An Illinois Iconoclast:
Edgar Lee Masters and the Anti-Lincoln Tradition

MATTHEW D. NORMAN

In 1931 a revival of the anti-Lincoln tradition reached its peak with the publication of Edgar Lee Masters’s acrid biography *Lincoln: The Man*. Lyon G. Tyler and Mildred Lewis Rutherford had led this revival during the 1920s and they were, perhaps not surprisingly, unreconstructed Confederates.1 Masters, however, had grown up in the very heart of Lincoln country and attained a national literary reputation with his *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). How did Masters, this native of the Illinois prairie, come to despise Abraham Lincoln? Why did he write what was arguably the most controversial Lincoln biography of the twentieth century?

Though Masters was born in Kansas in 1868, his father, Hardin, moved the family to Petersburg, Illinois, shortly after his birth.2 Petersburg and New Salem are both located in Menard County, and until Hardin moved the family to Lewistown, Illinois, in 1880, Masters grew up surrounded by people who had known Abraham Lincoln. William H. Herndon, Lincoln’s third law partner and biographer, was a friend and sometimes legal partner of Hardin Masters who regaled young Masters with stories about Lincoln. Masters’s paternal grandfather, Squire Davis Masters, was another contemporary of Lincoln who had a profound impact on young Edgar Lee. Masters’s grandfather was an early settler of the county and owned a farm that was situated just a few miles from New

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Salem. Squire Masters served in the Black Hawk War, and on at least one occasion he retained Lincoln’s services as an attorney.¹³ Like many of the early pioneers of Menard County, Masters’s grandfather was of Southern origin and affiliated with the Democratic Party. As a member of the Illinois state legislature in 1855, Squire Masters did not vote for Lincoln in the election for U. S. Senator. Masters idealized both his grandfather and the years he spent in Menard County. He described his grandfather as a “Jeffersonian Democrat” who exemplified “Americanism.” Masters characterized Petersburg and the surrounding environs as his “nurturing spot” and “spiritual home.”¹⁴ In attempting to explain why Masters wrote such a critical biography of Lincoln, it is important to note his reverence for the agrarian virtues that he believed his grandfather represented. That his beloved grandfather not only knew Lincoln personally but opposed him politically should not be overlooked.³

Carl Sandburg wrote inside his personal copy of *Lincoln: The Man* that the book was a “long sustained Copperhead hymn of hate reversing the views of a Masters I knew well 10 and 15 years before he wrote these sickly venomous pages.”⁶ A reviewer for the *New York Times* agreed with Sandburg’s assessment and believed it was the kind of book that neither Jefferson Davis nor Alexander Stephens would have written. Instead, the book read more like the product of an “Indiana Knight of the Golden Circle.”⁷ Not all reviewers agreed that the book was a Copperhead biography of Lincoln. Claude Fuess thought Masters’s harangue against Lincoln was written “as if he were an unrecognized and still bitter veteran of Lee’s army.”⁸ I would argue that instead of categorizing the book

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⁵ My emphasis on the formative influence Squire Davis Masters had upon the young Masters is indebted to comments James Hurt made on this paper at the 1999 Conference on Illinois History.

⁶ Edgar Lee Masters, *Lincoln: The Man*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1931). Sandburg’s personal copy is at the Rare Book Room of the University of Illinois Library at Urbana-Champaign.


as either Copperhead or Confederate, Masters’s Lincoln is best understood as the product of a bitterly disappointed and resentful champion of the Little Giant, Stephen A. Douglas. It is made abundantly clear throughout *Lincoln: The Man* and other writings by Masters that the course of American history would have been radically altered for the better if Douglas had triumphed in the 1860 election. The key to understanding Masters’s Lincoln is Masters’s unbounded admiration for the Little Giant.

Masters’s veneration of Douglas was a matter of public record since the publication of his 1922 novel *Children of the Market Place*. James Miles, an Englishman who moved to Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1833, is the narrator and main character in *Children of the Market Place*. Soon after taking over his father’s estate, Miles meets budding young lawyer and politician Stephen A. Douglas. After his first conversation with Douglas, Miles is left “enthralled” and convinced that Douglas’s vision for the growth and development of the burgeoning republic qualifies him as a “world thinker.” 

