



Lincoln Lore

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LINCOLN AND THE HATEFUL POET

No one hated Abraham Lincoln as thoroughly as Edgar Lee Masters did. He could find little to admire in Lincoln's personal character and less in the Sixteenth President's political legacy. Masters's book, *Lincoln: The Man* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1931), was a publishing sensation which caused tidal waves of indignation across America. Today, the book and the controversy over it are almost completely forgotten. The book is deservedly forgotten, but the controversy over it merits some attention. It marked the end of an era in popular literature in America. It was something of a turning point in the career of Lincoln's image in modern America. And it revealed here and there some of the great intellectual currents of that era of depression.

Masters was an unlikely Lincoln-hater. Had he written a book which praised Lincoln, reviewers and critics would have found it easy to explain.

They would have pointed to Masters's roots in Lincoln country. Though born in Garrett, Kansas, in 1869, Masters grew up near the site which has prompted more sentimental revery about Lincoln than any other, New Salem. That village became a ghost town even in Lincoln's life, but nearby Petersburg, which took its village life from New Salem's death, survived. There, and in Lewistown, Masters spent his youth. The romance of this Sangamon River country captivated even Masters. His *Spoon River Anthology* (1914), which made Masters famous as a poet, included an oft-quoted epitaph for Ann Rutledge:

Out of me unworthy
and unknown

The vibrations of
deathless music;
"With malice toward
none, with charity
for all."

Out of me the
forgiveness of
millions toward
millions,
And the beneficent
face of a nation
Shining with justice
and truth.

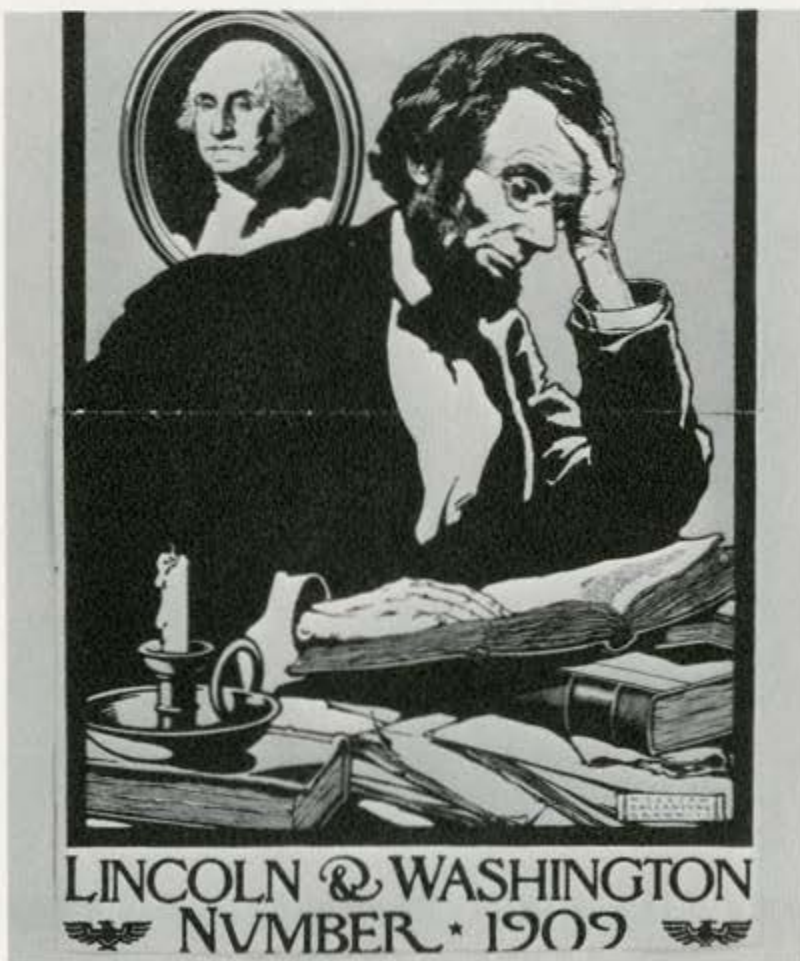
I am Anne Rutledge
who sleep beneath
these weeds,

Beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln,
Wedded to him, not through union,
But through separation.
Bloom forever, O Republic.
From the dust of my bosom!

