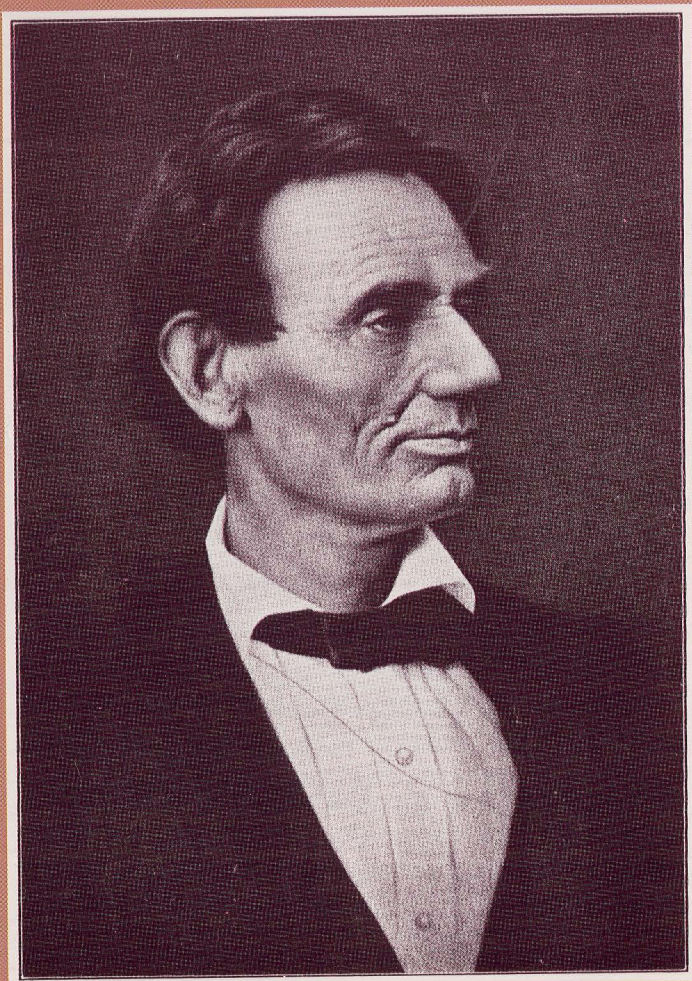


ABRAHAM LINCOLN



Lord Charnwood

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by
Lord Charnwood

Introduction by
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INTRODUCTION TO THE DOVER EDITION

ABRAHAM LINCOLN is the most written-about figure in American history. A number of biographies of the sixteenth president have been published, and specialized studies of his career appear every year. Only a small proportion of these works, however, have had any lasting significance. One such study is Lord Charnwood's *Abraham Lincoln*.

Godfrey Rathbone Benson, first Baron Charnwood, was born on November 6, 1864 in Alresford, Hampshire, England. After graduating from Oxford, he was appointed lecturer in philosophy and in 1898 was admitted to the bar. Benson was active in politics, serving in the House of Commons (1892-95) as a member of the Liberal party and, following his elevation to the peerage in 1911, in the House of Lords. Shortly thereafter, for reasons that are not entirely clear, he began work on a life of Abraham Lincoln. The book was published in England in 1916 and in the United States the following year.

Charnwood's *Abraham Lincoln* came out at a time when Lincoln scholarship was entering a new phase. The most important initial accounts of the wartime president were written by personal acquaintances and contemporaries. By the turn of the century, however, the Civil War generation was passing from the scene, and a group of amateur historians came to dominate the Lincoln field until about 1930. Of the works of these early non-professional historians, Charnwood's biography retains the most prominent place in Lincoln scholarship today. Indeed, in his 1947 assessment of Lincoln biographies, Benjamin Thomas judged Charnwood's study "the best one volume life of Lincoln ever written."

