BOOK REVIEWS


Here is another biography with Lincoln’s name in the title; but this time the title seems justified. The heart of the book does indeed describe the very close relationship between Lincoln and his Secretary of War. The two possessed complementary talents albeit accompanied by greatly diverse personalities. Nor is the Life and Times in the title ill advised. The authors have achieved that delicate balance between the demands of the central figure and the description of the events of his time, a most difficult art. In addition, the biography is written in a close-knit manner utilizing techniques which compel the reader’s attention from paragraph to paragraph and from chapter to chapter.

Professor Hyman, using notes collected by the late Benjamin Thomas, describes Stanton’s childhood in Ohio and moves briskly into the more fertile area of his career as a very successful “loophole lawyer” whose practice was extended from Ohio to Pittsburgh. Stanton’s greatest successes came from his practice at the “golden triangle.” His appeals to the Supreme Court earned him fame and fortune especially in the “reaper case” and the fight, on behalf of Pittsburgh clients, against the bridging of the river at Wheeling. Stanton, a pre-war Democrat, accepted an appointment as Attorney-General in the cabinet of Buchanan in the last months of that troubled administration. His “cooperation” with the Republican leaders in Congress during the “lame duck” days of the Democratic administration together with his reputed efficiency and the gross inefficiency of Lincoln’s first Secretary of War, earned him a place in Lincoln’s war cabinet.

Under the impact of the prolonged war, Lincoln and Stanton grew closer and each supplied a healthy check upon the other. “Lincoln was calm, unruffled, careless with secrets, forgiving, inclined to tell a joke to place matters in perspective; Stanton was seemingly merciless, secretive, implacable with error, furious at reverse” (385-86). Stanton’s qualities made him the ideal “hatchet man” for Lincoln although “Stanton required a man like Lincoln to manage him.” The two men grew with their terrible responsibilities and came to understand the concept of total war better than their generals.

Throughout the book there is a tendency on the part of the author
to view events from Stanton's perspective and perhaps this is as good a posture as any for a biographer. The tendency is, however, more marked when Mr. Hyman deals with Stanton's actions while continuing his secretaryship during Johnson's administration. He draws inferences which may be warranted, but which will be hotly debated. Stanton is pictured as acting from patriotism and in defense of the army and the fruits of the late war rather than from duplicity, political ambition, or even insanity as has heretofore been suggested. One cannot but wonder if the portrait would have been the same had the book been completed by Benjamin Thomas whose experience in writing the very judicious life of Lincoln might have given added restraint.

The final section of the book vividly describes the breach between Stanton and President Johnson and the Secretary's refusal to leave his office while shielded by the Tenure of Office Act, an act which Stanton had opposed when it was originally introduced in Congress. Grant is pictured as the man who sometimes backed and oftentimes controlled Stanton. He was also the man who, noncommittal and cushioned by Stanton, had nothing to lose and the Presidency to gain. The tensions of long siege of the war department office, coupled with Stanton's compulsion for hard work and life-long asthma, weakened him so that he never recovered sufficiently to restore his depleted fortune. He died virtually bankrupt shortly before Christmas, 1869, before he could take the Supreme Court seat which Grant belatedly offered.

Many readers will be disappointed to find the biography includes no detailed refutation of the supposition that Stanton was involved in a conspiracy leading to Lincoln's assassination. In six pages, plus some additional references to the capture and trial of the alleged conspirators, Hyman describes the incident while relegating the recent implications of Eisenschiml and others to the footnotes, and there they are summarily dismissed. Perhaps this is all the allegations deserve, but this treatment will disappoint those grasping for further speculative material concerning the mystery.

Hyman's view from the perspective of Stanton may be judged as partisan history, but the charge is mitigated by the author's frequent attempts to see his man from others' perspective as well. "He was not a great man" (361), Hyman once states although he is quick to qualify the statement. Considering the pitfalls of biography in general and of Stanton, the "unloved Secretary," in particular, the biography comes off remarkably well. The herculean task of collecting and utilizing the thousands of manuscripts combined with the talents which made the
biography read so very well make the book a splendid addition to the growing list of reassessments of men who lived in this nation's most troubled time.

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Mr. Weisenburger, Professor of History of The Ohio State University, has produced a valuable five part work that reports sympathetically the findings of historical scholarship of the answer given by the Church to the significant problems during the "critical period in American Religion," 1865-1900. Here is interesting reading about "... the point of view ofchurchmen and churchwomen ... as they expressed a faith which gave vital meaning to their lives and as they found a comradeship of faith in vital fellowships. From these fellowships came further inspiration for gracious living, moral leadership, charitable endeavors and varied works of mercy." Rather than undertake an exhaustive study, the author has had to be selective, partly because he has treated certain developments in other books and partly because of space limitations.

Part 1 serves as introduction and pace setter for the work. The basic predicament of Henry Adams, the highly intellectual grandson and great-grandson of two presidents, is analyzed because, according to the author, his problems were also basic for his whole generation. During this period Biblical Criticism, evolutionary and geological concepts altered faith so that it was based less on minute doctrinal definitions and more on central Biblical truths involving personal commitment and fidelity sustained by fellowship with others of the faith. The intellectuals of the day had become so socially segregated that they tended to look down with near scorn on all human endeavor. There was the tendency for such families once active in practical affairs to become primarily observers and critics instead of leaders. Like Adams the age was so involved in using reason as a basic guide to truth that help was sought from the experts in physics, anthropology and art but rarely from those whose temperament, train-