A closer look at Masters's early years reveals that he was both a part of his environment and a man at odds with it. His grandfather was a Democrat with little sympathy for the North during the Civil War. Edgar Lee Masters's father, Hardin W. Masters, ran away to enlist in the army during the war, but his father brought him back. Hardin Masters became a lawyer and dabbled in Democratic politics. He crossed the prohibition-minded Republicans of Lewistown on more than one occasion.

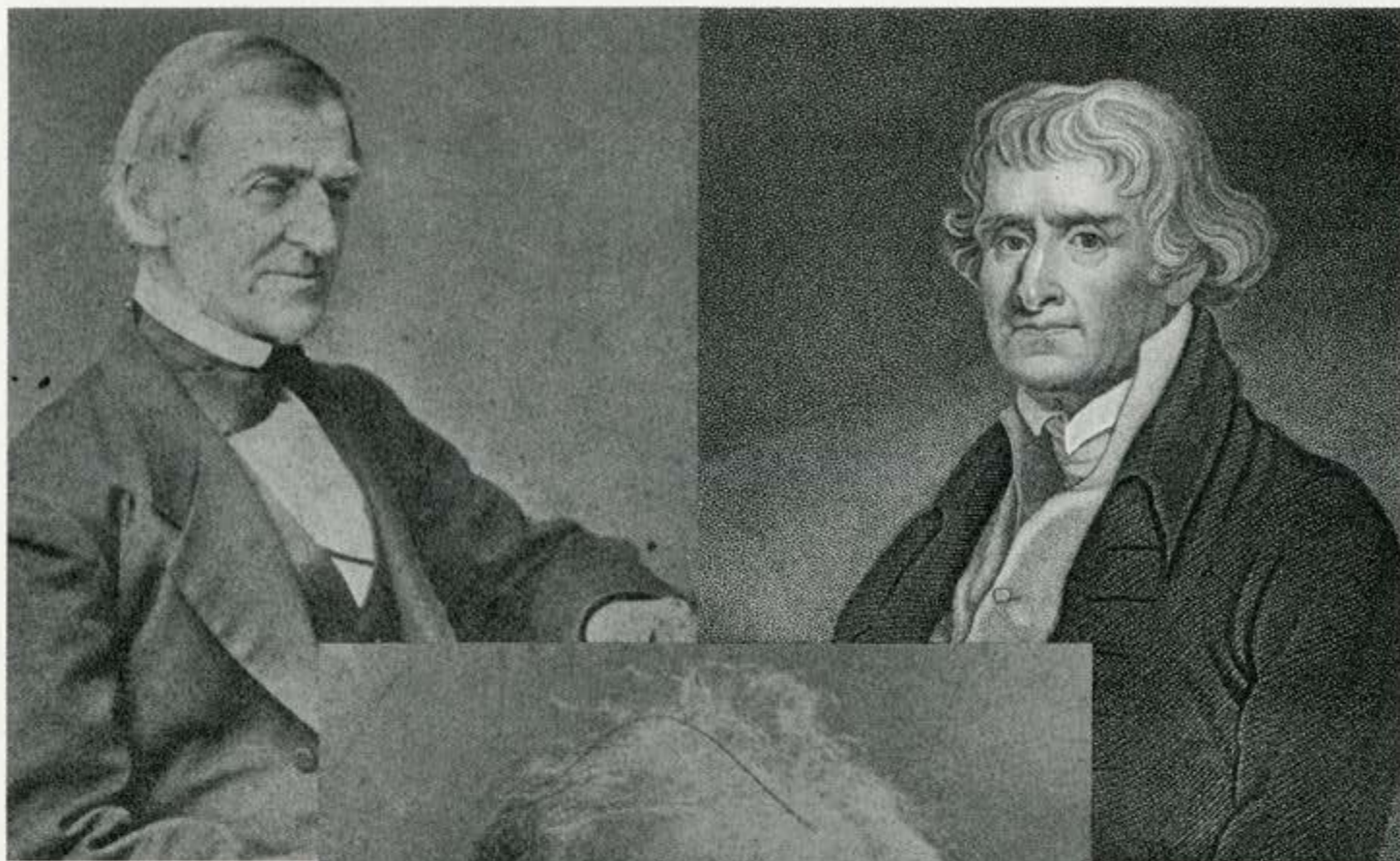
Edgar Lee Masters continued the family tradition of affiliation with the Democratic party. He too became a lawyer, after graduation from Knox College in Galesburg, and established a practice in Chicago. He continued to practice law somewhat unhappily until his literary career allowed him to give it up in 1920.

