

**CARL SANDBURG'S ABRAHAM LINCOLN**

**by**

**BILLIE FAYE HARDING, B.A.**

**A THESIS**

**IN**

**ENGLISH**

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of Texas Technological College  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for  
the Degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**Approved**

^

**Accepted**

**August, 1966** ✓

AL  
805  
T3  
1966  
No. 85  
cop. 2

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am deeply indebted to Professor Warren S. Walker for his helpful criticism and direction of this thesis.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Any study of Carl Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and Abraham Lincoln: The War Years can be rewarding whether it be for a short period of time or a long period. To get the full value of the work, however, one should study it minutely over an extended period of time. Upon first reading the six volumes, the reader becomes swamped in the massive detail and loses much of the literary quality. Consequently, the best way to read the Lincoln biography is a little at a time. One can pick up any volume and read any chapter with pleasure, and by studying the work in such a slow and ruminative fashion, the reader can gain full appreciation of the writing ability of Carl Sandburg.

A study of Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years is especially rewarding because the reader gets not only significant biographical information but also much of the flavor and color of the Midwest. Sandburg includes descriptions of so many of the little ordinary things that made up the life of Midwesterners during the last century. He writes about what they ate, how they dressed, what they

did for entertainment, what they thought, and how they talked. These two volumes are written in a lyrical mood that further enhances the appeal of the material.

In . . . The War Years the reader gets a vivid picture of the Civil War and the reactions of the people in a time of crisis. He is taken from conferences in the capital to the Battle of Gettysburg, from Lee's army to Grant's headquarters. He hears the comments of the people; he reads the daily newspapers; he sees the carriages going down Pennsylvania Avenue; he visits in the White House. All of these things add up to an unforgettable picture of the great crisis in American history.

But more important, the reader of Sandburg's monumental tribute to the Prairie President learns to understand and appreciate Abraham Lincoln. The nature of Lincoln's personality, complex and elusive, was a challenge to any writer; but Sandburg met and conquered the challenge. The reader of the Lincoln biography sees the many facets of Lincoln--the country boy who always had a humorous story for any situation, the scholar who enjoyed Shakespeare, the man who wept over the death of a soldier, and the President who was shrewd in politics. The reader learns to understand Lincoln as he never has before, mainly because Sandburg very painstakingly paints the portrait in minute detail of Lincoln's growth through fifty-odd years. Sandburg did

what he set out to do: he articulated a legend.

Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years is encased in two volumes with a total of nine hundred and eight pages. These volumes began as a story for children, but soon Sandburg learned that the character of Lincoln was much too complex for the understanding of children. He then gave up the idea of a children's book and published . . . The Prairie Years as a book for adults in February, 1926. Harcourt, Brace and Company was the publisher. The years passed and Sandburg found himself wanting to write the story of Lincoln the President. Then after long, drudging hours and days and months of work, Sandburg sent the four volumes of . . . The War Years to Harcourt, Brace. These were published in December, 1939. This time the pages numbered to nearly twenty-five hundred.

. . . The Prairie Years and . . . The War Years met with immediate success. The volumes sold quickly. Furthermore, almost all of the reviewers gave high praise. Then in 1940 Sandburg received one of the highest honors a writer can receive, the Pulitzer Prize in the area of history.<sup>1</sup> Thus his books were important to scholars as well as to the public. At the present time, the biography's popularity and importance has grown to such an extent that excerpts

---

<sup>1</sup>The Pulitzer Prize in biography had already been awarded and so they gave Carl Sandburg the prize in history.

are contained in high school anthologies. Moreover, there is little doubt that in the years to come the reputation of Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln . . . will continue to grow and flourish.

The writer of the present study first became interested in Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln . . . several years ago while she was teaching a course in American literature in high school. The anthology that was used gave high praise to Sandburg's work. Then, too, biography has been a neglected child of literature for too many years, though it is, undeniably, an important field and deserves more attention. Thus, the present study was begun.

This study has considered four areas: (1) the suitability of Carl Sandburg as Lincoln's biographer; (2) the relationship between Abraham Lincoln . . . and the New Biography; (3) the literary and stylistic aspects of the Lincoln biography; and (4) the criticism of the biography. In the first area, concerning the biographer, the writer wishes to establish proof that Sandburg was unequivocally suited to write the Lincoln biography. His attitude toward his subject was right. He felt that Lincoln was a great man, a man deserving of praise, but that he was a human and thus capable of human frailties. Second, Sandburg grew up in the region where Lincoln spent much of his life and was, therefore, immersed in the customs of that area. He was

thoroughly familiar with Lincoln's background from first-hand experience.

In the second area, "Abraham Lincoln . . . and the New Biography," the writer has taken the position that the Lincoln biography is neither completely patterned after the principles of the New Biography nor completely in the older tradition of the nineteenth-century biography. It is a transition between the two.

In the third area, the literary and stylistic aspects of the Lincoln biography, the reader wishes to point out that the outstanding qualities of the six volumes lie in the way they are written. The legends, tall tales, humorous stories, and Lincoln quotations give the books interest. The style of writing gives the work literary quality. Carl Sandburg is a storyteller, a poet, and a journalist; the combination of the three produce a style worthy of good literature.

Finally, the main purpose of the fourth area, the criticism of the Lincoln biography, is to point out how the reviewers in 1926 and in 1939 received the work and to analyze more recent criticism. However, one must bear in mind that the time element involved here is still too brief to give much perspective.

Consideration of certain areas had to be omitted from the present study because of the limits of time and length

imposed upon such projects. One of these areas is the authenticity of the data Sandburg used, a subject for the historians but one so broad and so controversial that even they cannot agree on it. The reviewers and critics, themselves often historians, have done some work in this area. Where value judgments are made about historicity in the following pages, they are always derivative.

Another undertaking that has not been attempted in the present study is a comparison between Sandburg's Lincoln and that of other biographers. Such a study would certainly be rewarding, but, again, would require a Lincoln scholar. Among the major "lives" that would definitely have to be closely analyzed--they were only consulted for the present study--would be these:

Charnwood, Godfrey R. B., 1st Baron. Abraham Lincoln. Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1917.

Herndon, W. H. and Weik, J. W. Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life. 2 vols. Cleveland: World, 1965. [Written in 1889.]

Nicolay, John G. and Hay, John. Abraham Lincoln: A History. 10 vols. New York: The Century Company, 1914. [Written in 1890.]

Randall, James G. Lincoln the President: Springfield to Gettysburg. 2 vols. New York: Dodd Mead, 1945.

Tarbell, Ida M. The Life of Abraham Lincoln. 2 vols. New York: Lincoln History Society, 1903.

Thomas, Benjamin. Abraham Lincoln. New York: Knopf, 1952.

In order that there be no misunderstanding between the

reader and the writer of this paper, certain terms should be defined. The word myth is used here to mean a story created by the folk and based upon emotion and religious mysticism.<sup>2</sup> The word legend is used to mean a story or a series of stories that, though not entirely true, are based initially upon fact. Legend is also used to refer to a person about whom such stories are told. The word poetry, as it is used here, means passages which convey emotion by the use of suggestive language and rhythm. Such passages need not have conventional and consistent meter. Style refers both to the effect achieved by writing and to the techniques used in achieving it, techniques such as metaphor, simile, idiom, vernacular, diction, development of imagery, and so on. With these definitions in mind, the reader should be able to understand better what the writer is saying.

It is hoped that the problems studied and discussed in this paper will benefit anyone interested in biography as a part of literature. Carl Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln . . . deserves to be called literature of a high degree, and the author of the present study hopes to prove that it is worthy of study as a product of one of America's leading contemporary writers.

---

<sup>2</sup>Charles Ramsdell, "Carl Sandburg's Lincoln," Southern Review, VI (Winter, 1941), 441.

## CHAPTER II

### THE BIOGRAPHER

Leon Edel once said, "When a writer sits down to write, all his past sits behind his pen."<sup>1</sup> That statement certainly applies to Carl Sandburg and the writing of the biography of Abraham Lincoln. Everything in Sandburg's life from his boyhood to the time of the final editing was equipping him to write the six-volume biography. Moreover, the conception of the idea of writing a good biography of Lincoln was no sudden inspiration to Carl Sandburg. He had thought about it all his life, whether consciously or subconsciously. Hence, the finished books were in a sense, a lifetime work.

Sandburg himself probably could not say exactly when he first became interested in Lincoln. Perhaps it dated from the time when he listened to the stories of men in Galesburg who remembered the Lincoln-Douglas debates that were held in that town in 1856. Certainly Sandburg heard them talk about having been present at the debates and having seen or spoken to Lincoln. From them he probably also heard some of the

---

<sup>1</sup>Leon Edel, Literary Biography (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), pp. 42-43.

legends of Lincoln that were so prolific in the Galesburg area. Or perhaps his first real interest stemmed from his professor at Lombard College, Philip Green Wright, who was one of the great guiding hands in Sandburg's life. Wright had become interested in Lincoln, and from him Sandburg heard ideas representative of a new movement "which had come to see Lincoln not only as exemplary but as representative and prophetic, not only a shaper of the American dream but also a product of that dream."<sup>2</sup> One of Wright's students, John C. Weigel, once wrote in an article for the Knox College publication, The Siwasher, that through Wright he had gained a conception of the real Abraham Lincoln, "'the kind of human being Carl Sandburg has given us in Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years.'" He goes on to write, "'And as I read it, Carl Sandburg, I wondered if even you know how much of Philip Green Wright shines through the rare beauty of your precious book!'"<sup>3</sup> Or perhaps Sandburg gained his interest through a disgust with the myth of Lincoln. The people, the folk, of America had created a myth that strongly followed the myths of old. It closely paralleled the story of Christ:

The boy Abraham was born in poverty and obscurity, the son of a carpenter; he exhibited in youth the divine qualities of tenderness and mercy toward all living things; under guidance of the Heavenly Father he rose

---

<sup>2</sup>Harry Golden, Carl Sandburg (Cleveland: World, 1961), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>John C. Weigel in an unidentified pamphlet quoted by Harry Golden, p. 69.

to the leadership of his people at the time of their greatest calamity; in humility and loving-kindness, but with inflexible will, he carried out his divine mission to save his country and free millions of bondmen; and then, because God willed a precious sacrifice in atonement for the people's sins, he died for them.<sup>4</sup>

Everyone from preachers to women's clubs, to old men on courthouse lawns had raised Lincoln to such stature that he no longer seemed human but divine. Sandburg deplored this conception of Lincoln, questioned the existence of such a man, asked whether or not "in certain moments, just for convenience, Lincoln might have stooped."<sup>5</sup>

In Chicago and Milwaukee, in later years, Sandburg heard a different version of Abraham Lincoln. To the people of this region Lincoln was a living philosophy with very little mythology attached. "He was not merely the war President of the G. A. R., not merely a convenient hook on which to hang a Sabbath-morning sermon. Nor was he simply a humorous storyteller in the memories of old men."<sup>6</sup> In short, he was a living human being who had been great and lived in the minds of people as an outstanding man. This conception Sandburg could believe; and perhaps here his first dedicated interest in Lincoln began, an interest which would set

<sup>4</sup>Charles W. Ramsdell, "Carl Sandburg's Lincoln, Southern Review, VI (Winter, 1941), pp. 441-42.

<sup>5</sup>Karl W. Detzer, Carl Sandburg: A Study in Personality and Background (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941), p. 199.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 76-77.

Lincoln free from the myth and place him on a plane where all peoples could understand him. In an interview with Yust in 1921 Sandburg said: "I have written other Lincoln poems . . . but I mean to write still another. It is a trilogy on Lincoln and it will aim to break down all this sentimentalizing about him."<sup>7</sup> Thus, in later years Sandburg did create a poem in the form of prose, a legend of Abraham Lincoln, not a sentimental legend but a legend that portrays the prairie President as a living philosophy of America.

Part of the reason for Sandburg's ability to create a legend of Lincoln is his early life on the prairie of America. It was through his associations and experiences in Galesburg that he gained such understanding of the early life of Lincoln. One biographer, Karl Detzer, has even gone so far as to parallel the early life of Sandburg to that of Lincoln. "They both had known the same hard poverty, the same hard labor, the same hard winters, the same soft spring winds."<sup>8</sup> Detzer goes on to describe other parallels. They had both worked in the fields of Illinois; they had both helped to build the family a house; they had experienced much the same boyhood pranks. Thus, Sandburg had only to look at his own childhood to get the feeling and emotion so necessary to portray the life of Lincoln.

---

<sup>7</sup>Walter Yust, "Carl Sandburg, Human Being," Bookman LII (January, 1921), p. 288.

<sup>8</sup>Detzer, pp. 166-68.

Another thing that Sandburg gained from his childhood in Galesburg was a "feel" for the way men talk and express their ideas. Much of this "feel" came from his working while other boys his age were still in school. It is with fondness that he talks about his days of delivering milk into the kitchens of Galesburg where he learned a great deal about people. But Sandburg himself admits that it was his job as a bootblack in the local barbershop that most influenced his early thinking. Here he heard all kinds of men discuss politics, religion, philosophy. It was from these men, too, that he heard stories of the early days of Galesburg and Illinois and learned the platitudes and idioms of the people.<sup>9</sup> How valuable these idioms and platitudes were when he came to write . . . The Prairie Years! Had he come from a wealthy family and had much formal education, perhaps his life of Lincoln would have been just another scholarly rendition. As it was, he came from poor, immigrant parents who knew the value of hard work, who knew the meaning of democracy, who knew the love of the land. They somehow transmitted that wisdom to Sandburg.

Another early influence on the life of Sandburg was his reading. In his book, Always the Young Strangers, he mentions his avid reading of pocket biographies. From these he learned about many great men of the past. Later he read

---

<sup>9</sup>Richard Crowder, Carl Sandburg (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1964), p. 23.

everything he could get his hands on: Robert Browning, John Ruskin, Daniel Defoe, Washington Irving, Joseph Addison, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson. He liked everything he read.<sup>10</sup> Many times he was criticized by the local people of Galesburg for sitting with a book when he could be doing more important things, but his early reading and love of the printed word no doubt helped him in later years to give vivid expression in his poetry and his prose.