One reason for the book's lasting appeal is Charnwood's approach to his subject. His volume is less a biography than a character study. Although the book adheres to a chronological framework, it is not a full, well-rounded account of Lincoln's life and it emphasizes interpretation and analysis rather than facts. Charnwood was most interested in Lincoln's character and ideas; he wanted to explain the kind of man Lincoln was, and why he made the decisions he did. Noting that "hardly an action of his Presidency is exempt from controversy," the author indicated that he intended to examine "just those actions and just those qualities of his upon which candid detraction has in fact fastened, or on which candid admiration has pronounced with hesitancy." (p. 213)

The resulting book was uneven in the coverage it afforded different parts of Lincoln's life. Charnwood devoted only limited space to Lincoln's early life, gave almost no attention to his legal career, and said little about his marriage or private life. Writing at a time when Americans still clung to a romantic view of the frontier, he correctly recognized that Lincoln harbored no fondness for his hard-scrabble youth. In the process, he ignored or downplayed many of the controversies about Lincoln's early life, such as Lincoln's mother's paternity, his romance with Ann Rutledge, and the story that he failed to show up for his wedding. Making little use of anecdotes, Charnwood attached limited long-term influence to these events, and hence his interpretation was not undermined by subsequent scholarship that questioned the validity of many of the stories about Lincoln's early years.

It was Lincoln as a public figure—his qualities as a politician and statesman—that interested Charnwood. But even in dealing with Lincoln's political career, he was selective. He attached no particular importance to Lincoln's membership in the Whig party, devoted little space to his terms in the state legislature, and glossed over the crucial years 1854–57, which marked Lincoln's

return to active political life, in only a handful of pages. The bulk of the book focuses on the period from his race for the United States Senate in 1858 against Stephen A. Douglas until his death in 1865.

Charnwood's purpose differed from other studies of Lincoln in important ways. Since he was writing for an English audience, he took time to explain aspects of American history that American authors assumed (probably none too accurately) their readers already knew, and he gave particular attention to American-British relations during the war. But the major influence on Charnwood was clearly World War I, which stimulated popular interest in the bonds of affection between Britain and the United States. Charnwood forthrightly adopted the view advanced by Lincoln that the Civil War was a struggle to save democracy throughout the world (much the same way Charnwood and many other English citizens and Americans viewed World War I). In portraying Abraham Lincoln as a great champion of democracy, Charnwood's study was exceedingly timely.

The book has other virtues as well. It is effectively written in a captivating though somewhat leisurely prose. In addition, despite his obvious admiration for Lincoln, Charnwood was not blind to his mistakes and shortcomings. He deemed Lincoln a poor judge of character, saw him as inadequately prepared for the presidency in 1861, depicted him as groping to find the correct policies early in the war, and bluntly designated Lincoln's imposition of martial law as "oppression." (p. 381) He had a shrewd eye for character, often captured in vivid snapshots, and he never lost sight of the larger context within which Lincoln operated. Finally, while Charnwood did no original research and his account is based on only a few published works, the rigor of his thought and the careful, deliberate quality of his judgments give the book great power.

Charnwood wrote before most of the key manuscript sources for Lincoln's life and the war years became

available, and as is the case with any work published so long ago, it has been superseded by more recent scholarship on many points. His racial attitudes and unquestioning acceptance of black inferiority (influenced by the British ideology of imperialism) inevitably offend the modern reader. In analyzing Lincoln's policy on slavery, for example, Charnwood confidently invoked the "experience as to the relations between superior and inferior races, which is now at the command of every intelligent Englishman." (p. 181) From his patrician's vantage point, he deplored the patronage system and the pragmatic nature of American political parties: he confessed his discomfort over Lincoln's attraction to "the somewhat unholy business of party management" and characterized such activity as "petty lapses" of principle. (pp. 73, 163) American parties, Charnwood believed, avoided the true issues and thus normally failed to develop effective leaders. Concerning Lincoln's nomination in 1860, he wrote, "the fit man was chosen on the very ground of his supposed unfitness." (p. 168) Charnwood repeated some stories that have since been discredited, and made some minor factual errors, but on the whole the book has held up well.

