

LINCOLN LORE

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THE UNION FINDS A HISTORIAN

LINCOLN FINDS A GENERAL by Kenneth P. Williams. 2 volumes, 902 pp. Macmillan Co., \$12.50.

The search of Abraham Lincoln for a capable general to direct the military forces of the nation, has found a literary counterpart in these post war years in the Union's attempt to find an able and sympathetic historian of the war. It is a strange coincidence that, "phoenix like," there should come forth, immediately after the final encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic, at Indianapolis, a historical contribution by a nearby Indiana University professor, which would have thrilled the now depleted ranks of the men who saved the Union.

Few books measure up to the extravagant claims made for them in the publisher's preliminary releases. When the announcement of Kenneth P. Williams' volumes *Lincoln Finds A General* first appeared, bearing such expressions as "unparalleled in the whole literature of the Civil War" and "changes our entire conception of the war," no unusual reaction was registered towards the so-called definitive volumes. However, with the appearance of the preliminary reviews which set the work apart as, "The first comprehensive military history of the Civil War ever written," and, "It has a ring of almost unassailable authenticity" there was a feeling that the three word review, "This is it," might after all, be applicable. The book that objective students of a certain period of American history have been patiently waiting for seems to have arrived, and at last the Union finds a Historian.

When the book itself was actually in hand and the profitable journey through the two volumes eventually pursued, it was indeed refreshing to find that the author felt the Union was not only worth saving but that it was worthily saved. We trust that the final two volumes beginning with Grant's taking command will not be postponed unduly.

The author, a university professor of mathematics who had extensive military experience, brings a keen analytical mind to the task, as well as the sense of acumen in the technique of war. The 128 thick volumes of *Official Records of the War* was the chief source of information.

The story opens with a preview of Ulysses S. Grant which leaves no doubt in the reader's mind who the general was that Lincoln had found. Furthermore, there is no speculation on the part of the author about the comparative stature of this General, when placed in review with other military leaders in the Civil War, who may have served on either side of the contest. The South also was quick to acknowledge that Lincoln at last had found a general for as soon as Grant was placed in command, General Longstreet in conversation with officers at Lee's headquarters remarked with reference to Grant, "That man will fight us every day and every hour until the end of the war."

Dr. Williams does not dodge controversial questions, and well supported with convincing authorities marshalled in the footnotes and more lengthy observations in the appendix, he goes to the very genesis of a dispute. Notably is the question of who is to be held accountable for beginning the war. He places the responsibility for initiating hostilities where Lincoln said it would rest if war came. The President in his First Inaugural in addressing the South said, "The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being your-

selves the aggressors." Williams does not believe that when one prepares himself against attack he is committing a hostile act.

Major General George B. McClellan's place in history as viewed by Dr. Williams is best set forth in the conclusion of the first chapter of the second volume in which he states, "McClellan was not a real general. McClellan was not even a disciplined, truthful soldier. McClellan was merely an attractive but vain and unstable man with considerable military knowledge, who sat a horse well and wanted to be President."

Referring to McClellan's political ambitions Dr. Williams holds that as early as the summer of 1862 McClellan promised Fernando Wood, mayor of New York City and another politician, that he would run against Lincoln in 1864. McClellan also wrote a letter "pledging himself to a conciliatory method of carrying on the war." Major General W. F. Smith who saw the letter said "it looked like treason." This new portrait of McClellan will stand out as one of the most important revelations of the book, illustrating the willingness of politicians without principle to even scuttle the ship of state if party ascendancy could be accomplished or maintained, and political ambition satisfied.

Admirers of Abraham Lincoln will be pleased to note that Dr. Williams submits much evidence which would reveal that the President was correct in the conclusion that the war should have ended at Gettysburg. The fame of General Meade does not take on added glory by a careful study of the post Gettysburg days. While the author may be preparing the way for the introduction of Grant, nevertheless Meade failed to measure up to the expectations of Lincoln in his search for a general.

The author displays his desire to go to the bottom of controversial questions by the way he handles the Maj. Gen. Fitz-John Porter case. He is convinced that Porter was guilty of the two charges brought against him, which findings were approved by the President and resulted in his dismissal. Observing the rehearing of the Porter case with Joseph Choate as the chief counsel, Williams is unshaken in his opinion that Porter was guilty. Williams feels that Grant's article under the caption "An Undeserved Stigma" appearing in the *North American Review*, could not have been based on a careful study of the evidence in the case, which of course does cast some reflection on Grant.

Although the value of the rather lengthy appendix has been mentioned, possibly one further note with reference to it might be timely. The contents are largely of controversial nature in which Dr. Williams explores arguments set forth by other writers on the Civil War with which he is not in agreement. Some of the books critically examined are Tilley's *Lincoln Takes Command*, Johnston's *Bull Run*, Shannon's *Organization and Administration of the Union Army*, Gordon's *A History of the Campaign of the Army of Virginia*, Milton's *Conflict: The American Civil War*, Williams' *Lincoln and the Radicals*, and Eisenschiml's *Why Was Lincoln Murdered*.

This reviewer wishes to withdraw and apologize for any criticism which he may have entertained towards the publishers when their preliminary announcements appeared with their almost unbelievable claims. In the author of *Lincoln Finds a General*, Kenneth B. Williams, the Union finds a biographer.