

LINCOLN LORE

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SANDBURG'S ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE WAR YEARS

You have come to more than the end of a book when you complete Sandburg's fourth Lincoln volume and find yourself chanting the author's last words:

"And the night came with great quiet
"And there was rest."

You are conscious of having viewed a colorful sweep of pageantry where words instead of brushes have created scenery and lucid character sketches have introduced realistic personalities who appear in orderly imagery before your very eyes.

Not only have you witnessed the irrepressible conflict through four horrible years, but you have been able to hear the voices of hate and condemnation, spoken with both a northern and southern accent, heaped upon the man in the White House. And the words of hate, so profusely illustrated by caricature, almost over-shadow words of sympathy and encouragement. It registers as no other Lincoln book the public sentiment adverse to the administration. No one can claim now that the enemies of Lincoln have not been allowed to express themselves, even to the most profane utterance of all the profanities pronounced against him.

Charles Seymour, Sterling Professor of History at Yale, reviewed Sandburg's *The Prairie Years* in 1926 and commented that likely Sandburg would "leave to hands more skilled in statecraft and national affairs the White House years of our martyred President." But far from this, Sandburg has delved more deeply into Lincoln's activities during these years than any other writer. For the past fifty years there has been but one exhaustive study of Lincoln, The Nicolay and Hay history, containing ten volumes with a total of 1,200,000 words. Sandburg's four volumes on *The War Years* combined with his two volumes on *The Prairie Years* total 1,500,000 words. The Sandburg work must now be recognized as the most complete life of Lincoln thus far produced.

Although the dust of obscure and buried documents is on the author's fingers, he does not seem to be primarily interested in confirming or refuting controversial questions. Footnotes and references, the earmarks of the historian, are omitted although numerous facsimiles of heretofore unpublished manuscripts seem to be offered as a substitute for information about sources.

Historians wondered if Sandburg's folk-lore approach, used in *The Prairie Years*, could be adapted to a discussion of a Presidential administration with its diplomatic and military aspects. One fact is certain: Sandburg has not changed his method of attack. He still writes as he did in *The Prairie Years*, with the pencil of a news reporter always alert to stories of human interest.

The most severe critic will be obliged to admit that Sandburg has been able to sustain interest through an exceedingly long story. His portraits of famous characters who appear again and again in the pageantry may be appreciated from this presentation of verbatim descriptions by Sandburg of a few of the most familiar figures.

J. Wilkes Booth—A lunatic—a diabolically cunning athlete, swordsman, dead shot, horseman, and actor with an unstrung imagination, a mind deranged, a brain that was a haunted house of monsters of vanity, of vampires and bats of hallucination.

Benjamin Butler—Heavy of body and somewhat corpulent, with a well-rounded paunch, bald, sleepy-eyed with cunning, a cast in one eye, he was at every moment an actor with ready answers fitting his favorite combined role of the Man of the People and the Man Who Knows How.

Simon Cameron—Smooth of face, sharp-lipped, with a delicate straight nose, a finely chiseled mask touched with fox wariness.

Salmon Portland Chase—A man trying to be a hero to himself, not knowing when he was hero, marplot, or simple snob.

John J. Crittenden—More a tradition than a living fact . . . a White House dinner guest of Presidents for forty years.

Jefferson Davis—Orator, horseman, man of fate.

Elmer E. Ellsworth—Well-knit . . . theatrical of stride, with "dark-brown hair that fell in careless, clinging curls about his neck, eyes of dark hazel that flashed and sparkled, a face smooth and fair as a maiden's, lips full and red, teeth of dazzling whiteness."

Ulysses Grant—Quiet manners, gravity, gray eyes, and a face with economy of expression . . . did not like show-off. He seldom swore.

Horace Greeley—Fair, pink-skinned, baby-faced, blue-eyed with a stare of innocence; with light, silky, almost albino hair—just a little diaphanous: people could see through him—and then again could not.

John Hay—Somewhat aristocratic . . . witty, suave, adroit . . . verse-writer and handy with the ladies.

Robert E. Lee—Cold and austere he seemed on parade in his official uniform, panoplied for duty . . . A physical frame "solid as oak," trained to hardships and loneliness . . . Unfailingly devout and pious, daily kneeling in prayer and meditation.

Winfield Scott—Three hundred pounds of weight, in shining gold braid and buttons . . . With age, dropsy, vertigo, and old bullets to carry, he could no longer mount a horse . . . cool, debonair, brave, loyal—and old, slow.

William H. Seward—Slouching, slim, middle-sized, stooped, white-haired, "eyes secret but penetrating, lively, with twinkling, a subtle, quick man, rejoicing in power."

Edwin M. Stanton—Nervous, asthmatic, strong man of many contradictions . . . stiff and proud rather than sociable, and on occasion was designated as "cheeky" . . . moody, and hectic . . . weird undergrowths of behavior swarming behind his black whiskers and black bushy hair, spectacled nearsighted eyes with a vehement stare.

Alexander Stephens—Little, frail . . . shrunken and dwarfish figure . . . in his slow-burning hazel eyes a touch of clairvoyance and communion.

Thaddeus Stevens—Scholar, wit, zealot of liberty, part fanatic, part gambler, at his worst a clubfooted wrangler possessed of endless javelins, at his best a majestic and isolated figure wandering in an ancient wilderness thick with thorns, seeking to bring justice between man and man.

Charles Pinckney Sumner—The scholar in politics, the most elegantly tailored man in House or Senate, wearing maroon vests, fawn gaiters, blue-violet neckties, high silk hat, cape over shoulder, gold-headed cane, gold watch chain.

Robert Tombs—Radiant, handsome, easily shifting from the air of solemn orator to quixotic comedian, smooth with always lurking angers.

Lyman Trumbull—Cold, shrewd, scholarly, humanitarian though no friendly mixer, accurate in statement, no demagogue, a clean politician whose word was dependable.

Ben Wade—Short, deep-chested, defiant-looking . . . day laborer, farm hand, cattle driver, schoolteacher, prosecuting attorney.

Gideon Welles—His short, thickset body had a massive head surmounted by a patriarchal wig, which with his white prophet's beard gave him a Neptune savor.

Abraham Lincoln, The War Years by Carl Sandburg. Four volumes, illustrated. Harcourt, Brace and Company. Trade Edition \$20. Limited DeLuxe Edition \$50.