Miles becomes a very close personal friend and political supporter of Douglas. When Douglas runs for Congress, Miles campaigns on his behalf. Douglas is a frequent guest at the Miles home, and he comes to rely upon Douglas for counsel in his personal affairs. Douglas attends the wedding of Miles, and Miles is present when Douglas delivers his maiden address in the U.S. Senate. The admiration for Douglas that Miles expresses throughout the novel is boundless. He refers to Douglas as a “super-man” and “the ideal man.”

The novel spans more than three decades of history in Illinois, yet Abraham Lincoln does not make his first appearance until nearly four hundred pages into the story. After a two-year sojourn in Italy, Miles returns to Illinois just in time to witness the last debate between Lincoln and Douglas during the 1858 campaign for the U.S. Senate. Before departing for the debate at Alton, he reads all of the newspapers and is very impressed with the valiant battle Douglas has been waging against both the Buchanan administration and the Republicans. Despite being a resident of Illinois since 1833, Miles has never heard of Lincoln. After reading Lincoln’s House Divided Speech, he observes that “both Jesus and Lincoln were sophists.” Miles believes a divided house can stand and that the House Divided doctrine would inevitably lead to a sectional

10. Ibid., 82, 104–5, 150, 205, 214, 240, 316.
war. When Miles arrives in Alton and sees Lincoln for the first time, he is not impressed. He observes that he “had never seen a man so absurd.” Lincoln has a high-pitched voice and his clothes do not fit his long, awkward frame. Much to the surprise of Miles, Lincoln was able to rise “to great heights of eloquence” in spite of those physical limitations.  

Although Miles comes away from the Lincoln-Douglas debate with the impression that a “a divine grace permeated his [Lincoln’s] being,” it is Douglas who, in his words, is the “martyr.” It is Douglas who courageously traveled around the country and “fought everywhere to the last” during the 1860 campaign. Douglas is the man of true principles, and yet Lincoln wins election to the presidency because his party, the recently organized Republicans, was able to cobble together enough “contemptible factions” to defeat the Little Giant. When Miles learns of Douglas’s defeat, he falls into the deepest depression of his life. After the election, Miles travels to Washington in order to witness Lincoln’s inauguration. He is struck by Lincoln’s ability to use the English language and believes Lincoln “kindred to the greatest souls.” Though Lincoln, the “rural genius” and “Socratic wag,” may have a gift for words, Douglas is the realist who champions the cause of Union during the secession crisis. Douglas is the tragic hero of the novel who spills every ounce of his energy on behalf of the Union, and Miles finds it fitting that the end of Douglas’s life coincided with the destruction of the Union and onset of the Civil War. He weeps when he learns of Douglas’s death. The war is treated in only two pages that emphasize the great tragedy of war. Though Miles is profoundly moved by the words of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, he does not believe its words are true.

The final chapter of the novel takes place in 1900, and the scene is Douglas’s tomb. Miles sits at the tomb and laments the death of all the people he cared about during his lifetime. The country is in a wretched condition. Since Douglas’s death, the Republican Party has revived the Hamiltonian program of the bank and protective tariff. Those policies have enabled giant trusts to control the nation, and Miles believes the trusts are much worse than any ante-bellum slave owner. The United States is also in the midst of a war of conquest in the Philippines that marks the final step in the

11. Ibid., 387, 390, 400, 404, 409.
12. Ibid., 441, 443, 451–53.
country’s transformation from republic to empire. Miles looks at Douglas’s tomb and concludes, “There was no truer, braver man in his time.”