Lincoln: The Man was Edgar Lee Masters's first biography. He had always been interested in politics and in history. Biography was immensely popular in America between the World Wars, in part because a new style of biographical writing titillated the popular imagination. This was the great age of the "debunker," who slayed American heroes in print by the dozens. The prudes and the religiously earnest, like Henry Ward Beecher and William Jennings Bryan, were natural targets for this age of revolt against Victorian morality, but soon the political figures were the objects of attack. George Washington fell to the pen of Rupert Hughes in 1926. *George Washington: The Human Being & The Hero* (New York:



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FIGURE 1. Before World War I, popular magazines dealt reverentially with Lincoln and Washington. Debunking was not the fashion.



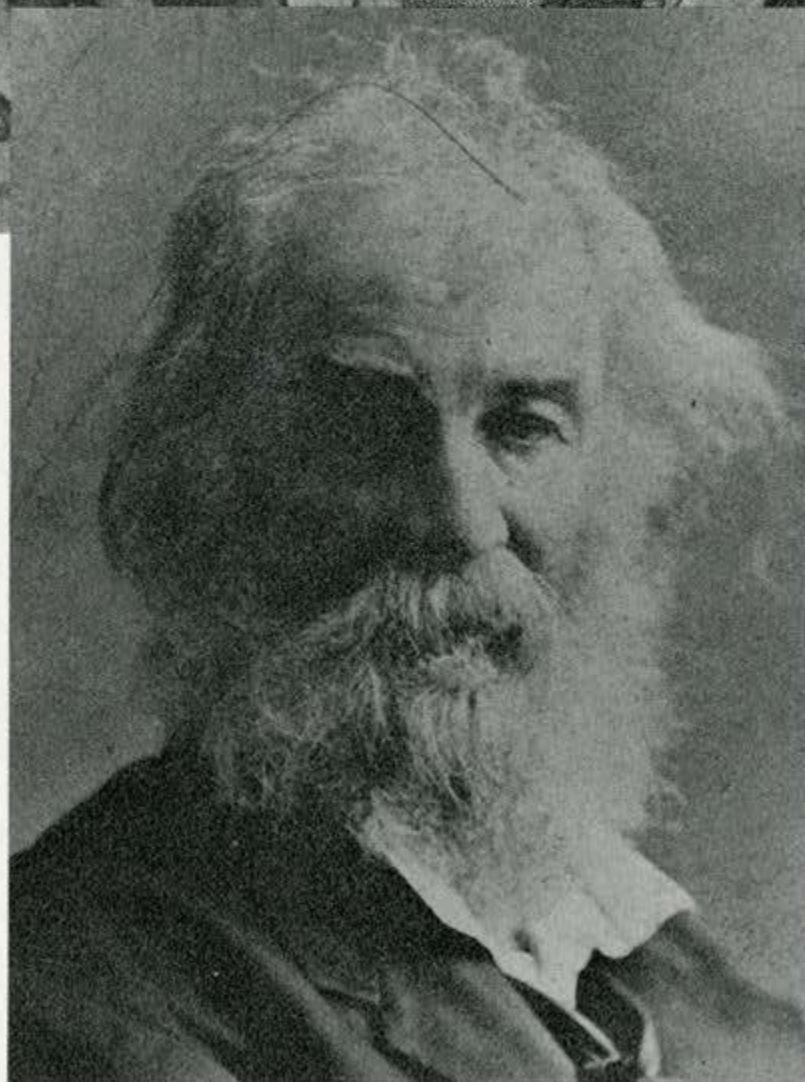
Ralph Waldo Emerson

William Morrow) began by describing George Washington's mother as "a very human, cantankerous old lady" who "smoked a pipe incessantly" and "dragged his pride into the dust by seeking a pension during his lifetime, by wheedlings and borrowings and complaints among the neighbors." Hughes hated Washington's first biographer, "a canting sentimentalist, Parson Weems," and stressed that Washington was not "a man of piety." Chapter XXVIII ended with this characteristic passage:

But George Washington had left old England to her own devices. He was bent upon saving himself first. He was deep in debt. He was betrothed to a woman of great wealth. He was going to marry and settle down to the making of money. Which, after all, is one of the most important duties of any patriot.

