

LINCOLN LORE

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ALLAN NEVINS ORIENTS LINCOLN

Nevins, Allan *The Emergence of Lincoln*. Vol. 1, Douglas, Buchanan and Party Chaos 1857-1859. Vol. 2, Prologue to Civil War, 1859-1861. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, London 1950. Price \$12.50.

Allan Nevins is in the midst of a voluminous composition in which he is recreating that period of American history which centers about the Civil War. For the excellency of his first two volumes which he entitled *Ordeal of the Union*, covering the period from 1848 to 1857, he was awarded the \$10,000 American History Prize sponsored by the Society of American Historians. The second installment of two volumes has just appeared under the caption *The Emergence of Lincoln* exhibiting data falling chronologically between 1857 and 1861 inclusive. We are informed that subsequent volumes will deal with the Civil War and its aftermath. Twice the author has been Pulitzer prize winner for biography. In 1933 his *Grover Cleveland, A Study of Courage* was recognized and in 1937 his *Hamilton Fish, the Inner History of the Grant Administration* received the applause of the judges.

Procedure in American biography has often followed the custom of lifting an individual out of his natural environment, gathering facts about him independent of important creative elements and then clothing him with garments which are out of character. Allan Nevins is not a member of this conventional school and the interpretive title of his book clearly implies that he is going to allow Abraham Lincoln to emerge from the historical setting of his day. The author has accomplished the laborious task of orientating Lincoln and this approach is easily the feature of his contribution.

Twenty years ago Albert Shaw in a two volume work under the caption *Abraham Lincoln A Cartoon History* covered the ground now traversed by Nevins and oriented Lincoln by the use of caricature and contemporary illustrations. Six years ago Genevieve Foster brought out a book entitled *Abraham Lincoln's World* which submitted important episodes in world civilization occurring during Lincoln's lifetime. She used unique drawings to illustrate the text but Lincoln is given little attention in the book until the author reaches the period of the Civil War. The orienting of Lincoln by Nevins follows a somewhat different mechanical pattern than that used by his predecessors. In a day when pictorial illustrations seem to permeate all types of literature he completely ignores this method of creating atmosphere. He relies almost entirely upon word pictures in which art he is a master and his descriptive paragraphs constitute what might be called a word art gallery.

The author has the happy faculty of introducing into the text extraneous details without seriously disturbing the general tempo of the argument. Sometimes when returning from one of these side trips you wonder after all if the excursion was not primarily for relaxation rather than orientation although the matter of sustained interest is not a problem with Nevins whose literary style alone is a medium for holding attention.

A purely mechanical feature of the book which contributes to the reading pleasure of the observer is the exceedingly long lines of type. While the printed lines on the same size page are not usually more than 25

picas in length those in the Nevins publications are 29 picas long. This factor causes fewer shifts of the eyes in the reading of a thousand words and also allows one to considerably cut down the number of pages turned for a given chapter.

The *Emergence of Lincoln* as the title indirectly implies is primarily the part of a larger drama in which Abraham Lincoln is but one of the moving characters. The student of Abraham Lincoln must not be disappointed in the failure of the author to introduce his hero until nearly the end of the first volume. Nor should the critic put aside volume one with some sarcastic remark about the lateness of Lincoln's emergence. The fact is that Lincoln does not emerge until the closing pages but the scenery has been in the making and shifted here and there to make ready for him. Yet when Lincoln comes he is largely overshadowed by Stephen A. Douglas with the exception of sharing the spotlight in the chapter on the famous debates.

The real emergence of Lincoln does not occur until midway through the second volume in a chapter entitled "Sunrise in Chicago." Here almost out of the darkness of the night, as the chapter caption might imply, a triumphant entry into the political life of the nation is made by Lincoln's nomination for the Presidency. His speechless participation in a four-party campaign, his election as a minority candidate, the secessionists' withdrawal and the launching of the ship of state with an untrained pilot at the helm, holds fast the attention of the reader till the ship leaves port.

With the appearance of Nevins' two volume work a unique situation exists in the field of Lincolniana today which probably will not occur again for many decades. Three outstanding authors have brought from the press, almost simultaneously, the first two volumes of their contemplated four volume works on Abraham Lincoln: James G. Randall in his *Lincoln the President, Springfield to Gettysburg* has followed the Lincoln saga to November 1863; Kenneth Williams in *Lincoln Finds a General*, published last year, reaches the climax of his thesis at the Battle of Gettysburg; and this latest contribution to the Lincoln theme by Allan Nevins, sees Lincoln safely inaugurated on March 4, 1861. There is no evidence of any competitive spirit among these three writers to see who may be first on the press with the remaining two volumes. Although Dr. Randall has about a five years lead on his contemporaries no preliminary announcement has been forthcoming to indicate he has already set for himself a deadline when this copy for the two concluding volumes should be submitted to the publishers. All three of these authors are college professors; Dr. Randall at University of Illinois, Dr. Williams at University of Indiana, and Dr. Nevins at Columbia University. All three are sons of the western country; Randall was born in Indiana, Williams in Ohio, and Nevins in Illinois.