Children of the Market Place, though not as virulently anti-Lincoln as Lincoln: The Man, reveals a great deal regarding the way in which Masters interpreted the history of nineteenth-century America. The novel is set in antebellum Illinois, but the hero of the story is Lincoln’s chief political rival. Miles’s admiration of Douglas reflects Masters’s own view of the Little Giant. Masters admired Douglas because he believed Douglas was the only politician of his era who truly espoused the principles of Thomas Jefferson. Masters thought Jefferson was the greatest American statesman, and he viewed American history as a continuing struggle between Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian principles. This Manichean interpretation of history is evident in Masters’s writing as early as 1904, when he published a collection of political essays entitled The New Star Chamber. In those essays, Masters praises Jefferson as the man “who gave form and purpose to the republic,” while Hamilton is condemned as a monarchist whose policies amounted to nothing less than “imperialism.” As early as 1904, Masters feared that the republic of Jefferson had decayed into a corrupt Hamiltonian empire. Masters’s political philosophy remained consistent, and it is succinctly summarized in a letter he wrote to his son Hardin a month prior to the 1932 presidential election. Masters informed his son, “I’m going to vote for Roosevelt. Never can vote the rotten republican ticket—all bad from Lincoln down.”

The themes suggested in Children of the Market Place are further developed in an article Masters published in the American Mercury just one month prior to the appearance of Lincoln: The Man. In the relatively short article simply entitled “Stephen A. Douglas,” the thesis is quite clear: Douglas was the greatest man of his era, whose political aspirations were tragically undermined by a conspiracy of “religious fanatics,” temperance advocates, and Hamiltonian

13. Ibid., 460, 462–64, 468.
centralists who all espoused “moral charlatanism.” Douglas was, in the words of Masters, “a statesman of Nietzschean quality, who subordinated the current morality to practical, hard programmes.” Douglas was the true heir of Jefferson’s legacy and almost single-handedly waged a valiant battle against the Whigs and Republicans, who were actually no different than the Federalists Jefferson combated. Douglas was the “greatest advocate of liberty of his time,” and while “nearly everyone was insane, both North and South,” Douglas maintained his clear-headed vision for America and realized the perils of sectionalism. Lincoln was little more than a humbug who defeated Douglas in 1860 with carefully constructed lies and the support of moneyed interests. Once in power, the Republicans resurrected the protective tariff and national bank, which ultimately led to “Prohibition, bureaucracy, the trusts, imperialism, and the loftiness of a Christian Republic free of slavery, polygamy and drink!” Masters was attempting to redress a great imbalance in the writing of American history. He thought it grossly unjust that Lincoln won the 1860 election and became “the colossal hero” of American history while Douglas had been relegated to the footnotes. According to Masters, the real truth of history is that “Douglas was superior to Lincoln in genius, in strength of mind, and in moral character.” The stage for Lincoln: The Man had been set. 17

The author of the sketch of Stephen A. Douglas in the Dictionary of American Biography observed in 1930 that Albert Beveridge’s recent biography of Lincoln was “the only biography of Lincoln that treats Douglas other than as a foil for the hero.”18 On the first page of Lincoln: The Man, Masters acknowledges his debt to both Beveridge and William H. Herndon. Masters asserts that his biography is a “rational analysis” of Lincoln’s “mind and nature” that offers argument and interpretation, whereas Beveridge merely gathered facts.19 If Beveridge was the first Lincoln biographer to treat Douglas other than as a foil for the hero, then Masters was the first Lincoln biographer to treat Lincoln as the foil for Douglas.

Masters dedicates Lincoln: The Man to “the memory of Thomas Jefferson” and then proceeds to argue that Lincoln was responsible for destroying the principles of Jeffersonian republicanism, thereby paving the way for a plutocratic empire. In his autobiography, 17. Ibid., 11, 15–16, 23.
Masters singles out Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as an important influence upon his intellectual development.\(^{20}\) This influence is evident in *Lincoln: The Man*, for just as Gibbon attempted to diagnose the reasons behind the collapse of ancient Rome, Masters’s biography of Lincoln is an exegesis upon the causes of the decline of the American republic. Gibbon identified political corruption and Christianity as two of the leading causes of Rome’s demise, and Masters reaches similar conclusions about the fall of the American republic. According to Masters, Lincoln was the first president to “invest the government with Christianity,” and the Republican Party’s control of the government inaugurated an era of “tyrannous plutocracy.” Douglas was the one man who could have saved the republic from decay, but a “demi-gogue,” who seized the reins of power through deception and then proceeded to behave like a corrupt Roman emperor, defeated him.\(^{21}\)