Through his love of reading and his ambition to write, Sandburg formed a friendship with Professor Philip Green Wright at Lombard College. Wright organized the Poor Writers Club, a group of young men wanting to develop their writing talents, who met on Sunday afternoons for reading and discussions. These informal meetings not only gave Sandburg a literary start but also gave him a large measure of the philosophy and wisdom of Wright, who influenced the young man immeasurably.

His associations with the "folk," his immigrant parents, his poverty, his sense of humor, his feeling about land, his devotion to democracy, his reading, his associations with Philip Green Wright--all these factors helped to equip Carl Sandburg for the writing of the life of Lincoln. Mark

---

<sup>10</sup>Golden, pp. 36-37.

<sup>11</sup>Carl Sandburg, Always the Young Strangers (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), pp. 258-269.

Longaker supports much of this view:

Written into his [Sandburg's] account of Lincoln there is a rich sympathy for time and place. Whether or not we accept the Lincoln which Sandburg re-creates, we must admit that the color of time and place is vividly painted. Out of this atmosphere, drawn indirectly by an author who has true familiarity with it, there emerges a man who is convincingly real.<sup>12</sup>

After his boyhood in Galesburg and his hobo days Carl Sandburg became a reporter in Chicago and Milwaukee. In those newspaper days he learned not only journalistic writing but, more important, he learned to recognize and respect the problems of all classes of people. In 1912 he was on the staff of the Day Book, which specialized in stories of the poor wage-earner. His contributions to this magazine were written with complete sympathy, whether right or wrong. The next year he was on the staff of System whose editor at one point made the following observation about Sandburg:

I sent Carl out on an assignment to interview some of the leaders in the "safety movement" and he came back with a short story which I planned to use in factory magazines. It was a typical story by Carl. It brought tears to my eyes. He had written it beautifully. He was sorry for this working man who had broken the rules and stuck his hand into a clipping machine and lost some fingers, but the story, as Carl wrote it, made you "hot under the collar" against management as if it were their fault.<sup>13</sup>

. . . The War Years attributes to Abraham Lincoln much the same attitude toward the poor and oppressed people.

---

<sup>12</sup>Mark Longaker, Contemporary Biography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), p. 249.

<sup>13</sup>Golden, pp. 200-201

Sandburg was also in sympathy with the Negroes. He saw and wrote of the 1919 race riots in Chicago and sympathized with the Negro's drive for equality. Heavily emphasizing this sympathy, Harry Golden, in his biography goes so far as to attribute to it Sandburg's desire to write the Lincoln biography.<sup>14</sup> During these reporter days Sandburg was equipping himself for the writing of the four volumes, . . . The War Years. The journalistic style which he developed, the journalistic recording of facts without opinion are brought to use in his biography of the war President. Detzer concurs with the view that Sandburg's ability as a reporter helped him write the biography:

Only a good newspaperman could have written certain passages of The War Years. The account of Lincoln's death is as superb a job of reporting as one finds in American literature, a piece of "straight news-writing," without a single useless word or unneeded phrase, wholly without emotion, but packed with the meticulous detail that makes great reporting.<sup>15</sup>

It was also during his reporter days that Sandburg actually began collecting materials for a biography of Lincoln. Whether he intended to write a biography at that time, or whether he was merely interested in Lincoln's life is a question for speculation. He did, nevertheless, gather material. His newspaper work afforded him the opportunity to talk to people who were also interested in Lincoln and

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>15</sup>Detzer, pp. 126-27.

acquainted him with the bookstores and libraries in which to browse for material. Harry Golden in his biography of Sandburg says This:

Vincent Starrett remembers Carl's gaunt frame bent over the ten-cent bin of the Clark Street Book store. The bin contained old bound magazines--Harper's, Century, Atlantic, etc.--with a lot of Civil War stuff. . . . The trough was a bit low so Carl used to sit himself cross-legged on the sidewalk while he hunted through the old magazine pages for reminiscences of his hero. When he found one he would rip out the relevant pages and take them inside, but of course he always paid for the whole book.<sup>16</sup>

While he was working on the Chicago Daily News, Sandburg quite often was found digging through the morgues of that newspaper for Lincoln material. He also haunted the public libraries where librarians considered him "a bumbling country correspondent."<sup>17</sup>

But more significant than his haphazard searching was his friendship with Oliver R. Barrett, who owned the largest private collection of Lincoln manuscripts in the country. Sandburg came to have access to them with the bonus of Barrett's interest and endless conversation about Lincoln.

Along with his quest for materials in Chicago, Sandburg made lecture tours all over the United States, at which times he would search out any shred of information that he

<sup>16</sup>Golden, p. 243

<sup>17</sup>Detzer, p. 141.

thought he could use. Sandburg made it a habit to check the location on a map when a club or school invited him to lecture. If the town or surrounding area promised to supply data from local museums, libraries, or newspapers, he quickly accepted the invitation. He also checked his notes to see whether or not some old man or woman who had known Lincoln lived in this area.<sup>18</sup> After his performance he would remain in the town a few days and talk to the old-timers or search out his information in libraries, newspapers, or private collections.

It was through these tours, about thirty a year, that Sandburg collected the mountainous piles of data about Lincoln and the Civil War period. The fact that he could travel all over the United States gathering information is evident in the six volumes he later produced, for there are quotations from archives of the Confederacy as well as the Union, quotations from Atlanta newspapers as well as Washington, stories of Southern people as well as Northern.

With so much data on hand Sandburg had a problem of storage. To solve this problem he created a filing system of his own, a system which an outsider would have a difficult time understanding. Each item was put into an envelope, and the envelopes were given such appropriate labels as "Gettysburg," "Looks," and so on.<sup>19</sup> His wife and

---

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

daughters helped him sort and file his voluminous materials, sometimes to their consternation. When the materials finally overflowed in his modest house, he stored them in the barn. Sometimes he ripped sections of books out, kept the sections in the house, and stored the gutted book in the barn.

Sandburg worked diligently gathering Lincoln material between 1919 and 1923. It was in 1921 that he began his unique filing system. By 1923 he had enough material to start writing something.

How exactly did Sandburg get started on his monumental six-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln? Undoubtedly there were many causative factors, but as Sandburg reminisced about it, years later, the answer to this question seemed simple enough. He had been writing the Rootabaga Stories for children, he explained to Harry Golden, and since he knew of no biographies of Lincoln written for children, he decided to write a biography of Lincoln for them.<sup>20</sup> In a conference with his publisher, Harcourt, a contract emerged for the children's book, and it is amusing to note that both Harcourt and Sandburg remember mentioning the idea for such a book first. And so Sandburg sat down at his typewriter and began writing. At first he actually did keep children in mind, but, gradually, he came to realize that much of the story of Lincoln was far too complex

---

<sup>20</sup>Golden, p. 239.

for the understanding of children. Harry Golden summed up the dilemma he faced:

There were situations and psychological factors involved that young people either would not comprehend or would understand only in part, that would confuse them. He had the choice of including them in a form so simple that they lost their meaning, or of leaving them out entirely and thus distorting a picture that for the sake of historical honesty should be complete and utterly clear.<sup>21</sup>

Sandburg commented, "I found myself not guiding, but being guided by, the material."<sup>22</sup> Gradually he gave up the idea of a biography for children and wrote it instead for adults. Even then he had problems:

"Often in my researches I would come to story material of a certain sort," he explains, and I'd ask myself, "are you putting this in just because it is about Lincoln, or because it's humanly interesting." I found I had to have that as a standard for a certain grade of material. It was as though I was operating a California orange-sizer. Certain material dropped out, other facts that were humanly interesting remained to go into the book. I was the patient sifter."<sup>23</sup>

When . . . The Prairie Years was published in 1926 it drew reams of praise from the reviewers.

Time passed and Sandburg found himself working on . . . The War Years. He says:

It was a fascinating work, and there were days I was at the typewriter sixteen and eighteen hours. Sometimes I was so dog tired I knew the only thing to do was to break away from the typewriter, the source

<sup>21</sup>Detzer, p. 160

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 159

materials, and notes. There were times there were shots of pain through my head that had me saying, "Could that be a forerunner of a brain hemorrhage?" A queer little prayer came to me, "Oh, Lord, if Thou wilt permit me to finish this task, then Thou mayest have me."<sup>24</sup>

There were days of discouragement, for the book grew to such proportions that Sandburg doubted that anyone would read it. But there were compensations. He humorously says, "The son-of-a-gun grows on you!"<sup>25</sup> He had come to feel a friendship for Lincoln so deep and abiding that when he had finished the chapter "Blood on the Moon," he wept. He says; "I was parting with him, after all those years, like people who had lived with him. When Lincoln died, for a time lights went out for me. The tears came."<sup>26</sup>

Who but Carl Sandburg could have written such a book about Abraham Lincoln? Richard Crowder expresses it concisely:

First of all, it was obvious that Sandburg was a through-and-through American and that he had identified himself completely with his subject. His deep firsthand knowledge of the Middle West of Lincoln let him speak with assurance. He possessed an irresistible urge to tell his story and also the endurance to work patiently, prodigiously. His total absorption in the central figure of Lincoln let him speak with love.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Golden, pp. 239-241.

<sup>25</sup>Detzer, p. 205.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 207

<sup>27</sup>Crowder, p. 131.

Moreover part of Sandburg's suitability as the biographer of Lincoln comes from his love of America, his understanding of the common people, his jovial good humor, his appreciation of a good story--all of which were dear to the heart of Lincoln. Perhaps Sandburg understood Lincoln because they had similar environments, perhaps because they had similar personalities. Sandburg "was the right man at the right time from the right place concerned with the right subject to meet with consummate success."<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER III

### ABRAHAM LINCOLN . . . AND THE NEW BIOGRAPHY

What is often referred to as the "New Biography" is one of the literary phenomena of our time, and its advent brought about a change in the popularity of biography. Until the twentieth century, generally speaking, lives of great men were written either in ponderous, scholarly fashion, piling fact upon fact, presenting very few human qualities; or the lives were written in a manner so idolizing the men that they appeared to be varieties of gods. There were, of course, notable exceptions, especially during the eighteenth century which brought forth what is usually considered the greatest biography of all time, Boswell's life of Johnson. But the nineteenth century lapsed back into what Thrall and Hibbard describe as "authorized" biographies, "discreet" and often "blurred."<sup>1</sup> With the twentieth century and Lytton Strachey, often considered the father of the new movement, there came the revolution which produced the New Biography. Both the method of handling the facts in a man's life and the method

---

<sup>1</sup>William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature (1st ed.; New York: Odyssey Press, 1936), p. 55.

of writing those facts into book form took new directions, and it was developed now to the point where it has become a refreshing form of literature, oftentimes preferred over the novel. Not only is it written in an interesting form, but it is at the same time reliable and "true," and the modern generation living in a scientific era is increasingly more inclined toward truth than fiction.

One may well ask what is so different about the twentieth-century biography that it can be called "New." The answer is not easy, for the New Biography is a rather complex medium that is difficult to define. Two rather brief but nevertheless appropriate definitions have been given by Lytton Strachey and Leon Edel. Lytton Strachey described biography as ". . . the most delicate and humane of all branches of the art of writing. . . ." <sup>2</sup> Leon Edel goes a little farther when he says, "A biography is a record, in words, of something that is as mercurial and as flowing, as compact of temperament and emotion, as the human spirit itself." <sup>3</sup> A better and much more detailed definition, however, has been given by Sir Harold Nicolson:

The Oxford English Dictionary defines biography as "the history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature." This excellent definition

---

<sup>2</sup>Lytton Strachey, Eminent Victorians (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., [no date]), p. vi.

<sup>3</sup>Leon Edel, Literary Biography (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), p. 1.

contains within itself three principles that any serious biographer should observe: A biography must be "history," in the sense that it must be accurate and depict a person in relation to his times; it must describe an "individual," with all the gradations of human character, and not merely present a type of virtue or of vice; and it must be composed as a "branch of literature," in that it must be written in grammatical English and with an adequate feeling for style.<sup>4</sup>

Though Sir Harold Nicolson's definition gives the essence of what a biography should be, it does not describe the various aspects of the New Biography on which critics are either in agreement or disagreement. The aspects on which most of them are in agreement are as follows:

1. The author must use selection in choosing from the facts in his subject's life in order to present a brief book.
2. The biography must present the truth with no shading of fiction.
3. The biographer must write the biography in as artistic style as he is able.

The other aspects of the New Biography that critics are in conflict about are these:

1. Whether or not the author should use any interpretation of facts in his biography;
2. Whether or not the author should use methods of psychoanalysis on his subject;
3. Whether the biographer should identify himself with his subject or remain aloof and objective.

Perhaps in the years to come these disagreements can be resolved, but for the time being it is a matter of personal

---

<sup>4</sup>Sir Harold Nicolson, "The Practice of Biography," The American Scholar, XXIII (Spring, 1954), 152.

opinion as to whether the biographer should use interpretation and psychoanalysis, and whether he should be subjective or objective toward his subject.

The purpose of this discussion, however, is not to decide which of the critics are right and which are wrong, but to examine Carl Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln . . . with respect to the various criteria for the New Biography. Can one consider Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and Abraham Lincoln: The War Years a New Biography, or do the six volumes more nearly resemble nineteenth-century biography? In order to place Sandburg's biography in its proper category, one must consider each criterion separately.

The first and probably the most important criterion of the New Biography is selection. Almost all of the critics agree that the biographer must evaluate the multitude of facts he has on hand and select those that will be most useful in portraying the life of his subject. If the biographer does not use selection, the biography becomes long, heavy, and dull as many of the lives in the nineteenth century were long, heavy, and dull. The next question, then, might well be, "How much selection and what types of selection must be used?" About this question there are two schools of thought. André Maurois represents one school that feels a man may be presented against his historical background. He says:

. . . A biographer has a right to leave around his central figure a margin, more or less wide, of contemporary facts. Only, if he leaves the margin too wide, he runs the risk of no longer writing a biography, while not writing a good history either. Where should he draw the line, and how should he choose between facts? It seems to me that he should consider as relevant all the facts that had a direct influence on the formation of the hero, on the adventures of his soul, or on his personal actions.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Maurois believes a man's actions are governed by outside influences and one must know what those influences are before he can understand the central figure in a biography.

