

LINCOLN LORE

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THOMAS NAST'S ILLUSTRATIONS OF LINCOLN EPISODES

The rapidly increasing interest in the story of the Civil War may be traced to at least three primary factors: current books by outstanding objective historians, growth and activities of Civil War Round Tables and the approaching centennial anniversary of the mobilization period. Naturally Abraham Lincoln occupies the center of the stage with Lee and Grant attracting their rightful share of attention. Some artists of the period will be recalled whose portraits of men in the public eye and colorful recordings of important battles have helped to visualize strategic episodes in the contest. Among these illustrators the name of Thomas Nast will stand out in bold relief.

Nast was born in Landau, Bavaria, September 27, 1840. At six years of age he was brought to the United States and when but fourteen became a draftsman for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Paper*. In 1860 he went with the *New York Illustrated News* and received his apprenticeship as a war illustrator by following Garibaldi in his European battles. He furnished drawings for the *Illustrated London News* and *La Monde Illustre* of Paris as well as his New York paper. Nast was back in America by 1862 and as early as the month of May he began his series of war sketches for *Harper's Weekly* which he continued throughout the hostilities. When he was thirty-three years old he supplemented his magazine contributions by lecturing, illustrating his speeches by caricatures as he talked. He was very active in his profession up to the time of his death in January 1903.

Harper's Weekly in its June 3 issue for 1865 printed a note of appreciation for the work of its artists which included Thomas Nast—"already known to our readers." The name of Nast however, is not among those who had been at the front—"scarcely less imperilled than the soldiers", implying that Nast did not make his battle sketches from personal observations but from either pictures or word descriptions of events. It might be said that his illustrations dominated the pages of *Harper's* as very often the cover picture as well as the impressive double page spread in the middle of the magazine were by him. His drawings helped tremendously to stimulate national moral in the home as most of his subjects were inspired by current events which appealed to sentiment. The drafts, the presidential proclamations, fast days and human interest episodes were featured.

On the back page of *Harper's Weekly* one usually finds a war cartoon by Nast in which he often uses the President as one of his figures. His portrayal of southern leaders was especially severe and for scheming politicians north or south he was "a thorn in the flesh." One of them said, "I don't care what they write about me but can't you stop those terrible cartoons."

The authors of *The History of the Nineteenth Century in Caricatures* caption one of its chapters "Thomas Nast" and observe that it was Nast "who first gave American caricature a dignity and a meaning." Possibly Nast was more responsible than any other artist for the gradual evolution of a "Brother Johnathan" into an

"Uncle Sam." Nast had clothed Lincoln with striped trousers, starred vest and blue coat and one editor commented, "The whole conception of our present Uncle Sam probably owes more to Lincoln than any other man," especially as he was drawn by Nast.

His more important Lincoln studies came at the close of the war and one of the most impressive exhibits was one entitled "Restoration of Peace." It carried a subtitle "Harmony and Good Feeling between the Sections." A portrait of Lincoln occupied the center of the drawing with excerpts from the Second Inaugural Address: "With malice towards none with charity for all . . . cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Associated with the picture of Lee are his words "Restoration of peace should be the sole object of all." Beside the picture of Grant is the expression in quotation "Let us have peace". At the top of the drawing is a portrayal of Washington and at the bottom a field scene with a plowman and his family under which is this famous statement of Grant to Lee, "Tell your men to take their horses home with them to help them make their crops."

Nast also did some portrait painting and one he made of the President has been erroneously referred to as the last painting of Lincoln with the implication that it was from life. It shows the President seated and the portrait to the waist is copied from a famous Brady photograph while the lower part of the body is apparently worked in by Nast.

The closest approach which Nast ever came to producing a masterpiece was his drawing of "President Lincoln entering Richmond" at the close of the war. Mr. Lincoln is portrayed with Tad holding to his hand walking up a street in Richmond with great crowds surrounding him. One negro woman with a baby in her arms has kneeled to kiss Lincoln's hand. Except for a few sailors and one officer, the rest of the assembled characters are negroes. The possibilities of developing this drawing into a historic painting were still entertained by Nast as late as January 1895 when he made a proposition to the State Board of Agriculture of Illinois to paint such a study for their art gallery at the fairgrounds. Apparently he sent a 4 ft. x 5 ft. copy of his old 1865 drawing in color to the committee for observation.

The death of Lincoln opened the way for Nast to create drawings for several large woodcuts 20" x 14". These various studies were used for several weeks after the assassination as double page spreads in *Harper's Weekly*. It was in producing this type of work where Nast was at his best.

As late as July 15, 1901, two years before his death, Nast drew what was probably his last picture of Lincoln. The artist made a sketch of himself with brush and pastel standing beside an easel on which there was a portrait he had made of Lincoln. This interesting study done on a piece of cardboard was presented to A. W. Gourley, a Springfield acquaintance of Abraham Lincoln as well as a close friend of Thomas Nast.