

Book Reviews

Portrait for Posterity: Lincoln and His Biographers. By Benjamin P. Thomas. (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1947, pp. xvii, 329. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$3.00.)

This is a novel approach to the Lincoln problem—a book about the men and women who wrote about him. Their portraits (the plural is better) for posterity stand out in stronger light when we look through their bifocals and see how and why they wrote. From a variety of sources but chiefly from their own letters Thomas has constructed his book. With humor and understanding he has portrayed the characters and personalities of that strangely assorted group who sought to discover and reveal the true Abraham Lincoln to the American public. Zeal at least was a common trait, and too often it swelled into intolerance and even vindictiveness toward fellow workers in the vineyard, particularly in the generation that knew their subject at first hand.

The fierce competitive spirit of the business world in these post-Civil War years had its counterpart in the field of Lincoln research and writing. And even the profit motive was not missing from the picture. Poor Herndon, who deserved far more than he ever received, wrote to Weik on one occasion as follows: "The money line is my line & not the glory line. I need the dollars. Glory may go to thunder if I get the dimes & this you ought to know." Henry Clay Whitney hoped for "more than \$500 a year" from his book but was badly disappointed. The testy Nicolay complained to Miss Tarbell, when she began her Lincoln researches, that she was invading his field and decreasing the value of his property. The controversies and jealousies of the early biographers, the work of Nicolay and Hay (written under Robert Lincoln's adamant censorship), and the triumph of the romantic, legendary Lincoln over Herndon's earthy hero take up the first six chapters.

The remaining seven, wherein the realists have their innings, cover the productions of Ida Tarbell, Lord Charnwood, William E. Barton, Albert J. Beveridge, "The Academic Procession," and Carl Sandburg, with a final chapter called "The Emerging Portrait." The author is rather unsympathetic toward the professional historians and is inclined to

the view that Lincoln eludes their "prosaic documentation." Sandburg, he believes, has come closest to capturing the real Lincoln, though he lets the poet's reviewers speak for him.

A bibliography is appended composed of manuscript sources and books and articles about both Lincoln and his biographers. Perhaps the chief omissions are the more recent writings of professional scholars on national aspects of Lincoln's career. This is explained apparently in Chapter XI by the number of such productions.

The character sketches, the descriptions of the physical appearances of the biographers (helped by drawings by Romaine Proctor), and the accounts of their methods of research and writing make entertaining reading. Paul Angle's *The Lincoln Reader* and this volume together provide an excellent approach to the vexing Lincoln problem.

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Abraham Lincoln & the Widow Bixby. By F. Lauriston Bullard. (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1946, pp. xiii, 154. \$3.00.)

The minuteness and intensity of the interest in Abraham Lincoln is demonstrated by the publication of this small volume about a letter which some have felt was not a genuine Lincoln letter. It also reveals the fascination which some privileged people find in history by studying the evidence on all phases of one of its unsolved problems and by trying to reach a tenable conclusion about it. It is a detective story about a famous American, a story which will repay many different types of readers for their attention.

The letter which has received so much attention was one which President Lincoln wrote to a widowed mother who was thought to have lost five sons in the federal armies during the Civil War. It was a beautifully worded condolence. The quality of the letter is not lessened by the discoveries that only two of the sons were killed in action, that one was honorably discharged, and that two may have been deserters.

The author clears away the misstatements about the letter, presents the ascertainable facts about the mother to whom the letter was written, and shows that Nicolay and Hay considered that it was bona fide. He rejects the idea that John Hay wrote it for Lincoln as has been suggested. Fur-