Masters wrote in the same debunking spirit.

Inspired in part by the success of Albert Beveridge's *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*



Walt Whitman

*From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum*

FIGURES 2, 3, 4. Masters thought that Lincoln's fame unfairly overshadowed the fame of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Jefferson, and Walt Whitman. Lincoln himself thought Jefferson "the most distinguished politician of our history." Emerson thought Lincoln was "the true representative of this continent." Whitman believed that Lincoln was "the grandest figure yet, on all the crowded canvas of the Nineteenth Century." They would not have complained about the distribution of fame as Masters did.

Thomas Jefferson

(1928), Masters argued that "As no new fact of moment about Lincoln can now be brought to light, the time has arrived when his apotheosis can be touched with the hand of rational analysis." Masters's debunking spirit was especially informed by the anti-war spirit which pervaded intellectual circles in America after World War I. Heroic reputations and wars went hand in hand. "War," Masters wrote, "makes brutes of those who practice it, and cowards and sycophants of those who have to endure it against their will; and when thinking is cowed and judgment is shackled, great reputations can be built both by stifling criticism and by artficing the facts."

The portrait of Lincoln that Masters drew was savage. The Rail-splitter was "profoundly ashamed of the poverty of his youth" and, therefore, married for money and leagued himself politically with the privileged classes in the Whig party. Though "mannerless" and "unkempt," Lincoln was no back-slapping common man. He was "cold," and

no one called him "Abe." He was also calculating; there simply "was no time when he was not thinking of his career." His mind was "lazy." He never studied and as a result knew little of the history of his country and its institutions. He was a "slick" and "crafty" politician.

Masters relied on Beveridge's recent biography and William H. Herndon's older one for the details to support this hostile portrait of Lincoln's personality. But Herndon and Beveridge wrote little or nothing about Lincoln's Presidency. For his appraisal of that part of Lincoln's life, Masters relied on his own political prejudices. He dedicated the book "To the Memory of THOMAS JEFFERSON THE PREEMINENT PHILOSOPHER — STATESMAN OF THE UNITED STATES, AND THEIR GREATEST PRESIDENT; WHOSE UNIVERSAL GENIUS THROUGH A LONG LIFE WAS DEVOTED TO THE PEACE, ENLIGHTENMENT AND LIBERTY OF THE UNION CREATED BY THE CONSTITUTION OF 1787." Lincoln "was a Hamiltonian always, though his awkwardness and poverty, and somewhat gregarious nature and democratic words seemed to mark him as the son of Jefferson." He centralized power.

Lincoln, Masters argued, could and should have avoided the Civil War. Instead, he ordered the invasion of the South. He was a conqueror. He obliterated states' rights and with them the true republic. In this crusade Lincoln wedded religious cant to centralizing politics ("Hebraic Puritanism," Masters called it) and ushered in the forces of industrial plutocracy, prohibition, and political corruption.

Even for an age used to debunking, Masters went too far. Rupert Hughes had been more circumspect. "As a god," he said, "Washington was a woeful failure; as a man he was tremendous." Masters did not give Lincoln any praise except to say that he had a sense of humor. The result was a howl of indignation all across America. School teachers, Boston booksellers, preachers, and Lincoln admirers denounced the book in dozens of letters to the editor, articles, and sermons. Charles E. Tracewell put it very succinctly in the *Washington Star*: "He overdid it."

Reactions to the book ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous. Lewis Gannett in the *New York Herald Tribune* confessed "to a total disbelief in heroes and a profound conviction of the high virtue of debunking. The conventional mythology according to which all great men were born great and never stole cherries or told fibs encourages small boys to feel guilty if they are not prigs. It is a loathsome philosophy." He quarreled with Masters not because he debunked but because he rebuked. It was "sheer poetry" and "heroic moralizing" but all for the other side. "Mr. Masters too has a spotless hero," Gannett said, "Stephen A. Douglas, and his hordes of angels are the soldiers of the Confederacy." The *Oneida (New York) Dispatch* said that "Masters' arguments fall of their own weight, inasmuch as his only declaration in Lincoln's favor is that 'he had a sense of humor.'" Yale's William Lyon Phelps was disgusted. "Never in history," he said, "has literature been so consistently filthy and rotten as today . . . it is getting so a good man is afraid to die." Representative Joe Crail of California, who had not read the book, called it "obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy and indecent" and introduced a bill in Congress to ban its circulation through the mail. And the custodian of the Lincoln tomb declared: "I have 300 pictures of Lincoln, taken at various ages after he was 5 years of age, showing him in many poses, and not one even hints that he was 'unkempt.' . . . His clothes were neat, his hair well combed and his features pleasant."