The other school of thought is represented by Mark Longaker who believes that the historical background surrounding the subject must be curtailed because it is the man the reader is interested in, not the facts of history. He says that if the subject of the biography becomes enmeshed in the facts of history to any great extent, the reader becomes bored, for he is not interested in the "exciting days that followed the French Revolution" but in the man Napoleon. The reader wants to know "Napoleon as a man, as one who struggled with the inner forces of his nature, as a companion with whom there may exist sympathetic understanding."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> André Maurois, "The Ethics of Biography," English Institute Annual, 1942 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Longaker, Contemporary Biography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), pp. 10, 18.

William Thayer falls into the middle ground between these two schools of thought. He says that the biographer must "reach a balance between history and biography, between the person and the cause."<sup>7</sup> Thayer represents the most realistic view of the problem, for who can say arbitrarily that every man must be isolated from his historical background, or that every man must be presented against his historical background? The degree of historical background used must vary with the individual subject. It would seem obvious that Abraham Lincoln should be presented against his historical background, because he was engulfed in history; he was also a maker of history. Carl Sandburg, realizing that Lincoln could not be isolated from history, especially in . . . The War Years, presented him side by side with the Emancipation Proclamation, the battle at Gettysburg, Ulysses Grant, and Jefferson Davis. He included all of the history of the Civil War period because that history was constantly in the mind of Lincoln and that history influenced Lincoln's actions and, sometimes, his lack of action. How else might the reader understand Lincoln the President? It would be impossible. In . . . The Prairie Years, on the other hand, Sandburg limited the use of historical background, for the history of the times did not so greatly affect the boy, Abraham Lincoln. Occasionally, Sandburg would begin a

---

<sup>7</sup>William Roscoe Thayer, The Art of Biography (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 124.

chapter with a summary of world events at that particular time in order that the reader might accurately place the life of Lincoln in relation to what was going on outside his small Prairie world. Otherwise, history as such was left out. This limitation is also appropriately used, for of what immediate use is the history to understanding the boy, Lincoln, except to see the shaping of his anti-slavery beliefs, his concept of democracy, and his desire to become President of the United States: Thus it would seem that Sandburg has placed his subject in the right perspective with history to create a successful biography.

Historical background, however, is not the only area in which the principle of selection should be used. There are other facts in the life of the biographee that must also be evaluated and then either discarded or included in the biography. This selection again must be left to the judgment of the biographer who must determine how he can best present a life-like portrait of his subject. There are some rules, though, listed by André Maurois, which he can follow:

1. A biographer has a right to suppress all duplicate evidence. . . .
2. A biographer has a right to distil the essence of a correspondence or of a diary. . . .
3. Small and trivial facts are not necessarily unimportant. . . .
4. A biographer . . . has no right to suppress a fact

because it goes against his preconceived idea of his hero. . . .

5. In a few cases, a biographer may have to suppress a fact for ethical reasons: for instance if the hero of the biography is a contemporary of the writer, and if premature publication of a certain fact could injure a third party. . . .<sup>8</sup>

In this particular kind of selection Carl Sandburg probably falls a little short. There is no doubt that he did use some selection, for he told Karl Detzer that he had to ask himself about story material of a certain sort: "Are you putting this in just because it is about Lincoln, or because it's humanly interesting?"<sup>9</sup> It can be argued, however, that he did not use enough selection. One instance readily comes to mind, that of Lincoln and the office seekers. There are all together some eighty pages of . . . The War Years and one complete chapter (Chapter 35, Volume II) devoted to office seekers. It is true that each case was different, but they all had the similarity of being a nuisance to Lincoln. Sandburg might well have used a few representative cases and mentioned that there were hundreds more, thus carrying across the idea quite effectively of how much time the office seekers demanded from Lincoln. As it stands, the reader becomes rather bored reading of one case after another.

---

<sup>8</sup>Maurois, pp. 12-13.

<sup>9</sup>Karl W. Detzer, Carl Sandburg: A Study in Personality and Background (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1941), p. 159.

Another area in which Sandburg might have used greater selectivity is in his writing about and describing the personality traits of a number of men who were only remotely connected with Lincoln. An instance of this occurs in his treatment of James Gordon Bennett, editor of the New York Herald. Sandburg not only tells of the policies of the paper in its treatment of Lincoln but also gives a biographical sketch of Bennett. A critic insisting on a stricter selectivity could well contend that this sketch, along with many more, might better have been omitted. Indeed, one of the criticisms most often directed against Sandburg's biography of Lincoln is its length. Oscar Cargill observes, "The reader inevitably wishes that Sandburg had not written quite so much. The much has a way of swamping the excellencies."<sup>10</sup> And Richard Crowder says, "One could wish occasionally for less minor fact and more opinion from the author himself."<sup>11</sup>

Carl Sandburg, then, chose to write an exhaustive biography which has little selectivity of material over the more popular short, selective portrait. In this respect Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and Abraham Lincoln:

<sup>10</sup>Oscar Cargill, "Carl Sandburg: Crusader and Mystic," English Journal, XXXIX (April, 1950), p. 183.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Crowder, Carl Sandburg (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1964), p. 134.

The War Years is not a New Biography.

The second criterion of the New Biography, which the critics place in importance equal with or above selection, is adherence to truth. Truth must be diligently pursued in any biography, but it is especially important in the New Biography where the author has much more freedom. He is likely to use his imagination more and as a result "imagine" events that did not take place. Or as Leon Edel has said: "The biographer may be as imaginative as he pleases--the more imaginative the better--in the way in which he brings together his materials, but he must not imagine the materials. . . . He must tell the truth."<sup>12</sup> The invention of materials can be an extremely serious mistake, for if the reader ever discovers an invented story, he very likely will be unable to believe any of the other stories, though they be true.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the biographer should not use facts in such a way that the truth becomes distorted. If, for instance, the biographer sets out to prove some thesis about his subject, he might easily be tempted to twist facts around to prove his point. Marchette Chute says, "Nothing can so quickly blur and

---

<sup>12</sup>Edel, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>Iris Origo, "Biography, True and False," quoted in William H. Davenport (ed.), Biography Past and Present: Selections and Critical Essays (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1965), p. 373.

distort the facts as desire--the wish to use the facts for some purpose of your own--and nothing can so surely destroy the truth."<sup>14</sup> Truth, then, is foremost, and there is no room for fiction, for when a biographer starts mixing fact and fiction, he no longer has a true biography, nor does he have a true fiction. He loses both.<sup>15</sup> The reader wishes that Carl Sandburg had done more checking of facts when he compiled his biography of Abraham Lincoln, for there are too many errors to be shrugged off. The mention here of a few errors will give some idea of the extent of misinformation Sandburg included as fact. Ramsdell lists the following from Volume I, . . . The War Years:

The African slave trade was not outlawed by the Constitution of the United States (p. 5) but by an act of Congress in 1807. Kansas had not, when made a state in January, 1861, been knocking for admission for twelve years (p. 14), nor had it always been the South that said "No." Senator Douglas had not voted to buy Florida from Spain (p. 15), since in 1819 he was a child of only six years. . . .<sup>16</sup>

Ramsdell goes on to list many more, but these should give some idea of the type of errors he found. Errors such as

<sup>14</sup>Marchette Chute, "Getting At the Truth," The Saturday Review, XXXVI (September 19, 1953), 12.

<sup>15</sup>Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography," New York Herald Tribune, (October 30, 1927), quoted in James Clifford (ed.) Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 197.

<sup>16</sup>Charles W. Ramsdell, "Carl Sandburg's Lincoln," Southern Review, VI (Winter, 1941), 451-52.

the above are not the product of invention but are more likely the product of ignorance of history or of sheer carelessness. Errors of a different kind were found by William Barton. He lists the following from . . . The Prairie Years:

Nancy Hanks is represented as singing to her children "From Greenland's Icy Mountains." That hymn was written a year after she died. . . . Grotesquely he [Sandburg] describes as a hymn the song "Legacy" which Lincoln is alleged to have sung out of the "Missouri Harmony." The "Missouri Harmony" contained a good many hymns, but "Legacy" was a drinking song. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the most frequently cited of his dubious materials, however, concerns the courtship between Lincoln and Ann Rutledge found in Volume One of . . . The Prairie Years.

Such a story as this was close to the heart of the romantic Sandburg and he rather "out-does-himself" in sentimentality. He describes in vivid detail the visits of Lincoln to Ann Rutledge, her devotion to him, their singing hymns together. The crowning blow, however, is his description of Lincoln's grief after the death of Ann Rutledge. He writes:

A week after the burial of Ann Rutledge, Bill Green found him [Lincoln] rambling in the woods along the Sangamon River, mumbling sentences Bill couldn't make out. They watched him and tried to keep him safe among friends at New Salem. And he rambled darkly and idly past their circle to the burying ground seven miles away, where he lay with an arm across the one grave.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>William E. Barton, "The Abraham Lincoln of the Prairies," World's Work, LII (May, 1926), 103-104.

<sup>18</sup>Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), pp. 189-90.

The Lincoln-Rutledge affair has always been a moot point among scholars and a subject upon which the folk have exercised their imaginations, and at the time he wrote the biography, Sandburg accepted it as historical fact. So have a great many other admirers of Lincoln, including Robert Sherwood who gave it great emphasis in the most popular play about the Great Emancipator, Abe Lincoln in Illinois. The balance of scholarly opinion today inclines to regard the affair as legendary, largely the invention of William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner.<sup>19</sup> Consequently one cannot accuse Sandburg of inventing the story, but one could justifiably accuse him of being somewhat careless with his facts, of not checking as thoroughly as a good biographer should.

In the second area of the New Biography, truth, Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln . . . also falls a little short. The errors that have been listed, however, seem to be trivial compared with the great bulk of fact in the rest of the work and do not mar the total impression of the biography appreciably.

---

<sup>19</sup> Another treatment of the Lincoln-Rutledge affair is found in Ruth Painter Randall's Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), which blames the Rutledge legend on Herndon and, with good evidence debunks most of it. Irving Stone in his novel, Love Is Eternal (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1954), tries to reconstruct the Lincoln-Mary Todd affair as the great love of Abraham Lincoln's life.

The third criterion of the New Biography is that it be written in a literary manner, that is, that it have an artistic style. It follows, then, that the successful biography cannot be written by a non-literary person but should be undertaken only by a writer who has the talent to present the facts in as articulate and as attractive a manner as possible. André Maurois has formulated some rules for the arrangement of facts that would help to create an artistic style. They are as follows:

1. That events should be presented to the reader in chronological order appears natural enough; yet a great many biographers do not seem to understand that the strict observation of this rule will greatly help to maintain the interest of the reader.  
. . .
2. Some trouble should be taken by the biographer to discover, in the life he is studying, some sort of pattern, such as to give to the multiplicity of facts an intelligible support. . . .
3. For the same reason to give support to facts it is important that the biographer should attempt to discover the main themes of the life he is writing. . . .<sup>20</sup>

Maurois goes on to explain that there is no reason why a reliable history cannot at the same time be poetical.

"After all there is a great deal of poetry in real life, and all the biographer has to do is to extract from the life he is writing all the poetry it contains."<sup>21</sup> There are some critics who disagree with Maurois, Bernard De Voto

<sup>20</sup>Maurois, pp. 24-26.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

for one. De Voto says that literary people should not write biographies because the literary mind is a mind "least adapted to the utilization of fact." He goes on to say that the literary mind is a mind professionally inaccurate and too naive to write biography. Biography must be accurate and the biographer must be skeptical and cynical.<sup>22</sup>

Where, then, does Carl Sandburg fit between the two poles? He is a poet who has written an outstanding biography. It would seem that, in a sense, he has proven Mr. De Voto wrong, for the poetical flights in the six volumes are among the things that make Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and Abraham Lincoln: The War Years an outstanding biography. For example, in writing about the battle at Gettysburg, Sandburg makes poetry of tragedy and thus conveys the emotion appropriate to the event. He writes:

Confederate bayonets had taken Union cannon and Union bayonets had retaken the cannon. Round Top, Little Round Top, Culp's Hill, rang with the yells of men shooting and men shot. Meadows of white daises were pockmarked with horse hoofs. Dead and wounded lay scattered in rows, in little sudden piles, in singles and doubles, the spindrift of a storm wave.<sup>23</sup>

Sandburg does not use poetry continuously throughout the six volumes, however. More often he records fact after fact

<sup>22</sup>Bernard De Voto, "The Skeptical Biographer," quoted in Davenport, p. 276.

<sup>23</sup>Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, Vol. II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), p. 343.

in a journalistic style, with the poetic passages sprinkled here and there in the biography to give it a lift from the sheerly methodical.

Sandburg also has a thesis in his biography of Abraham Lincoln, but it is so fairly handled that the word theme might be more appropriate than thesis. Richard Crowder explains that theme as follows:

Sandburg showed Lincoln as the product of his rural-village environment and his character was built on tensions resulting from some humanizing weaknesses and from some out-of-the-ordinary powers. The distinctive qualities in Lincoln, as Sandburg saw them, were his earthiness and at the same time his undeniable loftiness of spirit, both enveloped in an inexplicable mystery. Through the slow accretion of fact the biographer showed the development of an awkward, though gregarious boy without formal education into a statesman who, though god-like by the Poet's implication, remained simple and natural to the end of the story.<sup>24</sup>

Sandburg in most places wrote the life of Lincoln in chronological order, though there are points at which he departs from strict chronology. The chapter on Lincoln's laughter and jokes, for example, does not appear in the time sequence at the point where one would expect it. It is placed in the midst of the chapters dealing with the stresses and strains of war and re-election, to relieve the tension. It there breaks the monotony and serves to refresh the reader.