It was only by deception and trickery that Lincoln became president, for Masters depicts Lincoln as the most ill-bred, ill-prepared, and ill-chosen president in American history. Lincoln’s father is described as “dull witted,” “shiftless,” “utterly ignorant,” and “one of the most worthless men who ever fathered a man of distinction.”\(^{22}\) Lincoln grew up amidst the filth, vermin, and vulgarity of the frontier and was attracted to the politics of “plunder” preached by the “Mephistophelean Hamilton” and his ideological successor Henry Clay.\(^{23}\) Douglas, on the other hand, was well-born and “firmly grounded in the Jefferson faith.” During their formative years Lincoln was “slow,” “fumbling,” and “cautious,” while Douglas was “forthright,” “outspoken,” and “courageous.”\(^{24}\) Though Masters had written an epitaph for Ann Rutledge in his *Spoon River Anthology*, in *Lincoln: The Man* he dismisses the story that Lincoln loved Ann Rutledge and asserts that Lincoln was “undersexed” and probably did not love Mary Todd either. Though Douglas was one of Mary Todd’s suitors, he was, according to Masters, “too discerning of character to want to ally himself with the shrewish young lady from Lexington.”\(^{25}\)

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22. Ibid., 9–11.
23. Ibid., 15, 27, 112.
While Lincoln spent his time “loafing” at his friend Joshua Speed’s store, Douglas became a successful lawyer and politician. As Douglas led a life of activity, Lincoln “though ceaselessly playing at politics, seemed to confine his industry to letter writing and to scheming.” Masters argues that Lincoln measured himself against Douglas, and though at “first depressed to intellectual impotence by Douglas’s success, Lincoln rose to energy and activity when the chance came to overcome Douglas.” Lincoln was like a snake in the grass, lying in wait for the perfect opportunity to strike, and when he did strike, he was intellectually unprepared for the task. Masters provides a list of important books that Lincoln never read and concludes that Lincoln possessed a “lazy mind.” He also points out that Lincoln possessed a “lazy colon,” which Masters attributes to Lincoln’s “brooding.” Masters argues that Lincoln “knew little or nothing of the history of liberty, as the debates with Douglas showed.” Not only was Lincoln deficient in his reading on subjects such as literature, science, history, and politics, but Masters also describes him as a “desultory reader of law.” Instead of furthering his knowledge of the law while riding the circuit, Lincoln preferred to tell “filthy” stories and often appeared in court “badly prepared.” While Lincoln languished as a third-rate lawyer after his failed term in Congress, Douglas became a leader of his party and one of the most prominent men in the republic.

