

New Light on Lincoln

LINCOLN AND THE CIVIL WAR IN DIARIES AND LETTERS OF JOHN HAY. Selected with an introduction by Tyler Dennett. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1939. \$4.

Reviewed by EMANUEL HERTZ

WHEN the Union in 1861 was brought face to face with disruption, Providence brought together the embattled leader, matured by a life of struggle, with his young law student John Hay, and established an intimacy between them such as existed between him and no other mortal. Hay became the one comforting influence during the sleepless nights when the great Commoner would seek repose at his young secretary's bedside by reading from Shakespeare and the Bible or from Hood and Artemus Ward. It was Hay's duty to go on all sorts of missions for the President, searching out the truth, carrying messages, and seeking counsel. In private conferences, on battlefields, and in editorial sanctums, the clear-headed young secretary was of great help to the sorely beset President.

John Hay became saturated with the flood of experiences that came along from day to day—and from hour to hour. The only relief he could find was to make a record of his impressions of these events. And so posterity was to be enriched by the diaries which he kept when actually in the White House, recording what seemed of importance. It is this gift which Dr. Tyler Dennett brings to the host of those interested in Lincoln.

Clara Hay decided to print her husband's diaries—but not publish them—and distributed them among those few who were fortunate to have been drawn into Hay's exclusive orbit. Hay became so thoroughly acclimated to the Lincoln atmosphere in the White House that he was never at home or at rest elsewhere. He was at his best during the years from 1858 to 1865. He was happy and completely occupied as Lincoln's secretary, as Lincoln's companion, as the repository of Lincoln's secrets and confidences. What young Hamilton meant to Washington, what Madison meant to Jefferson, young John Hay, even to a greater extent, meant to Lincoln. Hay was not merely Lincoln's companion to laugh with, but one before whom Lincoln could think aloud. Young Hay possessed a versatility equaled by few. At twenty-six, he was the secretary of the ablest of those who ever occupied the White House. At thirty-one he was a diplomat. At thirty-four, he was editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. At thirty-seven, he was editor of the *New York Daily Tribune*. In 1883-84 he was a novelist. In 1890, he was to become Lincoln's biographer in conjunction with Nicolay. He was

Ambassador and Secretary of State at sixty-six, and a public speaker of rare ability.

It is to be regretted that Dr. Dennett's work stopped with December 1870. The biography of Abraham Lincoln was the great work of Hay's life—a work for which he had been preparing since he left the White House. The hope, the idea of presenting the Lincoln he knew to posterity never left him. And the work, having been prepared and given to the world under the supervision of Robert T. Lincoln, resulted in the greatest tragedy of John Hay's life. It is unfortunate that Dr. Dennett decided to omit Hay's letters to Robert T. Lincoln, to Henry Adams, and to John Nicolay—disclosing John Hay's own opinion, and his lament at the destruction of his magnum opus.

The letter to Robert T. Lincoln, January 27, 1884, in which he asked Robert to



John Hay in 1861

"read with pencil in your hand and strike out everything to which you object. I will adopt your view in all cases, whether I agree with you or not." Again in his letter to Robert of January 6, 1886, "I had struck out of my own copy . . . everything you objected to"—"before final publication I shall give you another hack at it with plenary blue pencil powers." The letter to Henry Adams, August 4, 1889. "I only wonder at the merciful Providence which keeps my critics away from the weak joints in my armor. Laws-america; if I had the criticising of that book what a skinning I would give it!"

There is no reason why the entire diary should not have been reproduced. All of it is vital. In this diary Hay spoke without any restraint; here he set down what few if any ever saw or heard—and the service of Dr. Dennett for making most of it available cannot be overestimated. True, some parts of it had percolated into the

big biography and into some magazine articles—but the consecutive comments so unconsciously made, as the spirit moved him, and as the events followed each other, are nowhere as authoritatively set forth. We see the Washington society as he saw it, pictured here with Hay's artistic touch and temperament, as a worthy supplement to Dr. Dennett's fine life study of John Hay.