Although it is not entirely consistent, Sandburg's style is, all things considered, artistically effective.

---

<sup>24</sup>Crowder, p. 98.

It therefore meets the third criterion of the New Biography.

The fourth aspect of the New Biography concerns the extent to which an author may legitimately interpret his subject. The nineteenth-century style of biography absolutely forbade any such license to the biographer. The factual biographer had to record the facts and could not interpret them in any way. James Flexner says that the factual biographer's method is an unnatural method because people are accustomed to evaluate other people as living entities; they cannot judge people from documents. He goes on to explain that about half the meaning in a letter from a friend lies between the lines, and there is nothing to keep the reader of a biography from reading between the lines of quoted documents in a biography:

True, a reader can try; but he is in a much worse position to make an interpretation than is the biographer, who has studied five hundred or a thousand papers to the reader's one, and who has a much better background of knowledge of the period in which the subject lived.<sup>25</sup>

According to Mr. Flexner, then, a biographer actually has an obligation, not just the freedom, to interpret anything that might conceivably be misunderstood by the reader.

There are, understandably, limitations placed on what kind of interpretations are made. Bernard De Voto especially cautions the biographer against inferring what

---

<sup>25</sup>James Thomas Flexner, "Biography as a Juggler's Art," Saturday Review of Literature XXVI (October 9, 1943), 3.

was in the mind of his subject. Such interpretation is "sheer guesswork." Mr. De Voto says the biographer can tell the reader what the "subject has written about his mind, but he may not on his own authority make any statement about the immediate content of that mind."<sup>26</sup> Such a statement seems reasonable enough, but sometimes a biographer needs to speculate about what might have gone on in his subject's mind. Is it not legitimate, in such a case, for the biographer to indicate that his statements are only speculative by saying, for example, "Perhaps Lincoln was thinking . . . "?

Carl Sandburg did a great deal of the above type of interpretation in . . . The Prairie Years but almost none in . . . The War Years. In the last four volumes he presents the facts, letters, and documents--there were, of course, so many more available for the later years--and lets them stand on their own merit. The reader may often wish to know how Sandburg felt about some derogatory criticism of Lincoln or some action of the State Department, but he can only guess. Sandburg offers no explanations. Thus in the fourth area, interpretation, Sandburg does not always satisfy the standard of the New Biography.

The fifth aspect of the New Biography concerns character analysis in the manner of psychoanalysis. With the

---

<sup>26</sup>De Voto, p. 287.

beginning of the twentieth century the public became extremely interested in the mind and the working of the mind, a trend due primarily to Freud. This interest in the mind opened to the biographer a new approach to his subject, theoretical psychoanalysis. Some biographers have used theories of psychoanalysis to absurd lengths while others have shied away from it entirely, and, as might be expected, the critics are also divided on the subject. Emil Ludwig says that a biographer has not only to know the history of the period but also must be well versed in the study of man. "He must be skilled, through both intuition and training, in interpreting a character by the symptoms of its behavior."<sup>27</sup> In other words he must, at least in a limited way, be a psychologist and an analyst. Leon Edel disagrees. He believes that most literary people do not have enough training to apply methods of psychoanalysis and, therefore, should not attempt its use.<sup>28</sup>

Carl Sandburg apparently agreed with Edel because he did not attempt any interpretation by means of psychoanalysis. He simply presented the facts and left the reader to his own interpretations. Such a course is probably wiser unless the

---

<sup>27</sup>Emil Ludwig, Genius and Character (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927), p. 6.

<sup>28</sup>Leon Edel, "The Biographer and Psycho-Analysis," New World Writing, No. 18 (Winter, 1961), pp. 50-64, quoted in Clifford, p. 226.

biographer has the professional training that Mr. Ludwig advocates. One can only guess at the damage that might be done to a life if it were psychoanalyzed by an amateur. Hence, it is commendable that Sandburg, who is neither psychologist nor psychoanalyzer, passed over any temptation he might have had to psychoanalyze Lincoln.

The last area of the New Biography to be discussed is the relationship of the biographer to his subject. Should the biographer try to identify himself with his hero in order to achieve sympathy for the man and the times? The answer, according to most critics, is Yes. Thayer regards sympathy as an indispensable qualification in the biographer. He explains sympathy, however, as a quality that "does not degenerate into unrestrained eulogy, but interprets the defects, blunders, and even sins of its subject, in their true relations."<sup>29</sup> Leon Edel agrees with Thayer, but goes a step farther. He says the biographer must identify himself with his subject to such an extent that he sees the world through the subject's eyes and achieves a kind of empathy. He must, however, be careful that at the time he is sympathetic, he also remains "aloof, involved yet uninvolved."<sup>30</sup> That kind of sympathy described by Thayer and

---

<sup>29</sup>Thayer, p. 144

<sup>30</sup>Edel, "The Biographer and Psycho-Analysis," quoted in Clifford, p. 230.

Edel, Carl Sandburg achieved for Lincoln. He saw the prairie through Lincoln's eyes and loved it with the same love, for it was a part of his life, too. He experienced the tragedy of war in the same way that Lincoln did. As a matter of fact, it was not as hard for Sandburg to identify with Lincoln as it might have been for someone else. They had the same environment in boyhood; they had the same love for good jokes and good books; they had the same political beliefs; they spoke the same kind of language; they both loved the common man. Sandburg had only a little way to go to experience what Lincoln felt in areas where the author was unfamiliar. Yet, he somehow remained objective too, especially in . . . The War Years. He does not gloss over the mistakes Lincoln made, but instead writes about them in such a way that the reader understands the causes for each mistake, understands that Lincoln is subject to errors as any human being is, and is, therefore, by implication, to be forgiven. Hence, Lincoln is not presented as some sort of god but rather as a man who was criticized, laughed at, and loved by the American people. Certainly Sandburg excelled in this sixth area of the New Biography.

In conclusion, one cannot say that Carl Sandburg's biography of Abraham Lincoln conforms one hundred percent with the criteria for New Biography, for it falls short in some areas: selection, truth, and psychoanalysis. In other

areas (artistic writing, identification with subject, and interpretation) though he does not always excel, he at least has achieved the halfway mark. Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years is closer to the New Biography than Abraham Lincoln: The War Years. It is written more artistically, with more poetry, and it uses more selection. Moreover, there is more interpretation in it than in . . . The War Years. In some respects . . . The War Years resembles the nineteenth-century biography more than the New Biography, because Sandburg used four volumes to cover four years of the President's life; he piled fact upon fact; he used practically no interpretation; he used, mostly, the journalistic style.

Despite all efforts to classify Sandburg's literary production, there is something about this six-volume work which eludes such categorization. Whether Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and Abraham Lincoln: The War Years be considered New Biography or nineteenth-century biography, it is still a monumental work of art that deserves the high acclaim it has received in the years since its publication.

## CHAPTER IV

### BIOGRAPHICAL STYLE: FOLKLORE, POETRY, AND FACT

To try to select any single factor in Carl Sandburg's biography of Abraham Lincoln that makes it an outstanding piece of literature is an almost hopeless task. Actually, everything in the six volumes of the biography contributes to the final effect and seems to be integral to the whole. One must, however, isolate specific features of the work if one is to evaluate its worth. Although the selection may be debatable, it seems to the present writer that those aspects contributing most to the biography's value as a piece of literature are the legends, the tall tales, the style, and the human interest, which Sandburg uses so expertly.

Most biographers consider legend out of the domain of their art; Sandburg, however, realizing that it is an essential element to portray a character in three-dimension, set out to collect in its entirety a legend of Lincoln. It is not that he substitutes legend for fact but rather that he uses it to give texture to the whole picture. He wanted to present a Lincoln who was full of life, who was witty, who was melancholy, who was steeped in the philosophy of America.

In short, he wanted to present Lincoln as a human being. He found the answer to the human Lincoln in the stories that circulated so freely among the folk of America. Abraham Lincoln was the sort of figure who appealed to the folk imagination--as well as to the literate poets' imaginations. Many of the jokes attributed to Abraham Lincoln he never told; many of the anecdotes told about him were woven from the yarn of folk yarnspinners; there were also ballads and songs about him attributed to folk origins, such as "Lincoln and Liberty"<sup>1</sup> and "Old Abe Lincoln Came out of the Wilderness."<sup>2</sup> Sandburg had only to select from the hundreds of legends and weave his selections into the historical facts of Lincoln's life.

Some of the stories that Sandburg chose to relate about Lincoln deserve recognition for their humor. Humor was a basic part of Lincoln's life, and Sandburg, realizing that fact, included dozens of humorous stories. One such story, found in Volume I of . . . The Prairie Years, is about Lincoln's days as a captain in the Black Hawk War. He was drilling two platoons one day, and as they approached a gate, he could not remember the order that would get them through. So he said, "This company is dismissed for two

---

<sup>1</sup>Carl Sandburg, The American Songbag (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), p. 167.

<sup>2</sup>Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years, II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 385.

minutes, when it will fall in again on the other side of the gate."<sup>3</sup> From a story such as this, the reader not only gets a chuckle but also a better understanding of the native shrewdness of a country soldier determined not to show ignorance.

Another story, that has a great deal of humor, was told about Lincoln in many prairie cabins by candlelight:

. . . Abe Lincoln[was] driving a two-horse team on a road heavy with mud. It was sunset time and Abe had his back to the sunset. And he met another driver with a two-horse wagon. Both knew that whoever turned out would be up to the hubs in mud, almost sure to get stuck in the mud. "Turn out," the other fellow called. "Turn out yourself," called Abe. The other fellow refused. Then Abe, with his back to the sunset began to rise from his seat in the wagon, rising and rising, his tall shape getting longer and longer against the setting sun, as he was saying, "If you don't turn out I'll tell you what I'll do." And the other fellow hollered: "Don't go any higher. I'll turn out." And after he had struggled through and passed by Lincoln, he called back, "Say what would you have done if I hadn't turned out?" Lincoln answered, "I'd 've turned out myself."<sup>4</sup>

This story, as well as being humorous, demonstrates Sandburg's ability to tell a tale with a knack that few people have.

One reason his stories are good is that he uses the vernacular, which is important to the realistic effect achieved.

Notice that he uses such words and expressions as "hollered" and "up to the hubs in mud." These expressions are picturesque and carry flavor with them. He uses the same kind

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., I, 155.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., II, 287.

of language in the following story about Lincoln campaigning for a seat in the legislature:

[He] stepped on a box ready to say "Gentlemen and fellow citizens," and make his speech, [when] he saw several fellow citizens on the edge of the crowd planting their fists in each others' faces, rushing and mauling. He noticed one of his own friends getting the worst of it, stepped off the box, shouldered his way to the fight, picked a man by the scruff of the neck and seat of the breeches, and threw him ten feet for a fall. Then he walked back to his box, stepped up, swept the crowd with his eyes in a cool way as though what had happened sort of happened every day, and then made a speech.<sup>5</sup>

These entertaining stories give much of the personality of Lincoln that is little known: his bullying nature.

Other stories that Sandburg included in his biography have the tall tale quality. Such stories invariably circulate among the folk about any person who is, himself, a legend. One of Lincoln's favorite pastimes was to sit among a group of men with his feet propped up and tell such tall tales. One of his tales was told early in his life when he had been hired by Dr. Nelson to take a flatboat to Texas. When he returned he said that "there were times he ran the flatboat three miles off into the prairies, but always got back to the main channel of the Sangamon."<sup>6</sup> Another tall tale that Lincoln was given credit for demonstrates his love of "fooling":

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., I, 160.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., I, 135-36.

Lincoln and a crew [were] loading Squire Godbey's hogs onto a flatboat down at Blue Banks; the hogs were slippery and stubborn and the crew couldn't chase them on board. The gossip was that Lincoln said, "sew their eyes shut." And farmers were "argufying" as to whether a hog is easier handled when his eyes are sewed shut.<sup>7</sup>

All of the stories about Lincoln did not show him to be a bully and a yarnspinner. Some showed him to be especially tenderhearted towards animals. Early in     . The Prairie Years Sandburg makes a point of telling his reader that Lincoln shot only one animal and never killed another purposely. In Volume II Sandburg writes some of the stories that circulated about Lincoln's kindness to animals. If he saw a pig stuck in a fence or a bird fallen from its nest, he always stopped to help it.<sup>8</sup> It is through such stories that the reader gets an insight into the "human" Lincoln. Without these stories, Sandburg realized that he could not give a realistic presentation of the prairie boy, who was a product of his environment. Without such stories Lincoln would have appeared as he appears in the painting so often seen in public school rooms: sad and stern.

Sandburg did not limit himself to stories about Lincoln. He told many others that had to do with people around Lincoln. These stories, too, give the biography added interest. One of the stories concerns Henry Clay:

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., I, 136.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., II, 67-68.

Henry Clay on his last ride from Washington to Kentucky steps out of a stage, goes back a few paces, leans over and puts his ear to the ground as if listening. "What are you listening for, Mr. Clay?" the driver asks. "I was listening to the tread of unnumbered thousands of feet that are to come this way westward."<sup>9</sup>

Sandburg also tells parts of the legends of Johnny Appleseed, Mike Fink, and Daniel Boone. The first two volumes of the Lincoln biography are rich with the lore that circulated around the young Lincoln and helped to form his background. One story that made the rounds probably depicts the temper of the prairie as much as any:

. . . A mob went to the house of a man and took him away and hanged him to a tree. It was a dark night and when morning came they saw they had hanged the wrong man. And they went and told the widow, "The laugh is on us."<sup>10</sup>

Stories like those quoted above are scattered throughout

. . . The Prairie Years, which has more legend than . . .

The War Years. Some critics believe that because there was less factual data about Lincoln's early life, Sandburg included these stories to fill in the gaps. Quite the contrary. Such stories are a part of Lincoln's life, of Lincoln's background. These were the stories that he told and that were told about him and to him. Without them, the biography would be colorless and uninteresting.