According to Masters, “envy of Douglas” is the “key” to Lincoln. Lincoln developed an “inveterate hatred of Douglas” and began his assault on the Little Giant following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, when Douglas was most vulnerable. Initially Lincoln’s efforts were ineffective, so for the 1858 U.S. Senate campaign, Lincoln embraced a style of rhetoric that Masters refers to as “Hebraic-Puritanism.” Hebraic-Puritanism, according to Masters, is the use of Christian morality for political effect. For example, in his House Divided Speech, Lincoln used the words of Christ in order to “cast a spell over the moral force of the electorate.” Lincoln’s ability to fool the electorate with cleverly worded appeals to morality made him no different than a magician who is able to cast spells over people. In his 1858 debates with Douglas, Lincoln “dodged and evaded the real questions” and displayed “intellectual impotence.” Douglas, on the other hand, upheld his Jeffen-
sonian principles and demonstrated that he truly understood the
nature of republican government and the Constitution.\textsuperscript{30}
In 1860 Lincoln’s Republican Party exploited Hebraic-Puritanism
to its fullest extent, and according to Masters, those “pretensions
to morality were specious,” since the only reason for the party’s
existence was a desire to control the patronage and plunder the
treasury. The Republicans were simply Hamiltonian Federalists
masquerading under a new name. Masters asserts that Lincoln
lacked vision and was unfit to serve as president, but Jefferson
Davis ruined Douglas’s opportunity to win the election when he
split the Democratic Party into two factions. Douglas was defeated
by a conspiracy, and the only hope for preserving the republic van-
ished as a consequence. According to Masters, “Lincoln and his
party were getting ready to do worse things against slavery than
slavery had ever done.” When Lincoln took office he faced the
greatest crisis in the history of the republic, and Masters sardoni-
cally observes that, unlike in 1840, there was no window for Lin-
coln to escape from in 1861.\textsuperscript{31}
Masters wrote that secession was perfectly legal, but Lincoln “had
no better than a country lawyer’s understanding of the constitu-
tion,” and his “desultory intellectual habits” prevented him from
understanding the nature of republican government (Masters ap-
parently forgot that Douglas was an ardent Unionist who opposed
secession and supported Lincoln’s call for troops to put down the
rebellion). Lincoln’s lazy mind, along with the influence of “fanati-
cal Zionism” in the Republican Party, led the country into what
Masters refers to as “one of the most cruel and bloody wars of his-
tory.”\textsuperscript{32} The Union was composed of sovereign states, but Lincoln
waged a war of conquest in order to vindicate his conception of the
nature of the Union. While Douglas bravely tried to forge a com-
promise in order to avoid war, Lincoln did nothing, and he entered
office with no plan on how to deal with the secession crisis. Mas-
ters characterizes Lincoln’s Inaugural Address as a “declaration of
war.” Lincoln maneuvered the Confederacy into firing the first shot.
That despotic act, in Masters’s opinion, set the stage for the impe-
rial conquest of the Philippines led by William McKinley.\textsuperscript{33}
As commander-in-chief, Lincoln behaved like a tyrannical des-
pot. Masters compares Lincoln to the Roman emperor Caligula and

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 288, 309, 404.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 303, 314, 368, 372, 375.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 272, 316–17, 334.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 4–5, 343–44, 383, 387, 391.
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speculates that perhaps “the unknown father of Nancy Hanks may have had the blood of Charles I in him?” Lincoln “perverted the Constitution,” commenced a “reign of terror,” and “crushed the principles of free government.” The Union army was under the command of “centralists and fanatics” who invaded the South and exercised “sordid imperialism” over their vanquished foe. Masters wonders whether it was “celestial or demonic possession” that afflicted Lincoln’s mind.34

Despite all of Lincoln’s deficiencies, Masters argues that Lincoln’s legacy to American civilization is much worse than any single act he committed while president. When Lincoln was elected, writes Masters, “The Republic was vanished not only in administrative forms, but out of the heart and understanding of men, which alone make republics possible. Never again would a Thomas Jefferson walk in simplicity to the Capitol to assume the chief magistracy. Hamiltonianism, the tariff, and the bank had done their work at last.” The triumph of Lincoln in 1860 marked the beginning of a great decline in the republic. The Republican Party was an “unscrupulous imperial organization” only interested in creating a bloated bureaucracy that would facilitate the ability of monopolies and big business to control national affairs. What made this all the worse was the nefarious use of Hebraic-Puritanism by Lincoln and the Republicans to mesmerize the American electorate into thinking that the Republicans served their interests. In short, Lincoln and his party wrought a “civilization that must be destroyed in order that America can rise out of the hypocrisy and materialism into which it was sunk by the war.”35

When Lincoln: The Man was published in February 1931, it created a great deal of controversy. Save for a few notable exceptions, the critics tended to agree with the reviewer in the New York World that Lincoln: The Man represented “the most bitter attack on Lincoln that has been made since the days of secession.”36 Historian Milo Quaife deemed the book a “diatribe” of two hundred thousand words that was often “incoherent.” The book’s publisher,

34. Ibid., 3, 377, 399–400, 410–13, 495.
35. Ibid., 4, 376, 429, 495.
Dodd, Mead and Company, had forbidden reviewers to use direct quotations, and Quaife concluded that this “loss to the reader will not be overly great.”\footnote{37} Other reviewers referred to the book as a “prolonged wail,” and as “a series of immoderate, absurd, and extreme statements which are neither founded on fact nor in harmony with reason.”\footnote{38} The \textit{ Literary Digest} concluded that Masters was guilty of “commercial sensationalism” in an attempt to “gather in a few dollars for his new book by slandering Abraham Lincoln.”\footnote{39} One more blunt reviewer observed: “Authors, like garbage contractors, must eat.”\footnote{40}

