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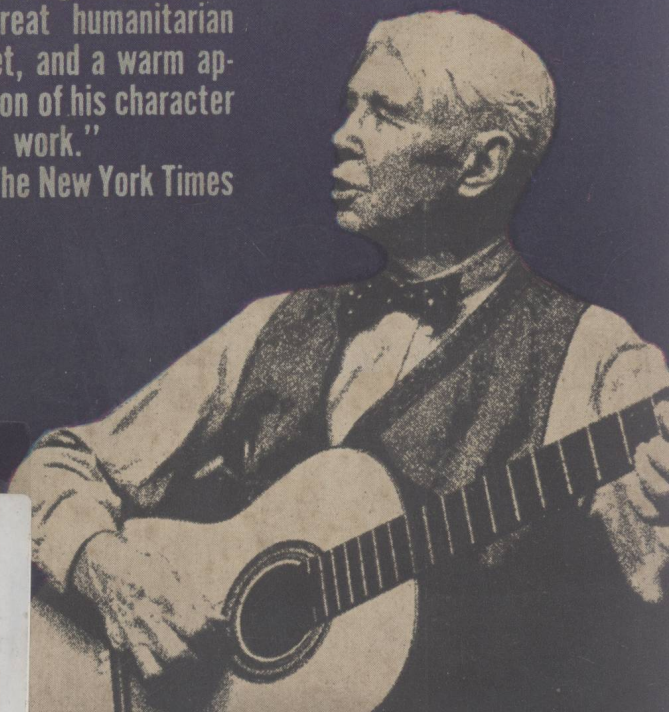
CARL SANDBURG

by HARRY GOLDEN

author of ONLY IN AMERICA

"...a glowing introduction
to a great humanitarian
and poet, and a warm ap-
preciation of his character
and his work."

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are his acts and his words. His real
life is led in his head, and is
known to none but himself.

Mark Twain, *Autobiography*

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Carl Sandburg

by HARRY GOLDEN

1902

author of
Only in America



A Crest Reprint



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For Danny and Mike, Barney and Rex

Our Grandchildren

in the hope that they

and grandchildren everywhere

will continue to live

in a free world

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Introduction

I want to write about Carl Sandburg, but this will not be the definitive biography. To begin with, anyone who wants to write the definitive biography will have to spend six years at the University of Illinois perusing and cataloguing the Sandburg papers. Also, I am too old and too fat and perhaps too impatient to spend time with all those sources "without whose help this book would not have been possible."

For if it takes two years to write the definitive biography of a leading world businessman, it will take twenty-two years to write the definitive biography of a leading world poet.

My research, such as it was, was my love for Carl Sandburg. I consider him my closest friend, and while I respect the men of critical acumen who have sometimes tried to diminish the importance of his work, I do not believe them.

Curiously enough, the book was not so difficult a task as I first imagined. As the idea of presenting Carl Sandburg on the American scene germinated in my mind, I realized that all I would have to do was write a biographical sketch of the United States of America through the past half century and use Carl Sandburg as a reference point.

For this poet came to the American scene as a journalist, writing newspaper stories for radical magazines in Wisconsin and Illinois. He was a reporter who followed the strikes and the picket lines and the race riots, a man who wrote all about the Molly Maguires, the Pinkertons, the I.W.W.'s, and the incipiently growing labor unions. From such early conflict, this silver-thatched poet now strums a guitar for a national television audience while a motion-picture star dances and tells jokes. In his spare time, he makes records for children. Here is the span not only of a literary man but of a great country. For this is the symbol not only of our experience but our experiments in the last fifty years.

The words of Carl Sandburg are read in the high school classrooms of America more than the words of any other living American writer. One guesses this from the universally anthologized poems, "Chicago," "Grass," and "Fog" in the schoolboy textbooks, and from any examination of Carl's

correspondence. Stretching back for fifteen years, there are literally hundreds of thick brown envelopes from high school teachers enclosing forty or fifty handwritten essays . . . "I asked my class to write an essay on the meaning of your poem, 'Grass,' and I hope the enclosed essays will interest you . . ."

Not ignoring Sandburg's critics, I feel he is still the one American writer who has distinguished himself in five fields—poetry, history, biography, fiction, and music—and I do not write this assessment merely to add to his laurels. For, quite frankly, the assessment is made daily, made by millions of Americans of every age and of every race, creed, and nationality—millions of Americans who know and love Carl Sandburg.