Sandburg also adds interest to his biography by writing of how the people in Kentucky and Indiana talked. He is a

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., I, 541.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., I, 199.

master at capturing dialect in the written word. He reports that Lincoln's words for "Father" and "Mother" were "Pappy" and "Mammy" and that most people pronounced "Lincoln" as "Linkum" or "Linkern."<sup>11</sup> Sandburg goes on to give a long list of the pronunciation of words. He says that Lincoln's parents talked much the same as other uneducated people in Kentucky and Indiana:

They called themselves "pore" people. A man learned in books was "eddicated." What was certain was "sartin." The syllables came through the nose; joints were "j'int's"; fruit "spiled" instead of spoiling; in corn-planting time they "drapped" the seeds. They went on errands and "brung" things back. Their dogs "follered" the coons. Flannel was "flannen," a bandanna a "bandanner," a chimney a "chimbly," a shadow a "shadder," and mosquitoes plain "skeeters." They "gethered" crops. A creek was a "crick"; a cover a "kiver."<sup>12</sup>

In thus reporting realistically the dialect used, Sandburg also suggests, indirectly, the language barrier that Lincoln had to overcome to be accepted as an educated man when he entered politics. Many times in . . . The War Years, Sandburg mentions the fact that people were slow to accept Lincoln as President because of his lack of polished speech and his lack of social graces.

Sandburg writes also of the common customs of the prairie people. These customs help the reader to understand Lincoln's environment and the way in which it influenced the formation of his character. The author writes of what the

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., I, 18.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., I, 19.

people ate, what they did in their leisure hours, and what they wore. One particularly interesting anecdote is found in Volume I of . . . The Prairie Years. "Men and women went barefoot except in colder weather; women carried their shoes in their hands and put them on just before arrival at church meetings or at social parties."<sup>13</sup> The inclusion of such incidents in the biography gives it richness and vitality.

In addition to the use of legends and practices of the common people, Sandburg gives vitality to his biography by reproducing many of the parables, metaphors, witty retorts, and philosophical observations of Abraham Lincoln himself. Seldom did Lincoln let an opportunity pass to tell a good story. These stories he loved, and through them, the reader sees one more facet of Lincoln's personality. For example, Lincoln told a story in the legislature when there was a debate over the constitutionality of a bill. The man who opposed the bill had shaggy eyebrows and let everyone know he could see any points that could be considered unconstitutional. Lincoln in rebuttal told the following story:

[There was] an old fellow on the Wabash River who had shaggy, overhanging eyebrows and wore spectacles. One morning this old fellow was looking up a tree near his cabin and thought he saw a squirrel sitting on a high branch. Getting his rifle, he fired one load, reloaded, fired again, but couldn't hit the squirrel. He asked a boy, "Don't you see that squirrel, humped up about halfway up the tree?" "No, I don't," said the boy, and, looking keenly into his father's face, he

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., I, 49.

break out: "I see your squirrel! You've been shooting at a louse on your eyebrow!"<sup>14</sup>

The reader probably gets a much keener sense of Lincoln's genius in reprimanding those with whom he disagreed through such stories than he would if Sandburg had used any other method.

Lincoln often used stories to break the tension of a conference, and perhaps Sandburg retold such stories to relieve the heaviness of his material. Allowing Lincoln to speak and act for himself makes the account more dramatic and forceful while relieving the author of the burden of continuous abstraction. One can see Sandburg's method in his description of the Trent affair, an affair which ended with Lincoln's being forced, through diplomacy, to release the captain of the Trent from American custody.<sup>15</sup> After introducing the incident and indicating Lincoln's frustrating dilemma, Sandburg lets Lincoln take over, in his own words, with the humorous report of the affair he told to Horace Porter:

I felt a good deal like the sick man in Illinois who was told he probably hadn't many days longer to live, and that he ought to make peace with any enemies he

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., I, 357.

<sup>15</sup>The English ship Trent had been fired upon by an American ship and her captain taken prisoner. England was in an uproar over the whole situation. Lincoln had to give over, but only with the thought in mind that eventually America would become so strong that England would have to pay for such embarrassments inflicted upon America.

might have. He said the man he hated worst of all was a fellow named Brown in the next village and he guessed he had better begin on him. So Brown was sent for, and when he came the sick man began to say, in a voice "as meek as Moses," that he wanted to die at peace with all his fellow creatures, and he hoped he and Brown could now shake hands and bury all their enmity. The scene was becoming altogether too pathetic for Brown, who had to get out his handkerchief and wipe the gathering tears from his eyes. It wasn't long before he melted and gave his hand to his neighbor, and they had a regular love-feast. After a parting that would have softened the heart of a grindstone, Brown had about reached the room door, when the sick man rose up on his elbow and said, "But, see here, Brown, if I should happen to get well, mind that old grudge stands!"<sup>16</sup>

Besides relieving the biography of the monotony of factual data, this story also shows Lincoln's keen wit and his ability to laugh in the face of adversity.

Lincoln many times used colorful or vigorous metaphors to make clear a complex situation. One of his most memorable metaphors he used after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. There could be little doubt in the mind of any reader about how grave Lincoln considered the hour to be:

We are like whalers who have been on a long chase. We have at last got the harpoon into the monster, but we must look how we steer or with one flop of his tail he will send us all into eternity.<sup>17</sup>

Such anecdotes as these Sandburg uses to good effect, for not only are they entertaining, but they also give the reader some idea of the depth of the personality of Lincoln.

<sup>16</sup> Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 368.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., II, 21.

Sandburg also writes of the ready retorts and the witty answers Lincoln produced, on the spur of the moment, as a defensive tactic. These answers show that Lincoln had a sharp mind, a native shrewdness that was not to be outdone. One remark came after an office seeker, upon being refused a position, said that he had helped make Lincoln President. Lincoln replied, "Yes, and it's a pretty mess you got me into!"<sup>18</sup> Another sharp answer came when a society belle dangled a Negro doll baby in Lincoln's face. He asked quietly, "Madam, are you the mother of that?"<sup>19</sup> And still another came when an unofficial adviser had said that men of force do not need books because they do their own thinking. Lincoln replied, "Yes, but books serve to show a man that those original thoughts of his aren't very new, after all."<sup>20</sup>

In presenting the hundreds of witty remarks of Lincoln, Sandburg shows his acute sense of humor, but at the same time, he also shows Lincoln to be a thoughtful man with philosophic tendencies. To give advice to law students, Lincoln said, "Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other thing. . . . Work, work, work, is the main thing."<sup>21</sup> In a speech at a

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., I, 376

<sup>19</sup> Sandburg, . . . The Prairie Years, II, 288.

<sup>20</sup> Sandburg, . . . The War Years, II, 309.

<sup>21</sup> Sandburg, . . . The Prairie Years, II, 84.

later time he said, "Familiarize yourself with the chains of bondage, and you are preparing your own limbs to wear them."<sup>22</sup> And about office seekers he had this bit of wisdom to offer: "This human struggle and scramble for office, for a way to live without work, will finally test the strength of our institutions."<sup>23</sup> Lincoln had decided views about his own life. He told Ward Hill Lemon, Marshal of the District of Columbia, this about his own personal safety:

I am determined to borrow no trouble. I believe in the right, and that it will prevail; and I believe it is the inalienable right of man, unimpaired even by this dreadful distraction of our country, to be happy or miserable at his own election, and I for one make choice of the former alternative.<sup>24</sup>

The above quotations are only a few of the hundreds contained in the Lincoln biography, but they should serve to illustrate the quality of Lincoln's philosophy of life. Through these thoughts Sandburg gives the reader still another facet of the complex and elusive personality of the Prairie President.

The legends, the tall tales, the idioms of the people, the stories and wise sayings of Lincoln all help to give Sandburg's work scope and dimension. They add interest and warmth and understanding to the life of Abraham Lincoln, who too often has been thought of as a god on a pedestal.

These things alone, however, do not make Sandburg's

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., II, 227.

<sup>23</sup>Sandburg,     , The War Years, I, 369.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., II, 207.

biography a work of art. Part of the worth of the six volumes comes from the rhetoric and the texture of the author's style. Sandburg, who is first and foremost a poet, used his poetic talent to write the life of the man whom he idolized.<sup>25</sup> No other language except the language of poetry seems appropriate to write the Legend of Abraham Lincoln, and where Sandburg used poetry, he achieved the greatest heights in the art of writing. The first two volumes, . . . The Prairie Years, are almost entirely lyrical, whereas the last four volumes, . . . The War Years, have only spurts of poetic prose. Perhaps it is the lyrical quality of . . . The Prairie Years that makes it more readable, more enjoyable, less dull and drab. However, when Sandburg does use poetry in . . . The War Years, it is of a deeper, more moving tone than that found in . . . The Prairie Years. The following passages may serve to illustrate some of the better poetry found in . . . The War Years. Sandburg describes Gettysburg just after Lincoln had delivered his famous address:

---

<sup>25</sup>Lincoln has always appealed to the poets, and hundreds of poems have been written about him. Some of the better known poems are these: William Cullen Bryant--"To the Memory of Abraham Lincoln," "The Death of Lincoln"; Oliver Wendell Holmes--"Services in Memory of Abraham Lincoln"; Vachel Lindsay--"Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight," "Lincoln," "When Lincoln Came to Springfield"; James Russell Lowell--"Our Martyr-Chief," "Commemoration Ode"; James Whitcomb Riley--"The Death of Lincoln," "Lincoln"; Walt Whitman--"Hush'd Be the Camps Today," "O Captain, My Captain," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed"; John Greenleaf Whittier--"Memory of Lincoln."

Back at Gettysburg the blue haze of the Cumberland Mountains had dimmed till it was a blur in a nocturne. The moon was up and fell with a golden benevolence on the new-made graves of soldiers, on the sepulchers of old settlers, on the horse carcasses of which the onrush of war had not yet permitted removal. . . .

In many a country cottage over the land, a tall old clock in a quiet corner told time in a tick-tock deliberation. Whether the orchard branches hung with pink-spray blossoms or icicles of sleet, whether the outside news was seedtime or harvest, rain or drouth, births or deaths, the swing of the pendulum was right and left and right and left in a tick-tock deliberation.<sup>26</sup>

Sandburg brings in the dark year of 1863 with these solemn words:

Death was in the air. So was birth. What was dying men did not know. What was being born none could say.

So often daylight seemed to break--and it was a false dawn--and it was as yet night.

When hope came singing a soft song, it was more than once shattered by the brass laughter of cannon and sudden bayonets preceding the rebel yell.<sup>27</sup>

Two hundred pages later he finishes his poem:

To think incessantly of blood and steel, steel and blood, the argument without end by the mouths of brass cannon, of a mystic cause carried aloft and sung on dripping and crimson bayonet points--to think so and thus across nights and months folding up into years, was a wearing and a grinding that brought questions. What is this teaching and who learns from it and where does it lead?  
 . . .

Beyond the black smoke lay what salvations and jubilees? Death was in the air. So was birth. What was dying no man was knowing. What was being born no man could say.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., II, 476-77.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., II, 124.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., II, 333.

What great emotion lay behind these words! Sandburg in this passage has given the reader the height of poetic artistry to convey some of what Lincoln felt in the tragic and bitter year of 1863.

Later in Volume IV, Sandburg again achieved poetic heights when he wrote of the death of Lincoln. It is a dirge, an elegy, written by a man who wept when he wrote it.

To a deep river, to a far country, to a by-and-by whence no man returns, had gone the child of Nancy Hanks and Tom Lincoln, the wilderness boy who found far lights and tall rainbows to live by, whose name even before he died had become a legend inwoven with men's struggle for freedom the world over.<sup>29</sup>

Sandburg concludes the six volumes with another elegy:

Evergreen carpeted the stone floor of the vault.  
On the coffin set in a receptacle of black walnut they arranged flowers carefully and precisely, they poured flowers as symbols, they lavished heaps of fresh flowers as though there could never be enough to tell either their hearts or his.

And then night came with great quiet.

And there was rest.

The prairie years, the war years, were over.<sup>30</sup>

Who could doubt the feeling Sandburg had for Lincoln or the feelings of the Northern people after reading the last passage in . . . The War Years? Through this poem, Sandburg achieves his goal in recreating the sadness the nation must have felt on the death of their beloved President.

. . . The Prairie Years and . . . The War Years are not all lyricism, however. Sandburg used other devices to

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., IV, 297.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., IV, 413.

achieve a style that is worthy of good literature. One device he used was the metaphor, and he used it well. He gives this interpretation to the growth of industry:

An embryo--a tugging, unborn baby--of a giant industrial and transportation civilization takes form and grows. The organism of society breaks the cords and bonds tying it to handicraft production and the organic structure resting on feudal landownership.  
 . . .<sup>31</sup>

Another good metaphor he used described Lincoln's marriage as being between "a slow-going wilderness bear and a cultivated tempestuous wildcat."<sup>32</sup> However, Sandburg was at his best in his many descriptions of Lincoln:

His [Lincoln's] form of slumping arches and his face of gaunt sockets were a shape a Great Artist had scrawled from careless clay, and was going to throw away, and then had said: "No, this one is to be kept; I made it by accident but it is better than many made on purpose."<sup>33</sup>

Sandburg also used similies to describe Lincoln. One of his best describes Lincoln as follows:

He looked like an original plan for an extra-long horse or a lean tawny buffalo, that a Changer had suddenly whisked into a man-shape. Or he met the eye as a clumsy, mystical giant that had walked out of a Chinese or Russian fairy story, or a bogy who stumbled out of an ancient Saxon myth with a handkerchief full of presents he wanted to divide among all the children in the world.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Sandburg, . . . The Prairie Years, I, 455-56.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., II, 278.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., II, 284-85.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., II, 285.