In an interview with the \textit{New York Times}, printed the day \textit{Lincoln: The Man} was published, Masters claimed he was not an iconoclast and that the statements made in his book were “established facts” that “cannot be disputed.”\footnote{41} Masters asserted that his book was motivated by a desire to depict the “real Lincoln.” He felt a deep personal connection to the land and the people who had helped shape Lincoln during his years at New Salem. As a boy, Masters had fished from the dam at New Salem and encountered people like Mentor Graham and William Herndon who had played important roles in Lincoln’s life. Masters was resentful that Carl Sandburg, the “slick Swede” from Galesburg, Illinois, could write a best-selling Lincoln biography that simply depicted the Lincoln of legend and myth. As one with direct familial ties to the Lincoln country, Masters felt uniquely qualified to write Lincoln’s biography and believed that Sandburg had infringed on his turf.\footnote{42} Masters later wrote that Galesburg was as alien to New Salem as the Ozarks.\footnote{43}

Unfortunately for Masters, he completely miscalculated the mood of the country. The harsh, irrational tone of his intemperate screed upon Lincoln alienated potential readers. Certainly if there was ever a period when the policies of the Republican Party...
seemed bankrupt, the early 1930s was such a time, yet few people wanted to read that the Great Emancipator was an undersexed sadist and the primary cause of all the country’s ills. Instead, Americans tended to embrace more firmly the Lincoln legend that Masters despised. During the 1930s people read Sandburg’s biography of Lincoln, attended performances of Robert Sherwood’s play *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, and spent nearly $1 million to put Lincoln’s face on a mountain in South Dakota.44

Undoubtedly there was room for a more critical examination of Lincoln, especially one that focused on the presidency, since Albert Beveridge was unable to complete his biography beyond 1858. Still, *Lincoln: The Man* contains little original research, and Masters’s thesis is both presentist and simplistic to the point of being *reductio ad absurum*. The book was both a commercial and critical failure, yet there are elements in Masters’s *Lincoln* that were embraced by professional historians during the 1930s. Though it did not originate with Masters, his view of the Civil War as a needless conflict that could have been avoided became the prevailing interpretation by the end of the decade. The revisionists, led by James G. Randall, tended to downplay slavery as a cause of the war and placed the blame on fanatical abolitionists and a “blundering generation” of politicians who were unable to reach a compromise. Perhaps the greatest hero for the revisionists was Masters’s hero, Stephen A. Douglas. George F. Milton’s 1934 study of Douglas rehabilitated the reputation of the Little Giant amongst scholars and made him a central component of the revisionist thesis. While Masters and the revisionists agreed that Douglas was one of a select few sane politicians who could have saved the country from civil war, their interpretations of Lincoln differed wildly.45 While Masters used Lincoln as a foil for Douglas, the revisionists tended to emphasize the similarities between the two. Randall wrote that it was a “mis-conception to suppose that Lincoln and Douglas were altogether opposites.”46 Revisionists certainly tried to peel away the myths

around Lincoln in order to present a more historically accurate portrait, and though they were often critical of Lincoln, their critiques did not come close to matching the bitter invectives of Masters.

*Lincoln: The Man* was a product of the Great Depression, written by a disillusioned champion of Stephen A. Douglas and Jeffersonian republicanism. Though *Spoon River Anthology* was both a critical and commercial success that established Masters’s reputation as a poet, nothing he wrote during the 1920s came close to matching his initial triumph. By early 1930, he and the country were in distress. Masters was far removed from his “spiritual home” of Menard County in the spring of 1930 when he wrote *Lincoln: The Man* in less than two months while residing at the Hotel Chelsea in New York City. 47 Lincoln scholar Harry Pratt and Carl Sandburg both believed that *Lincoln: The Man* revealed much more about Masters’s own personal tribulations than it did about the life of Abraham Lincoln. Pratt concluded that Masters’s financial troubles and conflicts with wives, publishers, and Clarence Darrow caused him to build up so much bile that “It just boiled out on Lincoln by chance.” 48 After reading *Lincoln: The Man* a second time (a rather remarkable feat in itself), Sandburg composed a poem rife with sarcasm to mark the occasion: “You are making for us a true portrait of Abe Lincoln. / Sure. Of course it ain’t a portrait of yourself.” Perhaps Sandburg was aware of the resentment Masters felt towards his success, for he concluded the poem with a crude assessment of Masters’s biography: “Rest back and sit satisfied. / The halo is a lot of hooey, / Lincoln and Masters one more fable / One more conglomerate fart / Lost on the anxious rumps of the west wind.” 49