HARRY GOLDEN

Charlotte, North Carolina
August 1, 1961

The Incredible Height

"This here phizzog"

The two most impressive things about Carl Sandburg when you first meet him are his face and his incredible height. Yet he does not quite measure six feet. The impression of height results, I think, because Sandburg so much resembles an American Indian—the reddish skin over the craggy face, the high cheekbones, the narrow hips, and the broad shoulders. He is a man you think must be tall because he ought to be tall. Someone remarked of him once that when he was young and dark he looked like a Sioux brave—all shoulders and alert eyes. Once his hair turned white, he began to look more like an Osage chief—with oil wells.

Since most faces conform now to our mass-media impression of beauty, Sandburg's face is a unique phenomenon. No matter what the picture or photograph—or even, for that matter, sculpture, the expression is never the same. He has no set pose yet remains recognizably—Carl.

In *Bitter Summer Thoughts*, his poem "Phizzog" asked:

This here phizzog—somebody handed it
to you—am I right?
Somebody said, "Here's yours, now go see
what you can do with it."

Mrs. Sandburg tells me that during all these fifty-three years she's known him, Carl has always had the same unruly shock of hair over his forehead, and the same habit of leaning forward like a fast-ball pitcher winding up and pulling the string on the batter.

A joint session of Congress

The *Congressional Record* says, "Applause," the members rising as the Honorable Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the House of Representatives, says, "And now it becomes my great pleasure, and I deem it a high privilege, to be able to present

to you the man who in all probability knows more about the life, the times, the hopes and the aspirations of Abraham Lincoln than any other human being. He has studied and has put on paper his conceptions of the towering figure of this great and this good man. I take pleasure and I deem it an honor to be able to present to you this great writer, this great historian, Carl Sandburg."

The occasion was the result of a resolution by the House of Representatives, the Senate concurring ". . . that in commemoration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, the two Houses of Congress shall assemble in the Hall of the House of Representatives at 11 o'clock antemeridian, on Thursday, February 12, 1959 . . ."

This was the wording of a House Concurrent Resolution, No. 57. It was the hope of the Congress that the joint session commemorating the 150th year of Lincoln's birth would be the forerunner of "wisely spaced kindred events that strike a powerful respect deep in the heart of the American people."

The actor, Fredric March, read the Gettysburg Address, then members of both Houses of Congress, the nine justices of the Supreme Court, the members of President Eisenhower's Cabinet, members of Washington's diplomatic corps, and the other guests rose for an ovation to Carl Sandburg.

Sandburg spoke twenty minutes, his opening and closing paragraphs as follows:

Not often in the story of mankind does a man arrive on earth who is both steel and velvet, who is as hard as rock and soft as drifting fog, who holds in his heart and mind the paradox of terrible storm and peace unspeakable and perfect. Here and there across centuries come reports of men alleged to have these contrasts. And the incomparable Abraham Lincoln, born one hundred and fifty years ago this day, is an approach if not a perfect realization of this character. . . .

And how did Lincoln say he would like to be remembered? Something of it is in this present occasion, the atmosphere of this room. His beloved friend, Representative Owen Lovejoy, of Illinois, had died in May of 1864, and friends wrote to Lincoln and he replied that the pressure of duties kept him from joining them in efforts for a marble monument to Lovejoy, the last sentence of Lincoln's letter saying:

"Let him have the marble monument along with the well-assured and more enduring one in the hearts of those who love liberty, unselfishly, for all men."

Today we may say, perhaps, that the well-assured and most enduring memorial to Lincoln is invisibly there, today, tomorrow, and for a long time yet to come. It is there in the hearts of lovers of liberty, men and women—this country has always had them in crisis—men and women who understand that wherever there is freedom there have been those who fought, toiled and sacrificed for it.

Tell your feet the alphabet

A few months later this venerable Lincoln scholar, poet, historian, fairy-tale writer, guitarist, and novelist was on television, reciting his poetry while Gene Kelly, the Hollywood star, danced across the set.

Sandburg strummed his guitar and directed the dancer:

Tell your feet the alphabet.
Tell your feet the multiplication table.
Tell your feet where to go, and watch 'em go
and come back.

It did not seem at all inappropriate or even extreme to hear Carl Sandburg entertain a national television audience with a poem that lent itself to rhythm and visual interpretation.

The solemn has always been mixed in this man, but along with it is a great sense of fun. If it was a different experience for Sandburg devotees, so was it a different (and infinitely better) experience for television addicts.

The first two duties of the poet are to find his voice and his listeners. What happier unity for him than television? It was altogether proper to see the first of the modern poets on a television screen reciting his poetry through a modern medium:

Can you dance a question mark?
Can you dance an exclamation point?
Can you dance a couple of commas?
And bring it to a finish with a period?

