gamut of economic theory from Marx to Veblen, and the gamut of legal theory from Holmes to Brandeis.

Mr. Lerner divides these essays and reviews into four groups: The Users of Ideas, A Galaxy of Americans (from John Marshall to John Dos Passos), Some European Thinkers (from Jonathan Swift to Thomas Mann), and Ideas and Society. The essays on constitutional law stand out from the others as maintaining consistently higher standards of scholarship and disclosing a higher degree of authority.

The essay on Pareto's Republic de-