Richard F. Fuller, treasurer of the Board of Trade of Boston Book Merchants and a prominent member of the American Booksellers' Association, wrote a letter to the *Boston Herald* stating that he was glad that *Lincoln: The Man* was not selling well. The *Boston* newspaper speculated that "the craze for biography" was ebbing, but Masters's publisher reported no disappointment with sales in New York. William L. Nevin, president of New York's John Wanamaker department store, refused to place the book on sale. Wanamaker's Philadelphia store did the same.

Masters had a fine reputation as a man of letters, especially as a poet, and Samuel B. Howe of the South Side High School in Newark, New Jersey, found it beyond his "powers of belief that a man like Masters could say the things he is quoted as saying." It was not an angry young man's book. Masters was over sixty when he wrote it, and this fact invited speculation about his motive. Famed Lincoln collector Oliver R. Barrett of Chicago said that Masters "glimpsed over the top of mediocrity" with his *Spoon River Anthology*, "but from the infection of that fatal praise he became too fearless, too painfully

analytical, and too willing to warm over and serve up his earlier successes. His popularity waned, the public turned to newer lights, and now his 'Abraham Lincoln, the Man' appears — a volume of protest." He noted also that Masters called Jefferson, Whitman, and Emerson the greatest Americans from whose fame "the praise that has been bestowed on Lincoln is a robbery." Jefferson was long dead by the time of Lincoln's Presidency, of course, but Emerson and Whitman both praised Lincoln. Officials of the National Lincoln League referred simply to the author's "commercialized base-ness."

Thoughtful reviewers ranged widely in their assessments of the book. A writer for the *Hugo (Oklahoma) News* read the *New York Times Magazine* review of *Lincoln: The Man* and complimented it:

It was wisely observed by the . . . reviewer that Masters' work is no Confederate biography — that it is a copperhead biography — that it is such a book as a Knight of the Golden Circle would have written. For it is personal. It is spiteful. It is hateful. It is mean. A Confederate writer probably would criticize the principles and policies of the war president, but he certainly would eulogize the kindly personality and charitable spirit of Lincoln. And it may be observed that in no other section of the country is the Lincoln name attaining such stature right now as it is attaining at the south. The revelatory works of Claude Bowers and Striker and George Fort Milton are teaching southerners how terrible a loss they suffered when Lincoln was killed and his peace-making policies were repudiated by political radicals. Most southerners now believe that if Lincoln had lived, he would have been more successful than Andrew Johnson in his efforts to prevent the onrush of the reconstruction terror.

This astute writer put his finger on a principal reason why Masters found almost no allies at all in his attack on Lincoln. Several editorials from former Confederate states, though they showed no special interest in defending Lincoln, did link him with Andrew Johnson and the (then) new view that Johnson tried to follow Lincoln's mild Reconstruction policies and to fend off a Radical Republican conspiracy to rape the South. The reviewer's assessment of opinion in the South was accurate. Times had changed since 1865.

Few wasted any kind words on Masters's effort. Professional cynic H. L. Mencken, whose review in the *New York Herald Tribune* was widely quoted and attacked, praised the book. Mencken agreed that "Lincoln turned his back on the Jacksonian tradition and allowed himself to be carried out by the tide that was eventually to wash away the old Republic altogether and leave in its place a plutocratic oligarchy hard to distinguish from the Roman." Lincoln's "most memorable feat," Mencken wrote, "was his appointment of the Lord God Jehova to the honorary chairmanship of the Republican National Committee." The Bill of Rights, Mencken added, "has never recovered" from Lincoln's repressive administration.

Claude Bowers, newspaperman-turned-historian and an active Democrat, called the book "intensely interesting" and "challenging." Harry Elmer Barnes thought the book might "compel the devotees of the Lincoln cult to listen to reason, something which they have not done in our generation." Barnes had argued "at the very progressive Twentieth Century Club in Boston" that Lincoln was unpopular in his own day; Barnes only "narrowly escaped physical assault at the hands of an Anglican Bishop who was present." Masters "rendered a genuine constructive service" by establishing "the precedent for fearless investigation of the career of the Great Emancipator." The *Syracuse (New York) Standard* interviewed faculty members at the local university, one of whom, history professor Edwin P. Tanner, also thought "Masters . . . rendered us a real service." Historian H. G. Eckenrode praised the book as "an exceedingly powerful and convincing work."