"Sometime they'll give a war and nobody will come"

The little girl saw her first troop parade and asked,

"What are those?"

"Soldiers."

"What are soldiers?"

"They are for war. They fight and each tries to kill as many of the other side as he can."

The girl held still and studied.

"Do you know . . . I know something?"

"Yes, what is it you know?"

"Sometime they'll give a war and nobody will come."

and:

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.

Shovel them under and let me work—

I am the grass; I cover all.

and:

Lincoln said, "Get into the game; your nation takes you."

And I drove a wagon and a team and I had my arm shot

off

At Spottsylvania Court House.

I am an ancient reluctant conscript.

These are pacifist poems, the poems school children read when their teacher asks them, "What is the meaning here? What does the poem say?" These are obvious messages for children. They learn they can think when they read poetry. Children understand easily the historic futility of war. Sandburg has written many such poems.

Robert Frost, who has good naturedly criticized Sandburg's political views from time to time, once referred to Carl as "a pacifist between wars." Sandburg offers no demurrer, because for all his pacifism he has indeed responded to every war and to every crisis involving America in his lifetime. The day after war was declared against Spain, Carl enlisted in the Army and went through the Puerto Rican campaign of the Spanish-American War. A few years afterward, he tried his luck at the Military Academy at West Point but was found deficient in arithmetic and grammar. In 1917 and in 1941, he gave the war effort everything of his talents and skills he could.

On October 11, 1917, he wrote a news story for the *Chicago Daily News* which clearly indicated his break with his fellow Socialists over supporting the war effort against Germany. It is important to remember that during World War I Socialists the world over hoped to convince each of the different national parties that it was a "capitalists' war." It didn't work, but the American Socialists were the last to give up the myth. The American Socialists were having an annual convention when the war in Europe broke out in August 1914. The Socialist leaders decided to send a cable to their colleagues of England, Germany, Austria, France, and Russia. They said that the American Socialists had decided to ask their fellow

Socialists in the belligerent countries not to take up arms in a war for the capitalists. The European Socialists who bothered to reply at all said, in effect: "*Deutschland über alles*"; "There'll always be an England"; and "We are fighting for our beloved La Belle France."

Sandburg was not so naive. In a newspaper story, he discussed his aversion toward the alleged sabotage of the American war effort as advocated by some of the radicals of the day.

The word sabotage is getting up front. Sabotage is a word that a Standard Oil Company lawyer would say exists in the twilight zone. The doctrine of sabotage was formally repudiated by the Socialist Party at the time the Socialists expelled W. D. Haywood, the IWW organizer. Last June, however, the Socialist Party at its convention in St. Louis formally opened the doors to sabotage through the elimination from its constitution of the anti-sabotage clause. *Victor Berger and other German members of the Party had previously been opposed to sabotage* (italics mine).

Notice the cold formality with which Sandburg now refers to his friend and former employer, the Socialist leader Victor Berger.

In 1940 Carl began lecturing to help support the American stand against the Fascists and Nazis in Europe. He gave a speech called, "What Lincoln Would Have Done," and his summation—"What Lincoln would have done is just what Roosevelt is doing."

Writers and writer figures

Unlike Vachel Lindsay, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Edgar Lee Masters, and Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg has dipped his spoon in every dish from proletarian poetry to the classic biography of Abraham Lincoln and to an identity as the "voice of America singing." He sings his way across the country, and I believe that in many respects he is much closer to Mark Twain than to Walt Whitman.

I believe that the only writers America has accepted as personalities have been Mark Twain and Carl Sandburg. It is a harder struggle for a native American writer to gain recognition as a personality than it is to gain publication. This is because Americans expect writers to be celebrities. A celebrity does not have to come from a certain time or a specific place. Nor does he even need something definite to say. A celebrity

needs only the ability or the luck to occupy the public's attention. A celebrity does this, sometimes in spite of himself, by satisfying a certain stereotype. He becomes, in short, a writer figure instead of a writer.

Woe betide the writer who does not lend himself to the popular image! "I sat down by the wayside of life," wrote Hawthorne, "like a man under enchantment, and a shrubbery sprang up around me, and the bushes grew to be saplings, and the saplings became trees, until no exit appeared possible through the tangling depths of my obscurity."

American writers—Melville, Whitman, Thoreau, to name a few—work in a solitude that becomes a virtual prison. Seldom do American men of letters realize they are part of a literary movement. Carl Sandburg says he had no idea he was part of a renaissance called the Chicago Movement until years later. But living in this solitude has consequences. One of them is that the public enforces a division between what a man writes and what a man is. Most American writers have grown used to being two distinct units: one as a man, the other as a writer.

