

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN BOOK OF THE YEAR—1942

Annually the Lincoln Foundation Advisory Group, consisting of nineteen outstanding students of the Emancipator, choose what they consider to be the best Lincoln book of the year. The title for 1942 receiving the largest number of votes is, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, written by David M. Potter. Carl Sandburg's, *The War Years* is selected for the designation, "highly commendable."

On January 22, 1942 the editor of *Lincoln Lore* had the pleasure of addressing one of Professor Potter's history classes in Rice Institute, at Houston, Texas, and learned about his manuscript soon to be completed. The impression received then that a thorough and painstaking investigation in a rather limited field of history was being made, is substantiated by the appearance of the volume now in hand.

His book emphasizes certain procedure which always finds a sympathetic response from those who are interested in historical evidence. Every chapter shows the results of untiring effort and exhaustive labor; the documentation of the text could hardly be improved upon; and the scholarly approach indicates a thorough training in the fundamentals of analysis.

While the preface of a book usually gets at least a hasty reading, very often the sections which are found in the appendix are wholly ignored. A better understanding of Professor Potter's work can be gained by reading both the preliminaries and the concluding comments before a study of the book is made.

In the "Biographical Note" appended, Professor Potter states that "the success of the investigation depends less upon the exploitation of unused sources, than upon the close and critical scrutiny, dissection, and comparison of the sources already known." This approach indicates that the author does not enter the field of history primarily as a student in search for new evidence, but as a compiler of data already in available archives.

Prof. Potter has gathered an extensive, and valuable collection of important data relating to the period between the summer of 1860 and the spring of 1861. In some cases it may appear as if too much emphasis is given to documents of purely partisan viewpoints, for instance, the author states that the *New York Herald* was "violently and unscrupulously Democratic," yet he admits that the files of the paper "have been drawn upon freely in this study." This reaction does not imply, however, that Prof. Potter has been unfair in placing before his readers information and documents which would develop but one side of the controversial subject to which he invites your attention. In fact, it appears as if he has made a very serious effort to present an unusually fair cross-section of American political thought during a very critical period of the Nation's history. This gathering and organizing of sources for this particular period is a real contribution to Lincolniana, and as such, is worthy of recognition.

Prof. Potter affirms that the supreme objective of his thesis has been "to utilize this material in an intensive study—of the viewpoint of Lincoln and the Republican leaders in the crisis preceding the Civil War." His publisher announces that he has written "without a sectional bias." We wonder in the approach to such a highly controversial subject, try as best he might, the professor has been able to entirely eliminate from his findings, the influence of his own political and social background.

The acknowledgments in a book sometimes are of more value than mere words of appreciation; they often very definitely allow the reader to get a glimpse of the author's environmental training and the incentives which prompted

his interest in the subjects discussed. It is evident from Mr. Potter's statements that the late Ulrich B. Phillips was largely responsible for the author's early guidance in the field of history. Dr. Phillips was born in Georgia, his undergraduate work was pursued in the University of Georgia, and his published works were all on subjects which related to the South.

It does not seem as if "a Southerner,"—as Prof. Potter is called by his publisher, brought up on Southern political traditions, and tutored by a writer of Southern literature, would be the most sympathetic individual to analyze the motives of either the political group called the Republican party or of Abraham Lincoln, in their respective contributions during the secession crisis.

It would be quite a difficult task to find as early as 1860 very much Republican party sentiment to analyze, except as it found expression in the Chicago platform. Lincoln wrote to Lyman Trumble just sixteen months before the Chicago Convention expressing doubt, even then, whether the Republican party could "maintain its identity." Certainly Lincoln's party was still in a decidedly undeveloped stage when he became its nominal leader. Prof. Potter in referring to the stubbornness of the Republicans, comments on their "long mental conditioning," leaving the implication that the party had been organized for a long period of time.

The author does not give us a very pleasing picture of the origin of the Republican party. He claims it consisted of "zealots," and "office seekers of no conscience whatever" who had formerly been associated with the Whigs. It is a problem to understand how the author could discover very many commendable motives among a group which he classified as fanatics and self-interested opportunists, and we would surmise he would have some difficulty in looking at events from their viewpoint, or the viewpoint of the presidential nominee who was supposed to represent them.

One chapter in the book is given over almost entirely in an attempt to reveal what Lincoln was thinking at a time "when he refused to publicize his views." Excerpts from the first two or three paragraphs of the chapter are submitted, which reveal indirectly the author's appraisal of Lincoln as the President-elect, emancipator, literary genius and statesman.

"Despite the stature which Abraham Lincoln afterward assumed, he was, until he entered the White House, simply a lawyer from Springfield, Illinois—a man of great undeveloped capacities and narrowly limited background. He was far more fit to become than to be President.

"This fact may seem too obvious to justify notice, and, indeed, it would be, were it not for the fact that the Lincoln legend has obscured the shortcomings of the man, and has glossed over the periods of his life during which he groped and blundered. Consequently the picture of Lincoln coming east from Springfield with his misgivings and his misconceptions, is lost. Instead, there is a picture of a man following the well-marked path of destiny to abolish slavery, to console Mrs. Bixby, to reach maximum at Gettysburg, to give his life in the cause of Union, and, finally, to belong to the ages. Writers whose minds are colored by this 'knowledge of the end' are so preoccupied with justifying or discrediting Lincoln's ultimate course, that they ignore the plain evidence of his earnest efforts to avoid that course altogether. He was, in fact, reluctant to become an Emancipator—great or of other dimensions—and the conflict which immortalized him was a conflict which he had believed he could avert. In fact, when the conflict materialized, it represented a signal failure of Lincoln's policy."