Most thoughtful critics — like Louis A. Warren in *Lincoln Lore*; Paul Angle, then the Secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association; and historian Claude M. Fuess — dismissed the book because it was less a history than an indictment. Masters had been a lawyer as well as a poet, and he argued a case against Lincoln as though he were fighting for a client's life. Fuess noted the excesses of Masters's language. The principles of the Whig party "were plunder and nothing else." The Republican party was "conceived in hatred and mothered in hatred, and went forth from a diseased womb without a name." Lincoln's record in Congress was "a tracing of his wavering mind, his incoherent thinking." He was "an undersexed man." His nomination at Chicago was the result of

"brutality and cunning." His attitude toward the South was one "of hidden and deep malignancy." Warren noted that the author was consumed by three passions. He hated the Christian religion; he hated "modern Americanism, and especially the political party now in power [Republicans]"; and he hated most American heroes. Angle noted the paradoxes of Masters's hatreds:

An advocate of slavery as a social system, he criticizes Lincoln for not opposing its existence in the South. An opponent of capitalism, he lauds Douglas as a statesman of the industrial era. A scathing critic of those who would pass moral judgments, there is hardly a page in his book on which he has failed to condemn or justify.

Lincoln: The Man, then, was a personal book, more interesting for what it revealed about Masters than for what it said about Lincoln. Reporters in New York City were able to interview the author, and the newspaper reports of these interviews were revealing. Earl Sparling of the *New York Telegram* described Masters as sitting in the office of his publisher, "his mouth a grim, austere slit, only his battered hat to show him a poet." The poet said that "we have a Christian republic; no slavery, no polygamy, no saloons; only monopolists, bureaucrats, corrupt courts, imbecile Senators obeying Wall Street, fanatics, clergymen." The Emancipation Proclamation, calculated to make Lincoln famous, was "in the direction of inspiring Negroes to rise and kill the white people." To a *New York Times* reporter, Masters protested that he was "not an iconoclast." A reporter for the *Herald Tribune* visited Masters in his home on West Twenty-Third Street. If Lincoln had let the states go in peace, Masters told the reporter, "They would have come back into the Union in less than five years. Economic necessity would have forced them back."

Nearly fifty years later, what can be said about Edgar Lee Masters and the controversy over *Lincoln: The Man*? First, though he railed against Wall Street, monopoly, and war, Masters's radicalism was largely cultural rather than political. Masters said that he hated prohibition "worse than anything since abolition." He was still fighting the small-town Republican prohibitionists his father fought back in Lewistown. His political and social criticism was neither profound nor well thought out. It had a veneer of sophistication because of his penchant for constitutional debate, a heritage of his legal background. Though critics dwelled on his Democratic affiliation, his denunciation of Lincoln's centralizing power would not endear him to the Democratic party of the 1930s.

Second, Masters's values boiled down to a peculiar nostalgia for the small-town America against which he first rebelled in the *Spoon River Anthology*. He believed in a "storybook democracy," to borrow a phrase from another contemporary novelist and social critic, John Dos Passos. Much of the content of this nostalgia was essentially racist. One suspects that the Civil War seemed hardly worth fighting to him because he could not see any wisdom in shedding white men's blood for the sake of slaves. He wrote a poem entitled "The Great Race Passes," which borrowed its key phrase from Madison Grant's famous racist book, *The Passing of the Great Race*. He loathed immigrants, felt that Civil War casualties had depleted the racial stock of America's "better days," and was antisemitic. Masters hated "Hebraic Puritanism" in part because he saw Christianity as perpetuating some of the religious ideas of Judaism. He once blamed the Civil War on a Jewish lust for money. He thought that Jews had spoiled the poetic talent of Vachel Lindsay; Jewish critics in New York shaped American opinion of poetry written in Chicago.

