

LINCOLN LORE

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THE LINCOLN READER

The question, "What is the best one volume life of Abraham Lincoln?" can now be answered without much hesitancy. *The Lincoln Reader* immediately takes its place as the most interesting condensed story of the Emancipator thus far published. Its selection by the Book of the Month Club assures its wide reading and therefore a renewed interest in the Lincoln tradition.

Several writers have anticipated publishing a volume which might be accepted as a contribution to a somewhat abbreviated study of Lincoln. It was well known among Lincoln students that the editor of *The Lincoln Reader*, Paul M. Angle, and J. G. Randall proposed to collaborate on such an undertaking in which Angle was to write the early years and Randall the latter years of Lincoln's life. The book never materialized although Randall went on to greatly extend his assignment into a manuscript which will eventually reach four volumes, two of which are already off of the press. Several years ago it was noised about that Carl Sandburg was preparing a one volume life of Lincoln but his publishers wrote on May 19, 1943, that as yet he had not started to write it, and concluded "so it could not be ready before 1944 or 1945." We are hoping it may some day be published. Reinhard T. Luthin spoke before the Civil War Round Table at Chicago in February and in the course of his remarks stated that he had about finished a one volume work in Lincoln but that he had no idea when it would be published.

The director of the Foundation had the pleasure of hearing Mr. Angle tell an audience at the Chicago Public Library on February 27 just how *The Lincoln Reader* happened to be compiled. He was very frank and generous to admit that the staff at the Rutgers University Press was responsible for the original idea and that he developed the text on the plans they had submitted. He said he recognized the difficulty which might arise from an attempt to bring proper chronological sequence out of so varied a contribution but he seems to have done an exceedingly fine job in this field. He was somewhat apologetic for the fact that the preparatory years consume more space than the presidential years. But he was more concerned about the futility of bringing into continuity the varied literary styles of the sixty-five different contributors to the book. However, the brief interludes prepared by the editor help to bridge over these fragments, so varied in their manner of presentation, but it is not likely that the large number of members of The Book of the Month Club will pause after each installment to compare the literary merit of the several authors.

A more important factor emerges than the marked variety in the literary style of the many authors participating in the work. This element is the wide diversity of the historical qualifications of the authors, extending from the anonymous scribe of unknown credibility to Abraham Lincoln himself. There are 170 separate sub-chapters in the development of the story with Carl Sandburg's fifteen contributions heading the numerical list. Nicolay and Hay's "History" comes second with 13 items and Lincoln's own statements follow with 12 excerpts. If we think in the terms of original sources however, the Herndonian school which includes the works of Herndon, Hertz, Lamon, and Weik largely predominates. There are 26 subchapters lifted from the above mentioned authors. Inasmuch as the four Beveridge excerpts all deal with subjects drawn from Herndon sources previous to the Illinois years, he should also be included in the classification above mentioned.

Another grouping of authorities might contain those who at some time have served as secretaries of the Abraham Lincoln Association, all Lincoln students of exceptional ability. The number of items used from their books are as follows: Angle 3, Barringer 1, Pratt 2, and Thomas 8. With the exception of Charnwood with 5 and Barton with 4 references, the rest are scattered with fewer contributions. One is surprised to find but two excerpts from Randall's extensive and dependable works and it does appear as if Miss Tarbell, featured in the publicity for the book, is "unworthily represented" in the one short piece of folklore utilized.

Compilations of writings usually undergo a leveling off process which may detract from the composition of some well informed participants and greatly enhance the works of those with mediocre talent. There is a widely separated viewpoint between tellers of legendary tales and students with the objectivity perspective. A compilation with such a diversity of contributors however will eventually strike an historical mean. Mr. Angle might have raised the scholarly atmosphere of *The Lincoln Reader* several degrees if he had done one of two things, either eliminated footnotes altogether or, better still, made a comprehensive use of them to make corrections where errors appeared. Without any pretense at using footnotes one could assume that the compiler acknowledged no responsibility for the accuracy of the text, but when one finds several mistakes corrected by the use of footnotes naturally he draws the conclusion that the statements left standing are accepted by the editor as factual. On page 10 Mr. Angle calls attention in a footnote that the date 1813 as used by Beveridge is in error and should read 1811. Thus the reader is under the impression that all dates have been checked for accuracy, but on page 4 the date 1784 in the text is left uncorrected when it is generally known the date should read 1786.

Again on page 51 the text carries the result of a tabulation as "277 votes against 3." Mr. Angle thinks it important to correct in a footnote the vote as reported by Mr. Lincoln "277 to 7." If an editor is so particular in making a correction of so slight a mistake the reader should be doubly assured that the other and more important misstatements of fact would be pointed out but such is not the case.

A critical reading of the first six chapters of *The Lincoln Reader* reveals more than fifty statements where the authenticity of the text might be questioned. Just what a detailed study of the remaining eighteen chapters would reveal is problematical. However, the corrections of purely technical matters and typographical errors are not so important as the propagation of pieces of folklore and fiction which do definite injury to a factual story of Lincoln. A few of these legends are here cited: The wild crab orchard home. The whiskey raft. The borrowed horses. The Dennis Hanks nativity stories. The half face camp. Thomas Lincoln's deception of Sarah Bush. The "angel mother" confusion. The vagabond theory. The Kelso tutorage. The law book in the barrel. The Logan-Lincoln-Herndon episode. And above all the Ann Rutledge story and its many impossible episodes.

Yet after making these rather critical observations we wish to repeat for emphasis the sentiment of the first paragraph of this review. We are in hearty agreement with Carl Sandburg who states that *The Lincoln Reader* is "The best one volume biography of Lincoln that can be bought, borrowed, or stolen."