Here is more proof that the definitive life of Lincoln is yet to be written. How could any of them be complete without the slightest reference to the John Hay letters and diaries? A most inviting task beckons to men of the mental stature of the author of John Hay's life and the editor of his letters and diaries.

Emanuel Hertz is the author of "The Hidden Lincoln" and "Lincoln Talks."

Lincoln on the Stage

ABE LINCOLN IN ILLINOIS. By Robert E. Sherwood. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1939. \$2.

TO one who has seen Mr. Sherwood's play, it is simply amazing how gripping is the Lincoln story, as presented by Mr. Massey from the text of Mr. Sherwood. It has something of the eternal in it. There is little that is new in it—

There is no new thing to be said of the mountains, of the sea or of the stars. The years go their way, but the same old mountains lift their granite shoulders above the drifting clouds, the same mysterious sea beats upon the shore and the same silent stars keep holy vigil above a tired world. And thus with Lincoln. For he was mountain in grandeur of soul, he was sea in deep under-voice of mystic loneliness, he was star in steadfast purity of purpose and of service; and he abides.

It is this idea which permeates Mr. Sherwood's play and book. He is one of the few who has grasped and held firm the elusive personality which is Lincoln's. He has achieved something which very few others have achieved. Lincoln's soul speaks in these lines—and nothing else really matters. He shows the long struggle which holds Lincoln with a stranglehold before the real Lincoln emerges. Many have sought that remarkable phenomenon—the real Lincoln—few have succeeded in disentangling him from the mountains of verbiage and useless impedimenta considered essential by the entire fraternity of Lincoln expositors which served but to befog what they were seeking. Each persists in his theory and buttresses up what he believes to be the solution—but the spirit is not in him or in his inept screed. But who can read this play and not feel that he is communing with Lincoln's great soul struggling to convince a skeptical and hostile world?

He is preparing slowly, but thoroughly, he is demonstrating to himself that this theory is sound—and when he is convinced, he becomes irresistible. When he

has done that he tells all in a single debate with Douglas. In it the author epitomizes all that Lincoln stands for up to that time, shows in a most satisfying manner that he is prepared to cope with this major problem of his life and of the nation's life—henceforth indissolubly linked. Lincoln convinced the American people then—and he convinces us now; Mr. Sherwood's version of the Lincoln message of 1858 and 1860 is so genuine and real that the reader forgets time and place and is ready to applaud the sentiment and the conclusion which the author puts into Lincoln's mouth in this, of all years, which is troubled with so many similar problems.

Tea with Lemon

THE ADVENTURE OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMIN. By Sylvia Thompson. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by FRANCES WOODWARD

SYLVIA THOMPSON, grown mellow with time, presents no problem in "The Adventure of Christopher Columin" except that of entertaining the reader. Unless it is fair to count as a problem the difficulty which this reader, at least, found in hitting on a proper pronunciation for the hero's surname.

Christopher is a middle-aged American whose wife is all for the cultural life as pursued in Green Plains, Mass. And Christopher, in the tradition of two or three rather more distinguished literary figures before him, runs away from it all. He is rich, and thus runs in considerable style—via the *Queen Mary* and the Channel planes. He advertises for, and finds, delightful English relatives. He writes to a mythical French relative who turns out to be even more delightful. He visits them all, and loves it. Considering the relatives already known to us personally, it would seem sheer lunacy to look for more. However, we are not, and alas never will be, the hero of a light English novel.

There are two agreeable English children to whom Christopher plays Fairy Bountiful. Sabrina, in Miss Thompson's nice phrase, "seems one moment like a flower, the next like a puppy," and is also prone to recite verse—good verse, at that. There is Christopher's wife's lover, and the Countess Zaza, and the statue from the sea, and Venice, and the blue, blue coast of France. There is the cozy rectory, and lots of good food, and a reasonable supply of good talk, and everything turns out beautifully in the best of several worlds, for everyone concerned.