Another device Sandburg used was the catalogue--it is sometimes described as "epic," sometimes as "Biblical"--much as Walt Whitman had used it. It is an effective device if it is not used too often. Sandburg did not over-use it, and so where he did use it, it emphasized the thought. For example, he uses the catalogue to describe the classes in Washington:

Three circles there were in Washington, (1) the Mud-sills, (2) the Hotels, (3) the White House. In the first were Negroes, Clerks, Irish Laborers, Patent and other Agents, Hackmen, Faro Dealers, Washerwomen, and Newspaper Correspondents. In the second were the Newest Strangers, Harpists, Members of Congress, Concertina-men, Provincial Judges, Card-Writers, College-Students, Unprotected Females, Stool-Pigeons, Contractors, Sellers of Toothpicks.<sup>35</sup>

In another place Sandburg uses the catalogue to describe the produce at the annual state fair in Springfield, Illinois:

There were sows, boars, stallions, mares, rams, Ewes, hens, roosters, geese, ganders, ducks, drakes, turkeys, gobblers; peaches, apples, crab apples, pears, picked from sunny orchards and canned by farmers' wives; also jellies, jams, apple butter, peach marmalade; and wheat, oats, rye, . . .<sup>36</sup>

The catalogue as it is used here gives concreteness to the narrative.

Carl Sandburg is a master in the use of concise language. He at one time belonged, along with Amy Lowell, to a group of poets called Imagists. Part of the imagistic

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., II, 414.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., II, 6.

creed was that the language of poetry should be "the language of common speech," with emphasis on the use of the "exact word," and "the exact image."<sup>37</sup> Sandburg's poems, "Fog" and "Nocturne in a Deserted Brickyard," are both good examples of imagistic poetry. Sandburg uses his imagistic training in the many sketches of people that he includes in his biography of Lincoln. He can give a vivid picture of a man in a few words much as Chaucer did.

Charles Ramsdell makes note of the following:

[Sandburg says] of Charles Sumner, "The winds of doctrine roared in the caverns of his mind"; Thaddeus Stevens was "a gnarled thorn tree of a man"; Robert J. Walker was "a somewhat shriveled looking little man, well-spoken, nervous, dyspeptic, adroit, shrewd rather than subtle"; Horace Greeley was "just a little diaphanous: people could see through him--and then again they could not"; and Ben Butler "could strut sitting down."<sup>38</sup>

In addition to those mentioned by Ramsdell, one other is worth noting:

Grant sat by a campfire, his hat slouched low, the collar of his blue overcoat hiding most of his worn, haggard face. He smoked a cigar, he slowly chewed the cigar, he sat motionless except for an occasional shift of one leg over the other.<sup>39</sup>

Another component of the Sandburg style was his use of the vernacular. He chose to write in the language of the

<sup>37</sup> Norman Foerster (ed.), American Poetry and Prose, Part II (4th ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), p. 1323.

<sup>38</sup> Charles W. Ramsdell, "Carl Sandburg's Lincoln, Southern Review, VI (Winter, 1941), 452-53.

<sup>39</sup> Sandburg, . . . The War Years, III, 45.

public rather than the language of the scholar. His chief aim in writing the life of Lincoln was to give Lincoln back to the people, and if he was to achieve his purpose, he must write in simple direct language. Crowder says, "His Sandburg's language and the arrangement of words were simple, unsophisticated, candid--the product of his Midwest."<sup>40</sup> Sandburg, as Rica Brenner quoted him, said, "Unless we keep on the look-out, we write book language and employ verbiage of dead men instead of using the speech of people today."<sup>41</sup> Thus, he uses the American idiom and uses it effectively. It is not unusual to find in Abraham Lincoln . . . a sentence such as this: "The lecture was no go; it didn't have the 'git' to it."<sup>42</sup>

It must be noted, however, that the styles of . . . The Prairie Years and . . . The War Years are markedly different, though both are effective and merit the high praise they have received. . . . The Prairie Years is written more like a novel with short chapters, lyrical passages, interpretations by the author, interpolated short stories, and a highly idiomatic English. . . . The War Years, on the other hand, is written primarily in the journalistic style (which reports facts without interpretation)

<sup>40</sup>Richard Crowder, Carl Sandburg (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1964), p. 128.

<sup>41</sup>Rica Brenner, Ten Modern Poets (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930), p. 133.

<sup>42</sup>Sandburg, . . . The Prairie Years, II, 237.

with few poetic passages, little humor to relieve the heaviness of the facts, and the predictable diction of standard English.

Though this brief discussion has touched upon only a few of the many facets of Carl Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln . . ., those facets were chosen with care to demonstrate the artistry of their author. Regardless of one's final assessment of Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, it seems inevitable to this writer that it must be viewed in terms of both biography and literature. Here perhaps more than in any other biography the artistry demands its share of critical attention.

## CHAPTER V

### THE REVIEWS AND CRITICISM

The reviews and the criticism almost without exception give high praise to Carl Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln, . . . . They call it interesting, exquisite, beautiful, noble, and magnificent. It is rather strange that they should all be agreed, for surely there have been very few books written that have not received a great deal of negative criticism or had a few critics who did not like them. Nevertheless, Carl Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln, . . . . has received very little negative criticism. One must bear in mind that there has not been sufficient time lapse since publication to get much perspective on or a true evaluation of the work. Too, . . . . The War Years was published at a crucial time for patriotic fervor. Perhaps that accounts for the lack of negative criticism in the contemporary reviews, but it does not account for the fact that there has not been much since that time. In all fairness, however, one must acknowledge the paucity of recent commentary of any sort, the critics having virtually ignored the Abraham Lincoln, . . . . . Aside from the reviews that were written at the time of the work's publication,

only four or five people have attempted to make any evaluation of the six volumes. One can only speculate on the reason that the work has been passed over, but probably the cause lies in its genre, biography. Biography has seldom received continuing attention from the critics.

In the reviews and the criticisms that are available are found six basic subjects discussed: (1) Sandburg's fitness as the author of Abraham Lincoln's biography, (2) the physical structure of the work, (3) the subject matter, (4) the errors, (5) the techniques of writing and the methods used, and (6) the value of the work. A summary of the criticism will point out the various opinions expressed by the critics.

The first area, Sandburg's fitness as the author of Abraham Lincoln's biography, received more attention in the 1926 reviews than it does in the 1939 reviews. The reason probably lies in the nature of the story in      The Prairie Years. The one point the reviewers all agree on is that Sandburg is especially suited to write about Lincoln because they both are products of the prairie. W. E. Barton specifies that Sandburg had an advantage because he had the benefit of the stories told in Galesburg, Illinois, by some of Lincoln's contemporaries.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>W. E. Barton, Review of Abraham Lincoln; the Prairie Years, by Carl Sandburg, American Historical Society Review, XXXI (July, 1926), 809.

Another reviewer goes a little farther and says that Sandburg and Lincoln have the same general physical features, they are both of poetical nature, and they both have the same outlook on life.<sup>2</sup> James A. Woodburn continues the poetic theme when he says that while Sandburg is no historian, he is a story-teller. In Sandburg "there is the eye of the genius to see, the power of the poet to express."<sup>3</sup>

Though few of the 1939 reviews mentioned Sandburg's Illinois background, the reviewers agree that he is suitable as the author of the biography because he is a poet and is devoted to his subject. Henry Steel Commager says that it is most suitable that the Lincoln biography should come from the pen of a poet because the poets have always understood Lincoln.<sup>4</sup> Edgar DeWitt Jones has essentially the same idea. He says that the poet and the historian are combined in the biography. Sometimes Sandburg is both, sometimes only one, but he does both effectively.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>"Carl Sandburg's Masterpiece," Bookman, LXIII (March, 1926), 87.

<sup>3</sup>James A. Woodburn, Review of Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years, by Carl Sandburg, The American Political Science Review, XX (August, 1926), 675.

<sup>4</sup>Henry Steele Commager, "Lincoln Belongs to the People," Yale Review, XXIX (Winter, 1940), 374.

<sup>5</sup>Edgar DeWitt Jones, "The People's Lincoln," The Christian Century, LVII (January 3, 1940), 21.

Max Lerner calls Sandburg the lever, in the sense that he has devotion to his subject and a tenderness for the common people.<sup>6</sup> Lerner thinks that this identification and tenderness enhance Sandburg's treatment of the material. M. L. Elting agrees with Lerner and adds that Sandburg knows Lincoln better than anyone else.<sup>7</sup>

Later criticisms are in accord with the reviews in that they praise Sandburg for his diligent work in accumulating so much data and in his identification with his subject. Harry Golden attributes Sandburg's understanding of Lincoln to the fact that the former was a Socialist intellectual and a poet. As such he not only understood Lincoln's political views but also his writing ability as evident in his preparing the Gettysburg Address.<sup>8</sup> Richard Crowder specifies that Sandburg spent many years gathering material and in the process, he absorbed it, "made it his own; now he had given it to the world colored by his own personality."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>Max Lerner, "Lincoln as War Leader," New Republic, CI (December 6, 1939), 197.

<sup>7</sup>M. L. Elting, Review of Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, by Carl Sandburg, Forum, CII (December, 1939), iv.

<sup>8</sup>Harry Golden, Carl Sandburg (Cleveland: World, 1961), p. 252.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Crowder, Carl Sandburg (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1964), p. 96.

The second area considered in the reviews was the physical characteristics of the Abraham Lincoln ; however, mention of its physical nature was brought in only incidentally. Most of the reviewers mentioned the enormous length of the work, and a few of them mentioned the omission of footnotes. But, by and large, there was little attention paid to these details. Only two reviewers seemed to be upset by these two things. Leonard Woolf thinks . . . The Prairie Years is too long. He says, "It was a kind of ragbag into which was stuffed, with little attempt at order and none at discrimination, every kind of fact remotely connected with the biographical victim."<sup>10</sup> Later, however, he admits that the mass of detail gave him "an overpowering sense of reality in the character of the biographee."<sup>11</sup> James A. Woodburn did not mind the length of the work, but he was upset by the omission of footnotes and lack of indication of sources. He says that the reading public will not miss them, but "the inquiring student will wish for them."<sup>12</sup> It is to be noted that only two of the reviews gave any negative criticism to the physical characteristics while several praised the

---

<sup>10</sup> Leonard Woolf, "Out of the Wilderness," The Nation and the Ahtenaem, XXXIX (May 1, 1926), 130.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Woodburn, The American Political Science Review, XX (August, 1926), 674-75.

illustrations and pictures, the thorough index, and the short chapters in . . . The Prairie Years.

The third area considered in the criticism is subject matter. More attention was paid to subject matter in both the 1926 and the 1939 reviews than any other aspect of the work. This attention is understandable since one of the functions of a book review is to give, more or less, some idea of the subject matter. One thing that was noticeable in many of the reviews, however, was the fact that the author gave a summary of the life of Lincoln, or life on the prairie, or life during the Civil War without connecting his observations to Sandburg's material. It is as though everyone wants to "get into the act" where talking about Lincoln is concerned. Any attempt to give all of the approaches to the subject matter discussed in the reviews would be a tedious task, but a few examples should serve to illustrate what kinds of discussions were contained in the reviews.

Briefly, the 1926 reviews discussed Lincoln's prairie life and his environment. Edith Wyatt uses two-thirds of her review to discuss the economic growth of the prairie and gives many illustrations of Lincoln's poverty.<sup>13</sup> The New York Times review concentrated on

---

<sup>13</sup>Edith Wyatt, "Lincoln at Home," New Republic, XLVI (March 17, 1926), 116.

the environment of Lincoln. The review specifies that Sandburg does not pay attention to ancestry but portrays Lincoln as growing up in loneliness.<sup>14</sup> L. E. Robinson agrees with the New York Times review. He says that Sandburg pays little attention to heredity but shows Lincoln as a product of the prairie.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Roscoe C. E. Brown says that Sandburg has attempted to sketch and explain Lincoln in terms of heritage and environment.<sup>16</sup> Another reviewer was more impressed by the legal aspects of ... The Prairie Years. He says, "Sandburg recounts case after case in which Lincoln's balancing of human values is exhibited."<sup>17</sup> Other reviews were more concerned with Sandburg's picture of prairie life. For example, Roscoe Brown says that Sandburg depicts the prairie society as part and parcel of America. Life was rough, typical of pioneer conditions. The people lived much as the Indians lived except that they had an interest in religion and politics. Brown goes on to say that Lincoln grew up in the Jeffersonian tradition; he was

---

<sup>14</sup>When Lincoln Rode the Circuit; Carl Sandburg's Vigorous Biography of the Prairie Years," New York Times, (February 14, 1926), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup>L. E. Robinson, "New Biographies of Lincoln," Yale Review, XVI (October, 1926), 183.

<sup>16</sup>Roscoe C. E. Brown, "Lincoln the American," North American Review, CCXXIII (June, 1926), 353.

<sup>17</sup>"Carl Sandburg's Masterpiece," Bookman, LXIII, (March, 1926), 86.

typically shrewd and ambitious, yet modest; he was eager for distinction, intellectually honest, high principled and courageous.<sup>18</sup> Some of the other reviews also gave sketches of Lincoln. Leonard Woolf uses one-half of his review describing Lincoln as a "scapegoat."<sup>19</sup> Woodburn remarks that we see Lincoln in all his various attitudes--joking, melancholy, unmannered.<sup>20</sup> And Mark Van Doren observes, "Few men and women are truly mysterious. Lincoln was, and in my opinion Mr. Sandburg has presented the elements of that mystery more subtly and more completely than I have ever seen them presented before."<sup>21</sup> There were many other observations, of course, but these representative samples should give some idea of the kinds of material contained in the most important reviews.

The 1939 reviews devote even more space to subject matter than the 1926 reviews, and this is no surprise, for during the period covered by     . The War Years Lincoln's actions were continuously of national significance. Everything from discussion of Lincoln to evaluation of his

<sup>18</sup>Brown, North American Review, CCXXIII (June, 1926), 354.

<sup>19</sup>Woolf, The Nation and the Athenaeum, XXXIX (May 1, 1926), 130.

<sup>20</sup>Woodburn, The American Political Science Review, XX (August, 1926), 675-76.