Charles Dickens exerted a powerful and direct influence on English workhouses and George Bernard Shaw helped to make the modern Labour Party in England.

American writers have rarely been that successful. They have found it hard to direct a personal influence even on belles-lettres.

Yet Sandburg and Twain succeeded as personalities because in their writings and in their persons they grasped something essentially American. I think it is that Twain celebrated the vigor of a rural America rushing to close the frontier and Sandburg embodies the last of the Lincoln ideas.

Neither Sandburg nor Twain was a personality with an influence because he was a representative of an age past and gone, although this is part of it. America is an urban and highly materialistic culture today and the Lincoln ideas have long been submerged by the exigencies of crisis government and politics by advertising. While Sandburg embodies that part of the past, he also embodies the victory won by the union men in the bitter labor wars and the successful fight the immigrant waged against entrenched privilege. This is a fight not completely over. When Congress applauds Sandburg on Lincoln's birthday, the Representatives and Senators may be trying to convince themselves they are applauding what they *were*, but down deep perhaps they know they are also applauding what they are. It is not for nothing that Sandburg's

parents were immigrants and that Sandburg, long before he undertook the Lincoln biography, described in eloquent poetry the terrible adjustments of immigrants and farmers to an industrial society.

So, too, did people revere Mark Twain as the first native American humorist who gained world stature, the writer who revealed to us the American language. But at the same time they could not help but realize that this voice was warning them of the dire moral consequences of racial segregation and of the hidden violence that waits within the American breast.

Americans have always been in love with their essential innocence—which is why they had to be forced into the role of leader of the free world by elimination rather than by choice. But they are also aware that that innocence has long been dissipated.

Both Twain and Sandburg had the one quality an American writer must have to become a personality: popular appeal, the ability to reach a wide audience. There have been writers of infinitely more sophistication than either Twain or Sandburg, stylists with infinitely more control, and writers with a deeper quality of mind, but just as often these writers were afflicted with a deep parochialism.

Sandburg and Twain realized that American unity was not a unity of optimism and sentimentality, but of optimism and violence. They are both optimistic writers with a profound understanding of the violent and dark side of American life.

Gustatory audience

Sandburg has made it clear to me that, until 1960, he never had an agent actively handling his poems. Scores of his poems undoubtedly could have been placed in magazines but he could not take time from his writing and other work to go through the monotony of sending manuscripts around.

In 1960 he met Lucy Kroll who became agent for his current writings, and for TV, radio, and miscellaneous engagements. She took something over one hundred poems and, instead of sending out manuscripts, she invited editors to her office and a quiet corner where they could read.

Editors of *Playboy* paid \$3,600 for six poems and a parable. Sandburg remarked, "It was fun to be read by the most gustatory audience of readers in America, all of them definitely opposed to artificial insemination."

Carl's history of labor 1904-1961

“At first the labor leader was thrown out and taken to jail. Later the labor leader was let in, but they searched him first. Now the labor leader is met by a butler and is led to where he puts his feet under the table.”

Fifty-two years of evolution

When Sandburg read the Democratic Party platform adopted in the national convention in Los Angeles in 1960, he said, “That’s a very good imitation of the national Socialist Party platform adopted in Chicago in 1908 when my future wife and I were in sparking attendance.”

Who reads Sandburg?

Sandburg once wrote, “A man writes the best he can about what moves him deeply. Once his writing gets published as a book he loses control over it. Time and the human family do what they want to with it. It may have periods of wide reading and acclamation, other periods of condemnation, decline, neglect—then a complete fadeout—or maybe a revival. And what revives in later years is often what was neglected when new. This happens. In literature and other arts—it happens . . .”

The head of the St. Louis Public Library, Mr. Charles Compton, once made a survey around the question, “Who reads Sandburg?” and found that beyond a certain array of intellectuals, persons who socially and professionally are strong for Culture with a capital “C,” there were policemen, taxi drivers, stenographers, beauty parlor workers, machinists, and a wide range of plain people who could not afford to buy books but were regularly drawing out “the Sandburg poetry books” from the public library and finding in those books something close to their lives, something that sang to them.

“To eat regular”

On each of Carl’s birthdays for the last fifteen years the reporters usually ask him what he wants out of life. So I asked him, too:

“I guess I can say mainly five things. To be out of jail, first of all—to be out of jail. This is a free country. Something