

# THE MAN WHO KNOWS LINCOLN

*Carl Sandburg's great works are based on a lifetime of listening to the people*

BY LOUIS UNTERMAYER

**A**LTHOUGH CARL SANDBURG is famous principally as a poet, there is a good possibility that he will be remembered longest as the most sensitive and spiritually sympathetic of Lincoln biographers. The very fact that he is a poet, and a peculiarly American poet, has contributed incalculably to his ability to catch the spirit of the great Civil War President.

In a sense, Sandburg's whole life has been a preparation for the mammoth, six-volume reconstruction of facts, visions, plain talk, and poetic interpretations which is his life of Lincoln. It was a recreation which was also a pure creation, something which could never have been written except by a poet who had listened to "the learning and blundering people."

Sandburg's intuition amplifies the bare items of Lincoln's birth. His sensitivity condenses to an elegy the death of Nancy Hanks, makes a lyric out of the tragic ro-

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mance with Ann Rutledge, and calculates precisely the effect of the Dred Scott decision on Lincoln's political attitude. The newspaperman joins hands with the visionary and reaches new heights in his prologue and epilogue to the Gettysburg Address. No biographer has ever accomplished so extraordinary a union of documents and dreams.

A great rhapsodizer, like his predecessor Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg has freely ranged the country for the subject matter of his poetry. He has celebrated the native scene in practically all its phases, from the windy shouting of the metropolis ("Chicago, Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads, and Freight Handler to the Nation") to the silence of the fog which moves over the city "on little cat feet"; from violent jazz fantasias, in which the drums, traps, banjos, and horns cry "like a racing car slipping away from a motorcycle-cop," to delicate and hushed nocturnes in a deserted brickyard. Like Whitman, Sandburg uses the language of his time; he mixes the most tenuous images with the current idiom, strengthening his ancestral Swedish mysticism with good American slang, answering Whitman's plea for "limber, lasting, fierce words." He has defined

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poetry in various ways, as "the opening and closing of a door," and, in an unforgettably homely epigram, as "the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits."

He was born Charles August Sandburg, January 6, 1878, in western Illinois, in the little town of Galesburg. The Sandburgs were peasants in the old country, and Carl's father, who had only a few months of schooling in Sweden, never was quite at home with the English language.

Although Galesburg had a population of only 15,000 people, the town had three colleges. Young Carl entered one of these, Lombard, but he spent much of his time at the Knox College campus, a place where, according to local legend, Abraham Lincoln first spoke up against slavery. One thing is indisputable: Lincoln and Douglas had one of their celebrated debates on the Knox College campus.

At 13, Carl went to work delivering milk. Whitman spouted Shakespeare riding on top of the Broadway busses and declaimed Homer while crossing on the Brooklyn ferry; Sandburg adapted Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" to the rhythms of the horse's hoofs and the rattle of wagon wheels. In his mid-teens he became a pottery worker, then a

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stagehand at the local opera house. then porter and bootblack in a barbershop—he recalls that one of the greatest honors was the blacking of fifteen pairs of Senatorial shoes on the day of a Congressman's funeral. In his late teens he worked as a house-painter and washed dishes in a Kansas City restaurant.

At 20, with no future to call his own, he enlisted as a soldier in the Spanish-American War, saw service in Puerto Rico, came home and worked out his tuition in college by serving as janitor of the gymnasium. He also became captain of the football team, editor of the college paper, and, at 26, published a little sheaf of random prose and free verse entitled *In Reckless Ecstasy* [*sic*], of which only five copies are known to exist. In this paper-covered booklet Sandburg was trying to say the things he uttered so vehemently later in life, but it went practically unnoticed. Twelve years later—after he had struggled to earn a living as an itinerant lecturer and newspaperman—Sandburg startled the country with the alternately tough and tender *Chicago Poems*.

The poet made huge strides in *Cornhuskers*; *Smoke and Steel*; *Slabs of the Sunburnt West*; *Good Morning, America*; and *The People, Yes*. His imaginative humor rollicked in several books for

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children, notably *Rootabaga Stories*, nonsense tales for the young which were fables for the adult. As a poetic folklorist Sandburg assembled a massive collection of native words and music in *The American Songbag*, gathered by ear from work-gangs, hoboes, hill folk, cowboys, and convicts.

Although Sandburg grew to be the laureate of industrial America, no major award was ever given to him for his poetry. Many minor versifiers won Pulitzer Prizes, but it was not until 1940, when Sandburg was 66, that he was given the Pulitzer Prize, in the history category, for *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*.

Sandburg has also distinguished himself in another field—the relatively new art of recording. Albums have been made of his sonorous readings from his long and prophetic *The People, Yes*, a litany of democracy, and from *Cowboy Songs and Negro Spirituals*, grassroot songs sung in the simple yet subtle style of a master of balladry.

At 70, Sandburg is—he has always been—the voice of the common man, and it is only natural that his biography of Abraham Lincoln should express for all time the spirit of that uncommon man who was the common denominator of humanity.

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