

LINCOLN LORE

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SANDBURG'S SIX-IN-ONE LINCOLN BIOGRAPHY

Sandburg, Carl. *Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years and the War Years*. Harcourt, Brace and Company. Cloth, 702 pp., Price \$7.50.

The picture motif in this modern day seems to permeate all avenues of information for both our entertainment and intellectual development. It is not strange that a new emphasis is being placed on the value of literary condensation. An admirable example in this field is now available in the current work of Carl Sandburg, who has successfully squeezed out the juice—the publishers put it “distilled the essence”—of his half dozen Lincoln volumes and presented us with a stimulating one volume work covering the entire period of the Emancipator's life. The effort has been so noteworthy that Ernest Hemingway said upon being advised that he had received the Nobel Prize, “I would have been most happy to know that the prize had been awarded to Carl Sandburg.”

When the standard Nicolay and Hay ten volume *History of Abraham Lincoln* had run through several successive issues, one of the authors, John Nicolay, brought out his one volume condensation. It was an altogether satisfactory production and for a period of fourteen years was easily the best one volume work on Lincoln attainable. So when Sandburg's exhaustive six volume work was completed, consisting of *The Prairie Years* published in 1926 and *The War Years* appearing in 1939, it was anticipated that eventually an abridged one volume work would be forthcoming.

The editor of *Lincoln Lore* wrote to Sandburg's publishers on May 14, 1943 inquiring when one might expect such a volume. A few days later the reply came that Sandburg had “not yet started to write the book” but suggested that in any case “it would not be ready before 1944 or 1945.” We are happy indeed that apparently Sandburg was not forced to meet a premature publishing date, but took his own good time to bring out the volume.

Any one who has had the experience of condensing historical data which has already been boiled down will appreciate Sandburg's difficult task of reducing the text to one fifth its original wordage. Considering the new source material made available by the Robert Todd Lincoln papers and other recently discovered documents containing important historical data, it would have been much easier to increase rather than condense the wordage one fifth or more. One other consideration had to be taken into account by Sandburg, the expurgation of statements made untenable by more accurate sources now available.

Sandburg's matchless literary style will make his new contribution the most widely read Lincoln biography thus far published. It will create many new admirers for the Railsplitter-President and increase the interest of those already intrigued by the fascinating story of the Emancipator. In view of the author's faithful and inspiring presentation of Abraham Lincoln, it seems incongruous to pay much attention to inconsequential errors. Reviewers who snipe at some of an author's casual deductions and overlook the grand sweep of the epic are given little attention by the average reader.

The publishers, however, are often more responsible for inviting adverse criticism of a book than the author himself, because of the extravagant claims made in the preliminary announcements and on book jackets. The most hackneyed as well as the most preposterous term which reputable houses use in extolling their publications is the word “definitive.” The claim made for a book so designated is, that it is conclusive or precise—“not varying in the slightest degree from the truth.” Possibly a few authors are privileged to write a biography where the evidence is all in, if ever there was such a situation, but infallibility is one characteristic which the average writer seldom is willing to assume.

The publisher has featured on the front page of the jacket for the Sandburg work a statement that the volume is “definitive” and once again on an inside flap of the jacket the claim is repeated. Sandburg would be the first one to admit that such an extensive work would contain a great many situations where viewpoints might differ, especially in such a highly controversial field as Lincolniana. It is to be expected that errors in dates and minor details might occur, regardless of how many times a book has been read for mistakes. The editor of *Lincoln Lore* is not one to gloat over finding “an erratum” as he has contributed to many of them himself during the years, but as an offset to the publisher's claim that its volume is “conclusive” and “precise” just the first three paragraphs in the book are examined for inaccuracies.

First Paragraph Capt. Abraham Lincoln is mentioned as living in Rockingham County, Va. in 1776. This county was not formed until 1777, cut off from Augusta County where the Lincolns were actually living in 1776.

Second Paragraph (a) While most biographers have usually referred to the Pioneer Abraham's wife, Bersheba, as a member of the Herring family, there are no documents to sustain this assumption and there is a widely circulated tradition that Bersheba was Abraham's second wife.

(b) There is no evidence that Abraham Lincoln located on Green River when bringing his family to Kentucky, as alleged, but he did enter land there. It is generally accepted that he established his home on Long Run near Louisville. When he was massacred by the Indians he was not in the Green River country, but on Long Run, Jefferson County.

Third Paragraph (a) Sandburg places the death of Abraham Lincoln's grandfather in 1784. We have documentary evidence that it was in the month of May, 1786. (b) This date would make the son, Thomas, at that time, at least eight years old instead of six as noted.

We want to be the first to observe that these errors, and many others like them, are trivial and would have been passed by unnoticed had not the publisher overdone the “definitive” emphasis. As already affirmed, we believe Carl Sandburg's one volume work is by far the most readable and inspirational one volume story of Lincoln thus far published. However, it is not definitive, as it is neither conclusive nor free from error, and does not preempt the Lincoln biographical field.