As Masters looked back on the course of American history, he traced all the country’s problems to Abraham Lincoln’s election to

48. Inside of his copy of *Lincoln: The Man*, Harry Pratt wrote: “Masters became increasingly bitter until his system was no longer able to hold in the bile. It just boiled out on Lincoln by chance. He fought with his family, two wives divorced him, quarreled with Darrow, he has accused every publisher he has of cheating him on royalties. His books have sold as remainders etc.—” Pratt’s copy of *Lincoln: The Man* is in the Rare Book Room of the University of Illinois Library at Urbana-Champaign.
49. Sandburg’s poem, “On Re-reading Edgar Lee Masters’ Lincoln-The-Man Three Years After The First Reading” was not published during Sandburg’s lifetime but has been published in George and Willene Hendrick eds., *Billy Sunday And Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 71–75.
the presidency. For Masters, the republic was in a state of decay and Lincoln and his party were to blame. *Lincoln: The Man* reads like a call to arms. Through the use of bombastic language perhaps Masters was trying to awaken the people from the spell that Lincoln, the Republican Party, and the makers of the Lincoln myth had cast upon them. Though Masters admired Douglas more than any other nineteenth-century politician, a Lincoln biography would have had more potential to sell copies than a book about Douglas. *Lincoln: The Man* can, therefore, be seen as an odd hybrid of Master’s political philosophy, his admiration of Douglas, his desire to expose the real Lincoln, and his need for a commercial success. Unfortunately for Masters, the reading public did not buy his book. The Spoon River poet may have been capable of writing an incisive study of Lincoln, but his intense hatred of Lincoln produced an iconoclastic tirade that failed to re-establish his popularity as a writer and is much more useful to students of Masters than to students of Lincoln.

It should be pointed out that Masters’s opinion of Lincoln mellowed somewhat in the last decade of his life, as evidenced by his 1942 contribution to the Rivers of America Series entitled *The Sangamon*. While Masters made no research trips prior to writing *Lincoln: The Man*, he used part of the advance he received for *The Sangamon* to make what would be his final visit home to Menard County, where he did some research and re-connected with his “nurturing spot.” Masters’s purpose is to examine the lives of the common folk of Menard County who “received Lincoln and sustained him” even though most were solid Jeffersonian Democrats and therefore viewed Lincoln’s Whig politics with some suspicion. Unlike in *Lincoln: The Man*, Masters’s tone is one of nostalgia rather than bitterness. He refrains from hurling epithets at Lincoln and the Re-

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publicans and instead paints an idealized portrait of a bucolic community. One can only wonder how different Lincoln: The Man would have been if Masters had brought some of this sensitivity to his subject.52

52. Masters went even a step further than The Sangamon in a February 1944 article he contributed to The Rotarian. In a puff piece for the restored village at New Salem, Masters claimed that no other spot in America, including Mount Vernon, Monticello, and the Hermitage, could rival New Salem for its romantic quality. Masters marveled at the natural beauty of the site and claimed that above the scenery there “hovers a memory the like of which Mount Vernon and the Hermitage do not have.” Masters asserted that Lincoln’s career was “more magical, more dramatic, than Washington’s or Jackson’s, and the aura of that career hovers over New Salem Hill and evokes wonder at every step in the restored village.” Whether Masters was sincere in these sentiments or was just trying to make ends meet is a matter of conjecture. See The Rotarian 64, no. 2 (February 1944): 32–33.