

LINCOLN LORE

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THOMAS' ONE VOLUME LINCOLN

Thomas, Benjamin P. *Abraham Lincoln*. Alfred A. Knopf, N. Y.
Price \$5.75

Today there has been released an epochal book in the field of Lincolniana, a full length one volume biography entitled *Abraham Lincoln* and written by Benjamin P. Thomas. It is such a book as Lincoln admirers have been clamoring after for many years. It immediately takes its place along with three other earlier volumes to form a select coterie in the vast accumulation of books about the Emancipator.

From the time the first campaign stories of Lincoln were printed in 1860 until the present day the question has been asked with regularity, "What is the best full length one volume biography of Abraham Lincoln?" Only at long intervals have there appeared contributions which were eligible for consideration in answering this query. The Thomas book is a direct challenge to the ascendancy of a title which has been predominant in this field for 30 years.

The first of these notable one volume biographies appeared the year after Lincoln's death and the author was Dr. Josiah G. Holland. As a young man Dr. Holland taught school at Richmond, Va. and later became Superintendent of Schools at Vicksburg, Miss. When thirty years of age he settled in Springfield, Mass. and served as an editor of the *Republican*, published in that city. Here he began his literary career and became one of the founders and the editor of *Scribner's Magazine*. Holland's *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* published in 1865 was the earliest full length biography to be designated by the term "best." Over 100,000 copies were sold.

The favored one volume work which replaced Holland's book did not appear until 1902 when John G. Nicolay brought out his *A Short Life of Abraham Lincoln*. Nicolay was Lincoln's private secretary and the custodian of his official papers for many years after the President's death. Nicolay had collaborated with John Hay in 1888 on a voluminous history of Lincoln. The position he occupied in relation to the President gave his work an authoritative tone which it has retained to this day. Dr. W. E. Barton writing as late as 1920 refers to this contribution as "the most important and valuable single volume life of Lincoln in print." It is a worthy member of the big four, one volume group.

It was not until 1916 that Lord Charnwood's *Abraham Lincoln* appeared on the scene and it was immediately accepted in both England and America as the finest literary production appearing up to that time in the Lincoln field. It was an excellent interpretative volume as well, and it soon superseded the Nicolay work. Charnwood's volume for thirty-six years has been the most highly recommended one volume work on the Lincoln shelf and it may continue to be our best literary production. On the jacket of one of the many editions

the publisher makes the statement that "the book never can be superseded," but a newcomer has already accomplished the seemingly impossible task.

The book by Thomas, successor to Charnwood, has already been acclaimed as the best full length one volume work on Lincoln ever written. The author received a Ph.D. from John Hopkins University in 1929, taught history at Birmingham Southern College for three years and then was chosen as executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association at Springfield, Ill. Here in the Lincoln country he recreated the atmosphere in which Lincoln moved by keen observation and by writing some monographs on the subject. This allowed him to orient Lincoln objectively, which Charnwood was never able to do.

Charnwood might be associated with Holland because of the literary excellency which both achieved, but Thomas should be paired with Nicolay. The opportunity to reevaluate the Lincoln papers, which Nicolay also had used for his work, contributed much to the accuracy of the Thomas text while his function as an advisory editor of the forthcoming *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* in nine volumes, assures one that nothing of importance in the manuscript field has escaped his notice.

Condensation—the most arduous burden which confronts an author who aspires to write an adequate full length one volume Lincoln—became especially burdensome to John Nicolay after collaborating in the 10 volume history. A more difficult task of condensation confronted Thomas with the tremendous amount of source material at hand. With the exception of Charnwood with 453 pages, the size of the other three noted volumes are almost identical: Nicolay, 555 pages; Holland, 544 pages; and Thomas, 548 pages. The various formats used in the printed pages which call for different length lines and different styles of type, give the approximate wordage as follows: Holland, 201,000; Nicolay, 175,000; Charnwood, 181,000; and Thomas, 197,000.

There are 20 chapters in the book by Thomas. The chronological sequence might be broken down into three sections. Four chapters take Lincoln from birth to marriage, six reveal him as a developing politician plus a little law, and the remaining ten give an account of his statesmanship as President of the Nation. While in round numbers these seasons represent 30, 20 and 5 years respectively, yet the relative importance of the periods as presented by Mr. Thomas seems to create a proper synthesis.

We rejoice that an American writer has at last captured the honor of writing the best full length one volume work on Lincoln now available which distinction has long been coveted by England.