

# LINCOLN LORE

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Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor

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## PULITZER PRIZE WINNERS MENTION LINCOLN

The awarding of a 1950 Pulitzer prize to Carl Sandburg for his *Complete Poems* suggests the possibility that the Lincoln theme may have contributed something to its recognition and invites the perusal of other Pulitzer winners for Lincoln references. The big four classifications in current literature cited these books which were given recognition by the judges: biography, *John C. Calhoun* by Margaret Coit; fiction, *The Town* by Conrad Richter; history, *The Old Northwest* by R. C. Buley; and poetry, *Complete Poems* by Carl Sandburg.

### John C. Calhoun—American Portrait

Students of Abraham Lincoln are pleased indeed that subject matter relating to a contemporary of Abraham Lincoln was given recognition in the selection of the best American biography. In the very first chapter of her book, Margaret Coit presents the probability that during their early years Lincoln did not live in so dismal a solitude as Calhoun experienced which is probably correct as the backwoods tradition of the rail splitter has been greatly exaggerated (p. 9). Also, in an early chapter Lincoln is again brought in as a contrast figure to the "fastidious" Calhoun with respect to their circuit riding behavior (p. 49).

Several monographs, wholly untenable, have been published supporting the tradition that John C. Calhoun was the father of Abraham Lincoln. Margaret Coit accepts the folklore that Calhoun carried on some kind of a courtship with a Nancy Hanks, daughter of Ann Hanks, who lived with her mother in a tavern at Abbeville, North Carolina. The author has not been so easily misled as some historians into believing that this was the same Nancy Hanks who married Thomas Lincoln in Kentucky in 1806, a full year before the alleged Abbeville affair took place and three years before "Abe" was born (p. 49-51).

Lincoln is again brought to the attention of the reader in the chapter on "Slavery—The Theory and the Fact." He is mentioned as having defined the tyranny of slavery as a system whereby "you work and earn bread, and I'll eat it" (p. 303).

### The Town

*The Town* by Conrad Richter which received recognition for the outstanding novel of the year offered no occasion for the author to mention Lincoln. Chronologically the scene is too early for Lincoln's emergence as the story follows the Indian wars with General Anthony Wayne and Chief Little Turtle coming in for some attention. The story is oriented in Ohio while Lincoln during this period was a youth growing up in Southern Indiana.

### The Old Northwest

Inasmuch as Abraham Lincoln is easily the outstanding figure produced by the old northwest and one of the world's great men, specific references to the environments which contributed to his growth might be expected in this two volume work by an Indiana author. Dr. Buley, however, in one paragraph disposes of Lincoln as far as any attention to his immediate surroundings are observed, in the following language:

"The Andrew Jacksons, Abraham Lincolns, and Andrew Johnsons were, to one way of looking, not unique, not even strikingly exceptional: like Daniel Boone they became known because they later got into conspicuous spots. In every western community of any size were other men just as able, men who in all probability would have accredited themselves just as well, had the accidents of history happened differently; (p. II, 328, 329).

On only one other occasion does the name of Abraham

Lincoln creep into the text when the author refers to Lincoln as an aspiring politician and makes the following quotation from Lincoln's announcement as a candidate for the Legislature in 1832.

"I can only say that I view it as the most important subject that we as a people can be engaged in. That every man may receive at least a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institution, appears to be an object of vital importance . . ." (p. 327).

On the four other occasions when Lincoln is mentioned in this two volume work his name appears in the footnotes: his enlistment in the Black Hawk War (II p. 71), copy of his announcement as a candidate for Illinois legislature in 1836 (II p. 176-177), mentioned as a Whig (II p. 232), and also as a Whig elector (II p. 246).

### Complete Poems

A brief autobiographical sketch which Sandburg prepared for the preface of his *Complete Poems* makes mention of his six volumes of biography although no reference is made to subject matter or titles of these books on Lincoln. The name of Lincoln does appear in the preface, however, in an appraisal which Lincoln made of the Declaration of Independence, calling it an "immortal emblem." (XXVII-XXIX)

When Sandburg's selection of *Chicago Poems* was published in 1915 he seems to have been paying some attention to studies of Lincoln in bronze. The Lincoln penny comes in for comment (p. 20) as well as St. Gaudens' heroic statue in Lincoln park (p. 27). The theme of "the peepul" is always of interest and his Lincolns always come forth from the people (p. 71). In the section entitled *The Cornhuskers* he presents in "Fire Logs" a portrait of Nancy Hanks dreaming of the coming of a tall man (p. 102).

The poet's impression of Lincoln's home town was associated with "Knucks" as he entitles the lines—brass knucks such as those used by ruffians. Observing these instruments of punishment in a Springfield store Sandburg recalled Lincoln's expression "with malice toward none" (p. 121). The lines under "Cool Tombs" emphasize Lincoln's attitude towards his enemies (p. 134).

The Lincoln theme finds expression in the *Complete Poems* more often in the later verses when the poet appears as the "Wandering Troubadour" singing his ballads for "the peepul." It was not until ten years after Sandburg wrote his *Prairie Years* that he composed a Lincoln poem of some length (156 lines) in which he submitted rhetorical questions: respecting Lincoln as a poet, a historian, and a patriot (p. 521-525). Reference to the Gettysburg Address allowed Sandburg to give further emphasis to the phrase "of the peepul, by the peepul, and for the peepul" (p. 587). Later Sandburg referred to profiteers as "respectable scoundrels" so defined by Lincoln (p. 606). In 1941 when in the midst of the war years the poet wrote under the caption "Is there any road to Freedom?" he used one of his favorite Lincoln expressions "we must disenthral ourselves" (p. 625). The song about "Mr. Longfellow and his Boy" was apparently reviewed to reveal that President Lincoln cried when he read Longfellow's poem "The Building of the Ship" (p. 632-634).

The most impressive verse on Lincoln, appearing in *Complete Poems* was read by Sandburg at William and Mary College in 1944 and is entitled, "The long shadow of Lincoln: a Litany." Here the poet again uses Lincoln's expression "we must disenthral ourselves" as a feature emphasis (p. 635-637).