<sup>21</sup>Mark Van Doren, [no title], The Nation, CXXII (February 10, 1926), 149.

administration is contained in these later reviews, and as with those of 1926, it would serve no important purpose to summarize the views of every contributor to them. A few should serve to exemplify adequately the material. L. E. Robinson gives a lengthy summary of Lincoln's administration with the conclusion that Lincoln gradually made himself master of his administration.<sup>22</sup> R. E. Sherwood pays more attention to the men and women in     .    .    The War Years. He says, "It is less the events than the men and women who made them that concern Mr. Sandburg."<sup>23</sup> Sherwood also gives a lengthy summary of the material in all four volumes. Commager was most impressed by Sandburg's ability to draw portraits of people and quotes several that he found especially good. He concludes that     .    .    The War Years is a history of all of the people gravitating around Lincoln.<sup>24</sup> Max Lerner, finding no indication of any thesis in     .    .    The War Years, concludes that Mr. Sandburg intentionally lets the reader draw his own conclusions. Lerner also recognizes two peaks in the four volumes, the chapter on "Lincoln's Laughter and Religion"

---

<sup>22</sup>L. E. Robinson, "Sandburg's Lincoln," The Nation CXLIX (December 2, 1939), 614.

<sup>23</sup>R. E. Sherwood, "The Lincoln of Carl Sandburg," New York Times (December 3, 1939), Sec. 6, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup>Commager, Yale Review, XXIX (Winter, 1940), 375-76.

and the chapters on Lincoln's assassination. He adds that ... The War Years "is itself a battlefield, a sprawling panorama of people and issues and conflicts held together only by Sandburg's absorption with the central figure."<sup>25</sup> Edgar Jones also cites the chapter, "Lincoln's Laughter and Religion" as one of the best in ... The War Years and comments on the vast number of anecdotes found in this chapter. To him the chapter at first seemed cluttered, but considering what goes before it and what goes after it, it is, he finally realized, important.<sup>26</sup> Stephen Vincent Benét, like Sherwood, recognizes the importance of the people in the biography. He says that men and women "known or little known, who played their part in those years--generals, civilians, office seekers, congressmen, cranks, soldiers of North and South, traitors, spies, plain citizens--appear and disappear like straws whirled along by a torrent."<sup>27</sup> Finally, Allan Nevins says that one of the two distinctive qualities of Mr. Sandburg's work is "the cumulative force of his detail in building up, step by step, an unforgettable impression of the crowded times, with

---

<sup>25</sup>Lerner, New Republic, CI (December 6, 1939), 197-98.

<sup>26</sup>Jones, The Christian Century, LVII (January 3, 1940), 21.

<sup>27</sup>Stephen Vincent Benét, Review of Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, by Carl Sandburg, Atlantic, LXIV (December, 1939), xx.

crisis jostling crisis, problems rising in endless welter--and, pari passu, an impression of Lincoln patiently finding his talents, learning to endure the storm and finally mastering it with sad serenity."<sup>28</sup>

The more recent criticism concerning the subject matter does little more than echo the 1926 and the 1939 reviews. Each writer of criticism, of course, takes a little different view, but it all comes down to the Lincoln biography's being a history of the period with Lincoln as the central figure. There are, however, two or three ideas that should be noted. Ramsdell says that Sandburg's fundamental purpose seems to be "to explain Lincoln and the Lincoln legend."<sup>29</sup> Others, among whom are Harry Golden and Allan Nevins, support this idea. Another idea that is rather different is expressed by Oscar Cargill, who says that devotion is the staying power of ... The War Years, but that some of its weaknesses also come from an excess of devotion. He gives as an example the close of the chapter describing Lincoln's death.<sup>30</sup> Another negative criticism is expressed by Richard Crowder, who says that Sandburg

<sup>28</sup>Nevins, Saturday Review of Literature, XXI (December 2, 1939), 3.

<sup>29</sup>Charles W. Ramsdell, "Carl Sandburg's Lincoln, Southern Review, VI (Winter, 1941), 444.

<sup>30</sup>Oscar Cargill, "Carl Sandburg: Crusader and Mystic," English Journal, XXXIX (April, 1950), 183.

drew in too much irrelevant material in order to show Lincoln's growth.<sup>31</sup> Other than those given above, nothing very different is contained in the more recent criticism about the subject matter.

The fourth area of criticism concerns the errors contained in the Lincoln biography. Only three reviews mentioned any errors, and not much mention has been made since then. Woodburn, Barton, and Brown were interested in the errors. Barton very decidedly lambastes Sandburg for not choosing his material more carefully. He says that any "new" material in the biography is not really new. The other biographers did not use it simply because they did not trust its source. Barton lists several errors that he found and concludes that a work such as this needs no new material; "that task belongs to critical scholarship and not to poetic fancy."<sup>32</sup> Woodburn also found some errors,

<sup>31</sup>Crowder, Carl Sandburg, p. 134.

<sup>32</sup>Barton, American Historical Society Review, XXXI (July, 1926), 810. In another article "The Abraham Lincoln of the Prairies," World's Work, LII, (May, 1926), 102-105. Barton lists the following errors: "Nancy Hanks is represented as singing to her children 'From Greenland's Icy Mountains.' That hymn was written a year after she died. . . . Grotesquely he [Sandburg] describes as a hymn the song 'Legacy' which Lincoln is alleged to have sung out of the 'Missouri Harmony.' The 'Missouri Harmony' contained a good many hymns, but 'Legacy' was a drinking song. . . . He repeats the old-time error of making David Elkins, whose name he misspells, a Methodist, but Elkins . . . was an old-time Baptist. Also he slips into an unfortunate blunder in telling how Lincoln's family's friendship for Jesse Head grew out of Head's anti-slavery convictions. Jesse Head did not possess any anti-slavery convictions."

but he opines that the errors are minor and should not mar the effect of the biography.<sup>33</sup> Brown, like Woodburn, noted some errors which he considered insignificant. His conclusion is that the reader gets a remarkably true and understandable account of Lincoln and of the society.<sup>34</sup> In the later criticism Ramsdell is the only one who noted the errors in the biography. He, like Barton before him, was quite perturbed that Sandburg was so careless with the facts: "No one can reasonably expect that four volumes the size of these     .    .    .    The War Years could be written without an occasional slip, but it is hard to see how some of the factual errors sprinkled throughout these pages could have escaped detection."<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup>Woodburn, The American Political Science Review, XX (August, 1926), 676. Woodburn lists these errors: "He [Sandburg] puts the cost of the Mexican war at one fourth of the proper sum; the Fugitive Slave Law was hardly a 'joke in northern Ohio'; he calls Fillmore a Free Soil candidate; he calls Prudence Crandall 'Prudence Campbell'; he puts Crawfordsville, Indiana, on the Wabash River; he describes John Quincy Adams as 'a sweet, lovable man'-- which he was hardly considered as being even by his friends, certainly not by his opponents in congressional debate."

<sup>34</sup>Brown, North American Review, CCXXIII (June, 1926), 353.

<sup>35</sup>Ramsdell, Southern Review, VI (Winter, 1941), 451-52. Ramsdell lists these errors from Volume I,     .    .    .    The War Years: "The African slave trade was not outlawed by the Constitution of the United States (p. 5) but by an act of Congress of 1807. Kansas had not, when made a state in January, 1861, been knocking for admission for twelve years (p. 14), nor had it always been the South that said 'No.' Senator Douglas had not voted to buy Florida from

The fifth area of criticism concerns the techniques and methods that Sandburg used in writing Abraham Lincoln. In the 1926 reviews, the criticism is varied, but most of it concerns Sandburg's use of poetry. James Woodburn, W. E. Barton, and Mark Van Doren all seemed displeased, in one way or another, with Sandburg's use of poetry. Woodburn doubts whether The Prairie Years can even be called biography because there is so much poetry and imagination and so much tradition mingled with fact. Likewise, Barton disapproves of Sandburg's poetic interpretations, as well as disliking some of Sandburg's

---

Spain (p. 15), since in 1819 he was a child of only six years. It is not true that the South Carolinians would not let Major Anderson's garrison at Ft. Sumter have anything to eat (p. 188) at the time Anderson is alleged to have so written to Secretary Holt, about March 1, 1861. From January 31 at latest to April 7, five days before the attack, Anderson had been permitted to purchase both meat and vegetables in Charleston. . . . Texas is listed in place of Virginia in the second group of seceding states (p. 237). The paragraph concerning Jefferson Davis' secession activities (p. 238) and his alleged opposition to the Crittenden Compromise is a tissue of errors. The whole story of the offer of the presidency of the Confederacy to Alexander H. Stephens (p. 255) and his declination is a myth. Stephens did not say in his famous 'corner stone' speech at Savannah that the Negro was 'subhuman' (p. 266). What he did say was that the Negro was not the equal of the white man."

<sup>36</sup>Woodburn, The American Political Science Review, XX (August, 1926), 674.

similes. He says he wonders "how far strained figures of speech are justified in biographical study."<sup>37</sup> Mark Van Doren, himself a poet, is nevertheless in accord with Woodburn and Barton: "It is annoying to hear from page to page in the first volume some transcendental want that still lived in him, lived far under in him, in the deep pools of him." He confesses, however, that he finds the book beautiful in spite of its obvious and unassimilated poetry.<sup>38</sup> Other reviewers disagreed with these three. The Bookman review, for example, says that Sandburg's prose is "like molten steel flowing into a vessel. It pulls. It strikes the eye with a hot blast." The review further praises Sandburg's use of "homely words" from the American language as it is spoken and describes his style as being limpid and graphic.<sup>39</sup>

The 1939 reviews, like those of 1926, paid a great deal of attention to these poetic elements, but they paid more attention to Sandburg's handling of detail. Stephen Vincent Benét likes some of the poetry but not all of it. He says, "There are places where Mr. Sandburg's style touches genuine poetry, there are others where it descends

<sup>37</sup>Barton, American Historical Society Review, XXXI, (July, 1926), 810.

<sup>38</sup>Van Doren, The Nation, CXXII (February 10, 1926), 149.

<sup>39</sup>The Bookman, XLIII, (March, 1926), 86.

to bathos."<sup>40</sup> He further adds that there is too much detail in . . . The War Years, and the selection is a little odd. He says, "It is a little difficult for me to see just why Mr. Sandburg gives . . . more space to the funeral tributes of the clergy than to the actual three days at Gettysburg."<sup>41</sup> Edgar Jones especially praises Sandburg's poetic style in the last part of the chapter entitled "Lincoln Speaks at Gettysburg." He adds that the narrative moves slowly, leisurely all the way through and in the final chapter, is a funeral dirge.<sup>42</sup> Max Lerner describes Sandburg as a poet and a reporter. He is the poet of the Chicago poems "celebrating America and the obscure ways of life, setting his words down with neither elegance nor precision but with a curious random obliqueness that nevertheless manages almost always to reach its object."<sup>43</sup> As a reporter, Sandburg writes with a matter-of-factness and lets the facts speak for themselves, though, in the final analysis, Lerner thinks there is too much detail, with the result that the reader inevitably loses perspective.<sup>44</sup> Henry Commager agrees with Lerner in respect to Sandburg's

<sup>40</sup> Benét, Atlantic Monthly, XLIV (December, 1939), xxii.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, The Christian Century, LVII (January 3, 1940), 21.

<sup>43</sup> Lerner, New Republic, CI (December 6, 1939), 197.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

journalistic style. He says, "The technique is that of an attack in force; Sandburg masses his facts in regiments, marches them in and takes the field, and the conquest is palpable and complete."<sup>45</sup> He disagrees however with Lerner's view that there is too much detail, for he seems to think the detail gives vividness to the narrative, and prevents the interest from lagging.<sup>46</sup> M. L. Elting is in full agreement with Commager and concludes, "Only rarely did we wish for less fact and more of the author's own judgment."<sup>47</sup> Allan Nevins also comments on the vast detail, calling it a Niagara. "He [Sandburg] has caught the drainage of the whole vast historical watershed of the Civil War as Niagara catches the Great Lakes, and he pours it forth in a thundering flood."<sup>48</sup> Nevins further describes his style as graphic and vital, saying he has "a cinematographic ease in glancing from point to point, idea to idea, event to event. . . ."<sup>49</sup> The Time review, however, found that Sandburg's method of "stockpiling" material caused a few repetitions, though the review does not list

---

<sup>45</sup>Commager, Yale Review, XXIX (Winter, 1940), 375.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Elting, Forum, CII (December, 1939), iv.

<sup>48</sup>Nevins, Saturday Review of Literature, XXI (December 2, 1939), 3.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

the specific repetitions. The review goes on to appraise his style as "direct, savored, terse, with scarcely a perfunctory or a pretentious sentence."<sup>50</sup> Hence, the 1939 reviews are split on the question of whether so much detail is good or poor form. They do, however, agree on the poetry. When there is poetry in     The War Years it is usually good.

Later criticism of the Lincoln biography is mostly favorable. The critics here, as in 1939, are concerned mainly with Sandburg's handling of the vast material. Mark Longaker says     The Prairie Years is overloaded with anecdote, and the principles of selection and omission are not observed. He finds, nevertheless, some merit in the length of the work:

A biographer who has a feeling for literary values, who has descriptive and interpretative power, who knows how to handle dramatic effect and who has a turn for phrase--in short, a literary artist--need feel no qualms about the size of his work. There are some good things of which we never tire. Sandburg's exhaustiveness becomes a positive virtue.<sup>51</sup>

Charles Ramsdell, like Longaker, gives a great deal of attention to the handling of details. He says Sandburg's method is to follow the usual order of events, enlarging the narrative with thousands of details. Some of these

<sup>50</sup>"Your Obt. Servt." Time, XXXIV (December 4, 1939), 38.