Third, Masters altogether misjudged the spirit of his age. When *Lincoln: The Man* appeared, critic after critic immediately labeled it as just another debunking book in the Rupert Hughes tradition. Instead of riding the crest of a wave, Masters in fact sank in a sea of predictable cynicism. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* placed the book in the "new school of biography in this country" and attacked the evolution of this school:

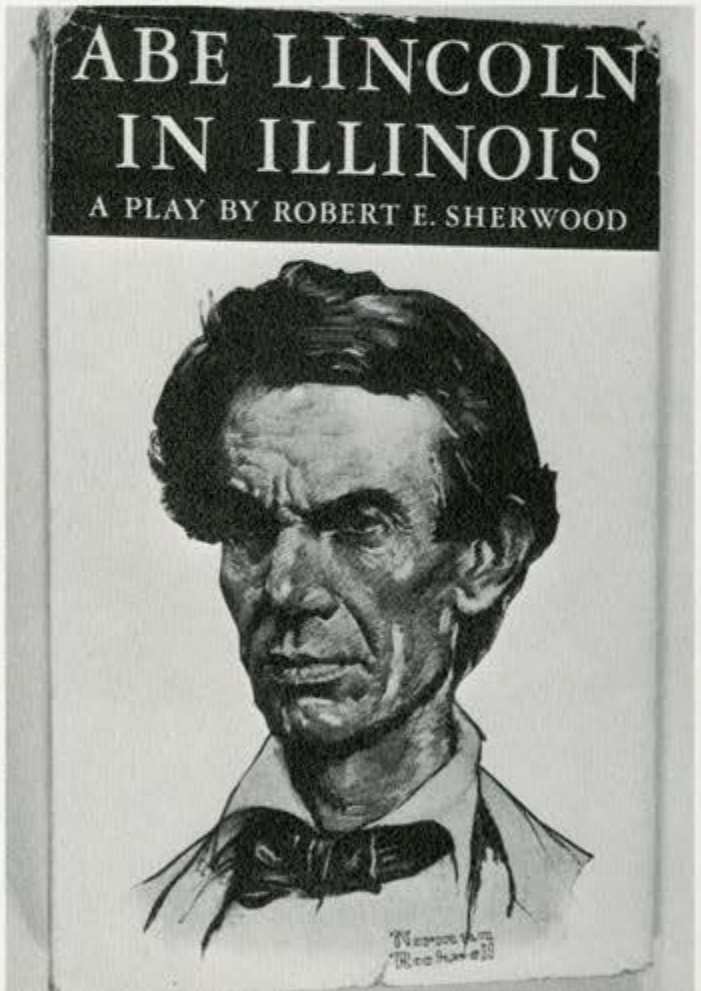
The original series of "real" biographies which were given to the public many years ago were entertaining and valuable because they made an honest attempt to depict notable men and women as they actually existed. But in these jazz days biographers are not content with giving distorted pictures of their subjects; they also take joy in attacking their motives.

More than one reviewer had ready at hand this anecdote to scotch the debunking spirit:

Two or three years ago another American writer made a speech about George Washington in which he said things resented by the people, who revered the memory of the Father of His Country. The day after the speech was made the Washington correspondents asked President Coolidge what he thought about the things that had been said.

Coolidge turned, looked out of the window toward the towering Washington monument, and said: "I notice it is still up there."

Masters's book was the last gasp of the debunking spirit in America between the wars. The popular Lincoln books and plays of the Depression era praised Lincoln. Robert Sherwood's play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, and Carl Sandburg's mammoth biography are the obvious examples. Predictions that Masters's "Copperhead" biography would not put a dent in Lincoln's reputation proved true. The book is largely forgotten. Stephen Oates, whose recent biography (*With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln*) stresses that no one called Lincoln "Abe," does not mention Masters's book. Even Masters himself by 1944 could write an article on "Abe Lincoln's New Salem" which called "Lincoln's career . . . more magical, more dramatic, than Washington's or Jackson's." He wrote the article for a magazine he would surely have shunned in 1931, *The Rotarian*!



From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 5. Robert E. Sherwood's play, published as a book in 1939, won a Pulitzer Prize and launched Raymond Massey's career as a portrayer of Lincoln on stage and screen. The illustration on the dust jacket resembles Massey more than Lincoln and shows how much the success of the play depended on the actor in Lincoln's role. The legalistic and pro-Southern Masters surely disliked Lincoln's speech in the play in which he denounced the Supreme Court as an institution "composed of mortal men, most of whom, . . . come from the privileged class in the South."