

Book Reviews

Always the Young Strangers. By Carl Sandburg. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953, pp. 436. Index. \$5.00.)

On the last page of his thirtieth book, Sandburg quotes a Chinese proverb: "At seventy a man is a candle in the wind"; but *Always the Young Strangers* testifies that at seventy-five Sandburg's own flame is burning bright, clear, and steady. With it he has illuminated his birthplace, Galesburg, Illinois, so as to bring out the highlights, the details, and the shifting colors of a Midwestern small town in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. To a somewhat lesser extent the book deals with the growing up of "Cully" Sandburg, with his brothers and sisters, and with his Swedish immigrant parents. Scores of other people are recalled in the book, sometimes memorably. There is thus a kind of harvest time richness and retrospective quiet about the book as Sandburg looks back half a century and more.

The fact of the book itself is a footnote to American history: Sandburg, perhaps the most versatile of all American writers, is the son of a man who never learned to write. And Sandburg himself is a living link, once removed, with Abraham Lincoln. As a boy in Galesburg, Sandburg used to nod to Newton Bateman, who had seen Lincoln, agitated by the rumble of not-so-distant drums, pacing back and forth saying, "I am nothing but truth is everything." History for Galesburg mostly meant the Civil War. Young Sandburg used to contemplate a bronze plaque which bore great words from a great debate held on the Knox College campus: "He is blowing out the moral lights around us when he contends that whoever wants slaves has a right to hold them." These words the biographer-to-be read "in winter sunrise, in broad summer daylight, in falling snow or rain, in all the weathers of a year."

Galesburg at this time was still a pioneer town. At Old Settlers' picnics Sandburg saw men who remembered virgin prairie grass rising six feet, with roots so tough and tangled they often broke the wooden plowshares. The old-timers seemed a mixed lot, some dolts, some roisterers, some merely

drifters, others "heroes with dreams of making an America to light the worlds overseas." Somehow the plains-breakers became a part of Sandburg's growing mind, at a later time helping to fire it into poetry.

Some of the old-timers were nasal-voiced Yankees, forming part of the New Englanders who were the dominant group in Galesburg, owning much property and setting the standards in education, politics, and religion. There were also English and Scotch-Irish from Kentucky and Tennessee, these mostly Democrats in a Republican town. Then there were more recent arrivals: Negroes, Irish, Swedes, a few German Jews, the inevitable pair of Chinese laundrymen. Still later came Italians with their "bawling bawling strengths."

The winds of history blew through the prairie town, and Sandburg records their impact. When Grant died, the town held its own funeral parade, the longest the town had ever seen. The seven-year-old Sandburg watched it from his father's shoulders, making a face at a girl who irreverently ate peanuts as the G.A.R. veterans marched past. Galesburg seethed over the "anarshists," as the Swedes called them, who set off the Haymarket Riot, and the town exulted over the hangings. When hard times came with the Panic of 1893, Sandburg recalls what it meant to a Galesburg family: eating lard sprinkled with salt as a spread for bread; forming a little neighborhood co-operative to buy and butcher a hog; kids getting for Christmas "a five cent bag of candy, a large five cent orange, and a long sad look."

Sandburg shows us social and economic change too. In his early years kids would watch the lamplighter come along before dusk with his ladder and lighted taper; later they stood under an arc light and when it went on looked quickly at the other arc lights two blocks away, half expecting that some would be late in getting lighted. Progress showed up too in the way Galesburg's board fences slowly disappeared, first around the homes of the rich, later even at the Sandburg house. The reason was that roving livestock had become scarce. Galesburg was becoming less prairie, more town.

The picture of Galesburg that Sandburg builds up little by little is an interesting one. It is perhaps the truest and best balanced account yet written of the Midwestern small

town, avoiding the distortions (which are of course artistically justifiable) of Edgar Watson Howe, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson, and yet possessing some elements of their vision of rawness, violence, sexual hypocrisy, and spiritual and cultural poverty. For instance, Sandburg concludes a chapter called "Where Shall We Go?", which describes Galesburg's meager recreational facilities, with an account of a lynch mob gathering around the county jail one night. The obvious implication is that this was a grim sort of entertainment in a town where there wasn't enough to do.

But the lynching was averted by a cool-thinking sheriff, and Galesburg was spared one of the worst stigmas. It was, by and large, as Sandburg reveals it, a pretty good town for a boy to grow up in. It was a friendly community, whose amiability is reflected in Sandburg's own precise (though occasionally uninteresting) recollections of literally dozens of people. Many of them appear only briefly, but often they are observed with an insight that brings them to life. There is, for instance, compassionate humor and understanding in Sandburg's description of a railroad worker going to the Friday night meeting of the Knights of Abbadabba, "walking with a quickstep, trying to look military and medieval in his garments of glory He . . . had the comfort that soon he would be in the hall where he would see his solemnly pledged brothers of the secret order in regalia the same as he was wearing and there would be the ritual and he would know happiness and a mystic satisfaction that the Q. railroad was not everything in this world."

The townspeople made Galesburg for Sandburg "a piece of the American Republic." The quick growth of the town and its heterogeneous population stirred his curiosity and led him to thinking about a bigger question which was to become, in the end, the supreme question for Sandburg: "All of us living under the Stars and Stripes—what does it mean? Men have died for it—why? When they say it is a free country, they mean free for what and free for whom, and what is freedom?" Sandburg's resolve to seek for answers is the start of that theme of wondering, groping, and searching that runs through nearly all of his writings. He has, he tells us here, found answers to some of the questions over the years, but for others he has found only "half-answers, mystery answers."