<sup>51</sup>Mark Longaker, Contemporary Biography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), p. 248.

details are unimportant, but they help to form the total picture. Ramsdell goes on to say that the quality of Sandburg's writing is uneven. Too much is mere quotation, direct or indirect, with too little comment from the author. Too much is dull, but he qualifies this criticism by insisting that it is not Sandburg who is dull but his material.<sup>52</sup> Oscar Cargill also wishes that Sandburg had not written so much: "He [Sandburg] has what is supposed to be the professor's love of facts on to which he grafts the poet's love of legend, but his attention to detailing each is such that perspective is lost among the trees."<sup>53</sup> Richard Crowder, likewise, wishes for more concentration and selection of data and more opinion from the author. Crowder also found the style of . . . The War Years an improvement over . . . The Prairie Years because the former is more factual while the latter is more lyrical and, as a result, more indistinct. He says . . . The Prairie Years might now be considered a poetic prologue to . . . The War Years.<sup>54</sup> Karl Detzer finds the effectiveness of Sandburg's style in its journalistic quality: "He [Sandburg] has the reporter's knack of spotting a good story when he sees it, of knowing

---

<sup>52</sup>Ramsdell, Southern Review, VI (Winter, 1941), 452-53.

<sup>53</sup>Cargill, English Journal, XXXIX (April, 1950), 183.

<sup>54</sup>Crowder, Carl Sandburg, pp. 129, 132.

how to tell it in plain words, how to arrange his material to get the most dramatic value out of it, and he never bores his reader with academic stodginess."<sup>55</sup>

The criticism of Sandburg's style, overall, is limited almost entirely to his use of poetry and his accumulation of facts. A little is said about his use of simple language, but a great deal more could be said. It will be interesting to see how future critics look upon Sandburg's style.

The sixth area of criticism concerns the overall value of the Abraham Lincoln. . . . Most of the reviewers consider the work an enormous achievement in the fields both of literature and history. Some think it is literature, some history. Barton says, "This work . . . The Prairie Years . . . is to be commended as a poet's interpretation of that part of Lincoln's life which preceded his inauguration as President of the United States, and not as an important addition to historical knowledge."<sup>56</sup> J. A. Woodburn says, "One may read many biographies of Lincoln, but he will probably never read a more interesting one than this."<sup>57</sup> Commager says about . . . The War

<sup>55</sup>Karl W. Detzer, Carl Sandburg: A Study in Personality and Background (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941), p. 127.

<sup>56</sup>Barton, American Historical Society Review, XXXI (July, 1926), 810.

<sup>57</sup>Woodburn, The American Political Science Review, XX (August, 1926), 674.

Years, "He [Sandburg] has realized that Lincoln belongs to the people, not to the historians, and he has given us a portrait from which a whole generation may draw understanding of the past and inspiration for the future."<sup>58</sup> Max Lerner adds, "Taking the total achievement, there is nothing in historical literature that I know quite comparable with it [. . . The War Years]."<sup>59</sup> Stephen Vincent Benet says, "I think it is difficult for anyone to read these volumes and not come out, at the end, with a renewed faith in the democracy that Lincoln believed in and a renewed belief in the America he sought."<sup>60</sup>

Thus, the praises go on and on. The critics have accepted Carl Sandburg's work as a great piece of literature. Clearly, it is not a flawless piece of art, for there are some things that could bear improvement--excessive detail, overuse of poetic style, inadequate selection--but most of the critics agree that these flaws are insignificant in relation to the total effect of the book. Most of the critics also agree that the Abraham Lincoln . . . is a monumental tribute to Lincolniana and to literature. It is too early to decide definitely the final worth of the biography, but it seems certain that it shall hold a place in American literature for years to come.

---

<sup>58</sup>Commager, Yale Review, XXIX (Winter, 1940), 377.

<sup>59</sup>Lerner, New Republic, CI (December 6, 1939), 197.

<sup>60</sup>Benet, Atlantic Monthly LXIV (December, 1939), xx.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Throughout the present study, the author of this paper has attempted to demonstrate that Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and Abraham Lincoln: The War Years are worthy of study as a work representing American literature. There are four basic reasons for this conclusion. The first is that Carl Sandburg is an author with talent for presenting an American legend. He grew up in a part of the United States especially memorable for its capacity to create legends. He understands legends and the people who make them. Furthermore, he has a command of the American language that is surpassed by none. Second, Abraham Lincoln . . . is a vast picture of America in the mid-nineteenth century, and while it is important historically, it is also important as literature because it is well written. It embodies the criteria of good literature: (1) it has excellence of form and expression; and (2) it has universal appeal. Third, Abraham Lincoln . . . is a rich field for the critics, and many rewarding studies could be made. At the present time, too few have been

attempted. Fourth, Abraham Lincoln . . . is a mixture of nineteenth-century biography and the New Biography. A transition between the new and the old, often embodying the best of both, it stands as a milestone in the history of the art of biography.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Books

- Aiken, Conrad. Scepticisms. New York: Knopf, 1919.
- Boynton, Percy H. Some Contemporary Americans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925.
- Brenner, Rica. Ten Modern Poets. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930.
- Charnwood, Godfrey R. B., 1st Baron. Abraham Lincoln. Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1917.
- Clifford, James L. (ed.). Biography As an Art: Selected Criticism. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Committee of the Carnegie Library Association (ed.) Washington and Lincoln in Poetry. New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1927.
- Compton, Charles H. Who Reads What? New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1934.
- Cowley, Malcolm (ed.) After the Genteel Tradition. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1937.
- Crowder, Richard. Carl Sandburg. New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1964.
- Davenport, William H. and Siegel, Ben (ed.). Biography Past and Present: Selections and Critical Essays. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965.
- Detzer, Karl W. Carl Sandburg: A Study in Personality and Background. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941.
- Deutsch, Babette. This Modern Poetry. New York: Norton, 1935.

- Edel, Leon. Literary Biography. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957.
- Foerster, Norman (ed.). American Poetry and Prose. Part II. 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962.
- Golden, Harry. Carl Sandburg. Cleveland: World, 1961.
- Herndon, William H. and Weik, J. W. Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life. 3 vols. Cleveland: World, 1965.
- Lewisohn, Ludwig. Expression in America. New York: Harpers, 1932.
- Longaker, Mark. Contemporary Biography. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934.
- Ludwig, Emil. Genius and Character. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927.
- Maurois, Andre. "The Ethics of Biography," English Institute Annual, 1942. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943.
- Millett, Fred B. Contemporary American Authors. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922.
- Nicolay, John G. and Hay, John. Abraham Lincoln: A History. 10 vols. New York: The Century Company, 1914.
- Oldroyd, Osborn H. (ed.). The Poet's Lincoln: Tributes in Verse to the Martyred President. Washington, D. C.: Published by the editor at "the house where Lincoln died," 1915.
- Randall, James G. Lincoln the President: Springfield to Gettysburg. 2 vols. New York: Dodd Mead, 1945.
- Randall, Ruth Painter. Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage. Boston: Little, Brown, 1953.
- Sandburg, Carl. Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years. 2 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926.
- Sandburg, Carl. Abraham Lincoln: The War Years. 4 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939.

- Sandburg, Carl. Always the Young Strangers. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952.
- Sandburg, Carl. The American Songbag. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927.
- Sandburg, Carl. Complete Poems. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1950.
- Sherwood, Robert E. Abe Lincoln in Illinois: A Play in Twelve Scenes. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939.
- Stone, Irving. Love Is Eternal. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1954.
- Strachey, Lytton. Eminent Victorians. Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., no date .
- Tarbell, Ida M. The Life of Abraham Lincoln. 2 vols. New York: Lincoln History Society, 1903.
- Thayer, William Roscoe. The Art of Biography. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920.
- Thomas, Benjamin. Abraham Lincoln, A Biography. New York: Knopf, 1952.
- Thrall, William Flint and Hibbard, Addison. A Handbook to Literature. 1st ed. New York: Odyssey Press, 1936.
- Van Doren, Mark. The Last Days of Lincoln. New York: Hill and Wang, 1959.
- Whipple, T. K. Spokesmen; Modern Writers and American Life. New York: D. Appleton, 1928.
- Yatron, Michael. America's Literary Revolt. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.

#### Periodicals

- Allen, Gay Wilson. "Carl Sandburg: Fire and Smoke," South Atlantic Quarterly, LIX (Summer, 1960), 315-31.
- Anderson, Sherwood. "Carl Sandburg," Bookman, LIV (December, 1921), 360-61.

- Arvin, Newton. "Carl Sandburg," New Republic, LXXXVIII (September 9, 1936), 119-21
- Babcock, Frederic. "Beginning of a Friendship," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 326.
- Barton, William E. "The Abraham Lincoln of the Prairies," World's Work, LII (May, 1926), 102-105.
- Barton, William E. Review of Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years, by Carl Sandburg, American Historical Society Review, XXXI (July, 1926), 809-10.
- Benét, Stephen Vincent. Review of Abraham Lincoln: The War Years by Carl Sandburg, Atlantic Monthly, CLXIV (December, 1939), pp. xx, xxii.
- Benet, Stephen Vincent and Rosemary. "Sandburg: Son of the Lincoln Countryside," New York Herald-Tribune Books, XVIII (December 14, 1941), 8.
- Brown, Roscoe C. E. "Lincoln the American," North American Review, CCXXIII (June, 1926), 353-57.
- Cargill, Oscar. "Carl Sandburg: Crusader and Mystic," English Journal, XXXIX (April, 1950), 177-84.
- "Carl Sandburg's Masterpiece," Bookman, LXIII (March, 1926), 86-87.
- Chute, Marchette. "Getting at the Truth." The Saturday Review, XXXVI (September 19, 1953), 11-12, 43-44.
- Commager, Henry S. "Lincoln Belongs to the People," Yale Review, XXIX (Winter, 1940), 374-77.
- Crowder, Richard. "Sandburg's Caboose Thoughts," Explicator, IV (May, 1946), 52.
- Dilliard, Irving. "Friends on the Post-Dispatch," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 355-60.
- Elting, M. L. Review of Abraham Lincoln: The War Years by Carl Sandburg, Forum, CII (December, 1939), lv.
- Felts, David V. "The Eloquent Drumstick," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 355.

- Finnegan, Richard J. "A Reporter, Yes," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 373-78.
- Flexner, James T. "Biography as a Juggler's Art," The Saturday Review, XXVI (October 9, 1943), 3-4, 19.
- George, Adda. "The Galesburg Birthplace," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 300-305.
- Gertz, Elmer. "Birthday Snapshots," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 379-83.
- Hansen, Harry. "Sandburg and the Chicago Daily News," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 321-25.
- Harcourt, Alfred. "Forty Years of Friendship," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 395-99.
- Haverlin, Carl. "He Heard America Sing," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 385-87.
- Jenkins, Alan. "Mentor and First Publisher," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 311-15.
- Jenkins, Alan. "Portrait of a Poet at College," South Atlantic Quarterly, XLIX (October, 1950), 478-82.
- Jones, Edgar De Witt. "The People's Lincoln," The Christian Century, LVII (January 3, 1940), 21-22.
- Jones, H. M. "Backgrounds of Sorrow," Virginia Quarterly Review, III (January, 1927), 111-123.
- Jordan-Smith, Paul. "A Folksy, Friendly Fellow," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 319-20.
- Lerner, Max. "Lincoln as War Leader," New Republic, CI (December 6, 1939), 197-98.
- Meserve, Frederick Hill. "Thoughts on a Friend," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 337-38.

- Moore, Ann Carroll. "Recent Books for Children," Bookman, LXIII (April, 1926), 209.
- Nevins, Allan. "Abe Lincoln in Washington," Saturday Review of Literature, XXI (December 2, 1939), 3-4.
- Nevins, Allan. "Sandburg as Historian," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 361-72.
- Nicolson, Harold. "The Practice of Biography," American Scholar, XXIII (Spring, 1954), 151-61.
- Pratt, Harry E. "A Tribute to Carl Sandburg at Seventy-Five," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 295.
- Ramsdell, Charles W. "Carl Sandburg's Lincoln" Southern Review, VI (Winter, 1941), 439-53.
- Randall, J. G. "Carl," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 329-33.
- Robinson, L. E. "New Biographies of Lincoln," Yale Review, XVI (October, 1926), 183-85.
- Robinson, L. E. "Sandburg's Lincoln" The Nation, CXLIX (December 2, 1939), 614-16.
- Rosenfeld, Paul. "Carl Sandburg," Bookman, LIII (July, 1921), 389-96).
- "Sandburg and Stallings," Bookman, LXII (May, 1926), 261.
- Sandburg, Carl. "Trying to Write," Atlantic, CLXXXVI (September, 1950), 31-33.
- Schenk, W. P. "Carl Sandburg--A Bibliography," Bulletin of Bibliography, XVI (December, 1936), 4-7.
- Sherwood, Robert E. "A Cold Walk with Carl," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 327-28.
- Sherwood, Robert E. "The Lincoln of Carl Sandburg," New York Times (December 3, 1939), Sec. 6, p. 1.
- Starr, Thomas I. "Cattails," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 334-35.

- Stevenson, Adlai E. "A Friend and Admirer," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 297-99.
- Thomas, Benjamin P. "A Man of Faith in Man," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 339-40.
- Van Doren, Carl. "Flame and Slag. Carl Sandburg: Poet with Both Fists," Century, CVI (September, 1923), 786-92.
- Van Doren, Mark. [No title] The Nation, CXXII (February 10, 1926), 149.
- Van Norman, C. E. "A Pair of 'Dreamers'," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 316-18.
- Weirick, Bruce. "Poetical Circuit Rider," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 341-53.
- "When Lincoln Rode the Circuit; Carl Sandburg's Vigorous Biography of the Prairie Years," New York Times (February 14, 1926), p. 1.
- Woodburn, James A. Review of Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years by Carl Sandburg, The American Political Science Review, XX (August, 1926), 674-77.
- Woolf, Leonard. "Out of the Wilderness," The Nation and the Athenaeum, XXXIX (May 1, 1926), 130.
- Wright, Quincy. "Lombard Memories," Illinois Historical Society Journal, XLV (Winter, 1952), 307-10.
- Wyatt, Edith. "Lincoln at Home," New Republic, XLVI (March 17, 1926), 116-17.
- "Your Obt. Servt." Time, XXXIV (December 4, 1939), 84-88.
- Yust, Walter. "Carl Sandburg, Human Being," Bookman, LII (January, 1921), 285-90.
- Zabel, M. D. "Sandburg's Testament," Poetry, XLIX (October, 1936), 33-45.