

A Lincoln Portrait—and Monument

ABRAHAM LINCOLN: *The Prairie Years and the War Years*. By Carl Sandburg. Illustrated. 762 pp. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$7.50.

By ROBERT E. SHERWOOD

OUR American poet, historian, minnesinger and goat-breeder, Carl Sandburg, has taken the time to cut his six volumes on Lincoln, "The Prairie Years" and "The War Years," down to one volume, which contains much, but obviously not all of the grandeur of the originals. It is, of course, a fine and incalculably valuable book and those who never got around to reading the full work should be deeply grateful for its publication and for all the labor and the pain that Mr. Sandburg must have put into its preparation. Those who did read the originals with admiring care—and with inspiration and love—may be permitted a lament or two for some grievous omissions.

In addition to the drastic cutting, Mr. Sandburg has also done some revision. For since "The Prairie Years" was published thirty years ago the list of Lincoln books and pamphlets on the shelves of the Library of Posterity has grown from a mere sixteen hundred items to more than four thousand, and there have been corrections of fact and blastings of legend added to the record.

One of these is the negation of the lovely story of the part played by Ann Rutledge in the Lincoln drama and of his inconsolable grief at her death which seemed to explain so much in his weird character—the character that Carl Sandburg once described as "a baffling Hamlet of democracy." It has been pretty well established by recent biographers that there is no valid, documentary evidence to justify the assumption that a romantic attachment ever existed between that "Amiable Maiden," Miss Rutledge, and young Abe. However, remembering how beautifully Mr. Sandburg had written about this presumably spurious romance in "The Prairie Years," I for one couldn't care greatly whether it was true or not; my feelings about the Ann Rutledge story reflected those of Voltaire about God.

MR. SANDBURG, in his new volume, takes proper cognizance of the lack of evidence exposed by the literalistic kill-joys who seek to deprive young Abe of his first, ill-starred and completely appropriate romance, but Mr. Sandburg is not the one to allow this to quench entirely his poetry or

Among Mr. Sherwood's several plays is "Abe Lincoln in Illinois," which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

his concomitant sense of fitness. He now writes of the famous romance between Abe and Ann: "They were both young, with hope endless, and it could have been he had moments when the sky was to him a sheaf of blue dreams and the rise of the blood-gold red of a full moon in the evening was almost too much to live, see and remember." (The italics in that quotation are mine, and identify the words which have been added to the same passage in "The Prairie Years"; I beg to endorse them.)

In "The Prairie Years" Mr. Sandburg used a version of Lincoln's farewell speech at Springfield that differed from the one in the Nicolay and Hay "Complete Works." I do not know the reason for this, but I am glad that he now reverts to the standard text,



Photograph from "Abraham Lincoln."

Robert Todd Lincoln considered this Mathew Brady photograph, taken Feb. 9, 1864, the best ever made of his father.

which seems to me to be far superior. The exact text of this and many other unprepared Lincoln speeches is always open to question. One can only say, "That sounds right." For instance: in the Springfield farewell as recorded by Nicolay and Hay (who were his secretaries at the time) are the wistful words, "I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return." There is a cadence in these words that identifies them with the same man who said later at Gettysburg, "The world will little note nor long remember * * *."

Mr. Sandburg has been ruthless in cutting his own text. It seems that about 75 per cent of the original six volumes has been removed. Perhaps some editors did the major work of preliminary elimination—but, even so, Mr. Sandburg must have displayed Olympian fortitude in agreeing to it. I am sure that had I been present at this oper-

ation I should have been moved to shout, time and again, "Oh, no—not that!"

There was a wonderful character who kept recurring throughout "The War Years." She was Mrs. Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, a South Carolinian, a loyal daughter of the Confederacy, a friend of Jefferson and Mrs. Davis and a superbly lively diarist. A few of Mrs. Chesnut's observations on the progress of the War Between the States and the persons involved remain in the new volume, but I miss many that are left out; for example, her comment on her enemy, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant: "He don't care a snap if men fall like the leaves fall; he fights to win, that chap does."

Of course, Mrs. Chesnut's "Diary from Dixie" is available elsewhere, but only in Sandburg will you find that magnificent epitome of Lincoln's funeral, written in a sort of marching blank verse, and including the lines:

"It was garish, vulgar, massive, bewildering, chaotic.

"Also it was simple, final, majestic, august. . . .

"The people, the masses, nameless and anonymous numbers of persons not listed nor published among those present—these redeemed it.

"They gave it the dignity and authority of a sun darkened by a vast bird migration."

All of this memorable passage, which occupies no more than one page, has been removed. I beg that it be restored in future editions.

Comparisons between this one-volume Sandburg and the great work by Benjamin P. Thomas published two years ago are odious. As Mr. Sandburg said to Mr. Thomas, "I hope and believe the two books will stand on the Lincoln shelf as good companions, supplementing each other." They will. Their common subject provided ample room for both, the historian-scholar and the historian-poet. Mr. Thomas has said it himself: "The realist's ruthless searching gives the necessary facts. Yet the realist is ill-advised to scorn the idealist's sensitivity to those soul-qualities of Lincoln which documentary facts alone may not disclose." And Gamaliel Bradford once said of Lincoln: "He still smiles and remains impenetrable."

Poet that he is, Carl Sandburg comes as close as could any mortal man to sensing the soul-qualities and penetrating the impenetrable. His portrait of Abraham Lincoln, whether in one volume or six, is a monument that will stand forever—a monument to subject and author alike.