One of the characters, along toward the end, inquires if one lump of sugar is not enough for the second cup? Miss Thompson has managed to keep just within this formula, and "The Adventures of Christopher Columin" is a well bred cup of tea with about enough lemon. Not everyone's dish, maybe, but cheering in this gray February.

Unfinished Symphony

SONS OF THE PURITANS. By Don Marquis. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

FOR those who wish to know how stories end, and for those who believed in Don Marquis's genius, this book is a tragedy:—it is unfinished; the approaches to death caught him at the 308th page. But what pages in these 308! Here are all the familiar strands and strains of the Mid-Western novel: the boy growing up out of tune with his Philistine environment, the rival Protestant sects that rule the town, the girl with too much sex, the evangelist with the same trouble, the eccentrics good and bad, the conflict between explosive life on a new soil and the grip of Puritanism gone stale.

They are all there and they make the plot, but with this every resemblance to routine Mid-Western fiction ends, and



From the jacket of "Sons of Puritans"

only greater comparisons, with Mark Twain, with Booth Tarkington at his very best, occur to the reader. For "Sons of the Puritans" was to be a very fine novel indeed, an American classic, I think, and even as Volume I, "Youth,"—which is what Don Marquis has written—it is, I believe, of durable quality.

For into this story of mid-America Don Marquis has put his view of life, which is tragic, ironic, as well as affectionate. He was one of those humorists whose imagination runs in three dimensions, with depth always below his height. He is at his best in this book, and not only in a satire which is sometimes fierce, as in the episode when the rival pastors quarrel over their sinners; sometimes tolerant and wise, as when a female evangelist carries her surplus of religious energy over into a sexual experience; sometimes severe to cruelty, as in his account of the village liberal captured by the fanatics in his senility. Delightful characters wander through his novel, as quaintly fantastic as archy the cockroach—Mister Splain who said he had been an outlaw with Jesse James, Miss Paisley the mortuary poetess, Aunt Matilda who was created to make the world virtuous. And there is one terrible figure of tragedy—Billy Boyd, the drunken printer, who

killed himself to escape the kind of Puritanism this story is written to lift into a bad eminence.

No one who loved Don Marquis or who wishes to see what he could contribute to American literature should miss this novel. Let them write the end for themselves—there is enough life, love, humor, hate, and imagination in what was written to build a dozen conclusions upon. Don, as the appendix shows, had not made up his own mind how to end.

Life in Quebec

LUCIEN. By Vivian Parsons. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

THIS novel is the latest recipient of the Avery Hopwood prize, awarded annually at the University of Michigan, and this is one of those satisfying instances in which the novel sheds as much honor upon the award as it receives. For "Lucien" ushers in a literary career evidently destined to be long and fruitful. By it Miss Vivian Parsons is revealed to be a writer endowed with most of the classic narrative talents: an easy, flexible prose style that leaves none of its traces upon the story, an understanding of the basic human emotions and the power to express them, a feel for the variety and differentiation of character, with the facility for illuminating this in the turn of a phrase, and above all the strong and dominating talent which can only be described as narrative facility. The story is the thing here, and one measure of her competence is the way in which the capacities catalogued so precisely above are fused to the vanishing point. You will read the story through to the end before you begin to think of the writing that has gone into it.

The book is set into a small city in Quebec. Lucien Charbonneau is a strong-willed and highly emotional girl whose life we follow from the aspirations of childhood to the frustrations and compromises of maturity. It is not a usual or a predictable life, for Miss Parsons has not needed to make use of any stock situations. There is the stamp of reality upon her people; they are fresh and vital, and as original as life itself. Lucien is loved by a young man too weak to save her from her father's cupidity. Her marriage to a rich farmer is arranged and consummated, and she finds herself at last impelled into this heartless arrangement by all those about her in whom she had trusted. Her development inside of this situation is the moving force of the book. The story of Lucien is so intertwined with other lives as to be, beyond its nature as a personal narrative, an evocative section of French-Canadian life, harsh, sentimental, traditional. Few first novels of recent years have offered such a thorough demonstration of distinctive ability.