In his interpretations, Charnwood manifested a strong degree of intellectual independence and in some ways anticipated future developments in the field. At a time when historians were beginning to question the importance of the slavery issue in the war's origins, he unhesitatingly pronounced slavery the cause of the war and portrayed secession not as the work of Southern politicians but as a popular movement that voiced the "general will" in the South. (p. 182) Condemning slavery on moral grounds, he labeled the Southern cause "wrong" and insisted that the North's victory was the "triumph of the right." (p. 181) He did not scoff at the Emancipation Proclamation or dismiss its significance, and though he wrote at a time when Radical Republicans were in historical disrepute, he boldly minimized the differences

separating them from Lincoln. In contrast to some later scholars, he correctly believed that great issues were at stake in the 1864 election and that Lincoln's re-election was essential to preserve the Union. Moreover, in accord with work by British military scholars, he was the first biographer to pronounce Lincoln a sound military strategist. The discussions of the military aspects of the war and questions of military strategy are among the best pages in the book. Like Lincoln, Charnwood grasped the crucial role of public opinion in a democratic war, and he understood what a significant military challenge the Union confronted.

Unlike many of Lincoln's contemporaries, Charnwood was not offended by Lincoln's common origins and crude social background, and he condemned American intellectual elites for their failure to recognize and appreciate Lincoln's superior qualities. Charnwood also recognized Lincoln's remarkable political skills, particularly his sure-handed "sense of real popular feeling throughout the wide extent of the North." (p. 247) He stood in awe of Lincoln's literary craftsmanship, marveled at the depth of his thought in speeches directed to the masses, emphasized his moral and spiritual growth in the White House, and judged him a great war leader. Hailing his enormous patience and iron determination, Charnwood paid tribute to Lincoln's vital—indeed indispensable—contribution to the Union's eventual triumph.

Charnwood's strong admiration for Lincoln, whatever his faults, was readily apparent. He was a man "quite unlike the many statesmen whom power and the vexations attendant upon it have in some piteous way spoiled and marred, a man who started by being tough and shrewd and canny and became very strong and very wise, started with an inclination to honesty, courage, and kindness, and became, under a tremendous strain, honest, brave, and kind to an almost tremendous degree." (p. 239) He ranked him one of the great statesmen of history.

The result is a book that can still be read with genuine

profit. Better biographies have been written since Charnwood's book was published, but as a study of Lincoln's character, it remains in the front rank with only a handful of other studies. As such, it has attained the status of a classic.

WILLIAM E. GIENAPP

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

STATESMEN—even the greatest—have rarely won the same unquestioning recognition that falls to the great warriors or those supreme in science, art or literature. Not in their own lifetime and hardly to this day have the claims to supremacy of our own Oliver Cromwell, William III. and Lord Chatham rested on so sure a foundation as those of a Marlborough or a Nelson, a Newton, a Milton or a Hogarth. This is only natural. A warrior, a man of science, an artist or a poet are judged in the main by definite achievements, by the victories they have won over foreign enemies or over ignorance and prejudice, by the joy and enlightenment they have brought to the consciousness of their own and succeeding generations. For the statesman there is no such exact measure of greatness. The greater he is, the less likely is his work to be marked by decisive achievement which can be recalled by anniversaries or signalled by some outstanding event: the chief work of a great statesman rests in a gradual change of direction given to the policy of his people, still more in a change of the spirit within them. Again, the statesman must work with a rough and ready instrument. The soldier finds or makes his army ready to yield unhesitating obedience to his commands, the sailor animates his fleet with his own personal touch, and the great man in art, literature or science is master of his material, if he can master himself. The statesman cannot mould a heterogeneous people, as the men of a well-disciplined army or navy can be moulded, to respond to his call and his alone. He has to do all his work in a society of which a large part cannot see his object and another large part, as far as they do see it, oppose it. Hence his work at

the best is often incomplete and he has to be satisfied with a rough average rather than with his ideal.

Lincoln, one of the few supreme statesmen of the last three centuries, was no exception to this rule. He was misunderstood and underrated in his lifetime, and even yet has hardly come to his own. For his place is among the great men of the earth. To them he belongs by right of his immense power of hard work, his unfaltering pursuit of what seemed to him right, and above all by that childlike directness and simplicity of vision which none but the greatest carry beyond their earliest years. It is fit that the first considered attempt by an Englishman to give a picture of Lincoln, the great hero of America's struggle for the noblest cause, should come at a time when we in England are passing through as fiery a trial for a cause we feel to be as noble. It is a time when we may learn much from Lincoln's failures and success, from his patience, his modesty, his serene optimism and his eloquence, so simple and so magnificent.

BASIL WILLIAMS.

BISCOT CAMP,
LUTON,
March, 1916.

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