Thus in a sense the autobiographical scope of *Always the Young Strangers* is widened: to learn of Galesburg is to learn of influences that helped shape the young Sandburg. Yet the book is an autobiography only in a limited way, giving us chiaroscuro glimpses of the boy rather than a full length portrait. Sandburg gives us, no doubt, what he considers essential, and modesty withholds the trivial. But we see him, for example, as a three-year-old in dresses, climbing into a hitched wagon and getting ready to drive off, and as a "six-year-old Republican" watching a torchlight parade for James G. Blaine. In church he gazed at a mural of Elijah and wished to ascend to heaven in a fiery chariot as did the prophet. The religious influence persisted, and Sandburg was confirmed in the Lutheran church, though he rebelled at fire-and-brimstone preaching. He was a typical enough boy to want to become a baseball player, yet sensitive enough to be saddened by the sight of circus freaks. He was bashful, not much of a success with the girls and often tongue-tied in their presence, but could hold his own with the boys.

His distinguishing characteristic, however, it appears, was his intellectual curiosity; and as autobiography the book is concerned chiefly with the education of Cully Sandburg. It came from various sources. He seems to have profited by his early schooling; he wasn't sure just what education was but felt he had gotten some in grammar school. For several years after eighth grade, his learning was a self-imposed task. He read books, magazines, and newspapers; and he learned from watching and talking to many kinds of people. He learned a good deal about thinking from Edward Eggleston's *How to Educate Yourself*. Finally, he learned from his numerous jobs, which, with his reverence for honest work, he describes more explicitly than he does himself.

When he was nineteen, his trip west as a hobo and "gaycat" (itinerant worker) was a succession of hard jobs and encounters with new people. He took it not long after a winter in which, half hating Galesburg and himself, dissatisfied with blind alley jobs, and feeling himself a failure with girls, he contemplated suicide "in bitter and lonely hours." After weighing the merits of various forms of self-destruction, he became more cheerful. "The idea came to me like a dawning. 'If death is what you want all you have to

do is live on and it will come to you like a nice surprise you never imagined.' "

The trip west added to the boy's maturity. He came back from it—after nearly losing his life riding a freight car—with greater self-respect and self-confidence. When the "Maine" was sunk in Havana harbor he was ready for a longer trip to Cuba as a private in the Sixth Illinois Volunteers. He was issued a Civil War uniform and spent lonely hours on guard duty reciting Gray's "Elegy" and the sad poem that so touched Lincoln, "Oh Why Should the Spirit of Mortal Be Proud?"

Sandburg returned from the war unscarred and unembittered but with memories of dirt, fatigue, mosquitoes, and embalmed beef. He was something of a hero, and he had a new purpose: to go to college. And he found that his military career had pleased his father, making the old man feel that now he was really an American citizen.

But there had not always been warmth between the son and the father, a hardworking, taciturn Swede. Early one Christmas morning, young Sandburg pointed to the sky, "You know, some of those stars are millions of miles away." The father sniffed and said, "We won't bodder about dat now, Sholly." He was, too, capable of striking his son on occasion. He could rise to drollery and playfulness, but his dominant mood was serious. Nevertheless, the relationship was one of gradually unfolding understanding and sympathy on the part of the son, who admits to an early attitude of smart-aleck superiority towards the old man. With maturity came recognition of the parent's rather barren lot and of his good qualities, his industriousness, his honesty, his loyalty to his family.

Sandburg's portrait of his father is one of the most memorable elements of the book, with its precisely recorded details and its fairness and candor. Equally vivid, however, and more moving is Sandburg's account of his mother, a sturdy, blonde, blue-eyed Swedish girl as he first remembers her. She was a faithful wife, a mother with great resources of love, a warmth her husband lacked, a sweetness of temper that could absorb and soften his anger. Yet she too was an earnest person, and she had a deep simple piety, an inner radiance that brightened as she aged. It shone unforgettable

in a "Souvenir," as she called it, that she wrote shortly before her death. It has touches of an astonishing poetry: "Crushed am I many times but not yet to death. The aprons of silence is with me. Silence is a gift. Be silent."

The virtues of *Always the Young Strangers* as writing are quiet but very solid ones. The book moves mostly in a colloquial vein whose easy flow and apparent simplicity may conceal from the hasty reader its artistry and subtle variations. For the most part Sandburg writes so as to suggest a youthful view-point, as when he says laconically of a sour-tempered milkman, he worked for, "Mr. Burton . . . never talked to me like he had been a boy" Or he says of a favorite lodger, "I don't get tired trying to think of what he was like" Only rarely is there a burst of Sandburgian poetry: "The land laughed with spuds"; at the death of a friend: "It could be that in the grave his hands might dream of Illinois corn" Because it is used sparingly, the poetry is that much more effective.

Early reviews of *Always the Young Strangers* have tended to run to extremes. It has been called the greatest American autobiography and a pretty bad book. It would appear wiser, on the one hand, to avoid invidious and rather pointless comparisons, particularly in view of the fact that this is only the start of an autobiography; on the other hand, it would be rewarding to read the book carefully and perceptively. Sandburg's extraordinary kindness, humility, and honesty, as well as his fine ability to evoke, to suggest, to report boyhood in a young prairie town before the turn of the century—these qualities and achievements deserve recognition and high praise. Their combination makes a rare sort of book, a very valuable addition to the literature of the Midwest and of America.

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On Freedom's Altar: The Martyr Complex in the Abolition Movement. By Hazel Catherine Wolf. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952, pp. xii, 195. Bibliography and index. \$3.75.)

The plaint of the Preacher, "it hath been already of old time," might be appropriated as a meet comment on the pres-