

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

January 2026

John W. Quinley

Hi all,

This month's letter concerns the assessment of Sandburg by literary critics. It was a mixed bag. From the letter:

It is not unprecedented for a neglected author or forgotten book to be revived by a new generation of readers, with different standards about who or what is worth reading. There also may very well be different critical appraisals of Sandburg's work in the years to come.

Stay tuned.

Just one more letter to go.

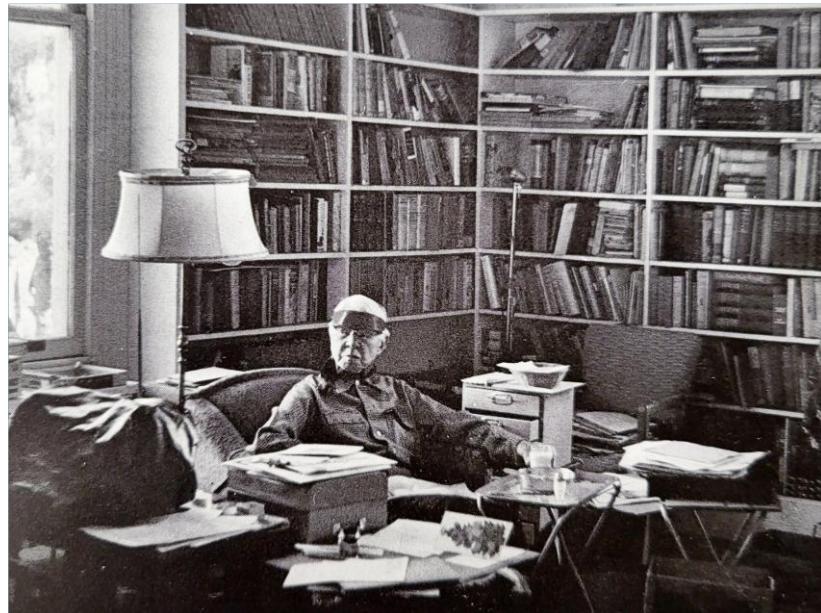
Thanks for reading,

John

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Critical Appraisal

Sandburg seemed to sustain his reputation only as long as he lived.

Once he died in 1967, it went down faster than the Hindenburg.

Joseph Epstein

Dear Readers,

Is Sandburg remembered today? Not very much. The public knows little or nothing about him; high school and college anthologies don't include his works; and he receives little attention from the academic community.

During the first half of the twentieth century, literary critics gave Sandburg's writings mixed reviews ranging from harsh condemnation to the highest praise. Some critics, it seemed, were unwilling to find literary merit in a man whose books always headed the best-seller lists. But at the same time, the American public and readers around the world bought millions of his books.

Sandburg wrote about working class life in the industrial heartland—sometimes with brutal and violent expression—at a time when pastoral themes were in vogue. One reviewer wrote that Sandburg “made the struggles of common people heroic, worth a poet’s tribute,” another said bitingly that he “finds ugly things and writes about them in an ugly way.” And because much of his poetry addressed current events, some judged it to be mere propaganda—more journalistic than poetic. They predicted that his work would have a short life in literary history. Unfortunately, they were right.

On this subject, American poet and editor, Amy Lowell wrote:

Judging from the standard of pure art, it is a pity that so much of Mr. Sandburg’s work concerns itself with entirely ephemeral phenomena. The problems of posterity will be other than those which claim our attention. Art, nature, humanity, are eternal. But the minimum wage will probably matter as little to the twenty-second century as it did to the thirteenth, although for different reasons.

Sandburg used free verse and common speech, even slang, in his poetry to reach working-class readers. They felt Sandburg understood them and some carried his books of poetry in their back pockets. However, the common speech of the early twentieth century often sounds strange to modern ears and readers may not be familiar with either the meaning of some words or the historical context of Sandburg’s poems.

One critic said he articulated the speech of the inarticulate masses, the vitality and strength of the American language. Others said the use of free verse was chaotic and vague and called Sandburg’s use of common speech “phrase mongering”—the raw material of poetry, not its finished product. Still others complained about what they considered

sentimentality of thought, incoherent sentences, the inability to sustain mood in long poems, and unnecessary repetition.

Moreover, Sandburg didn't follow the dictates of the New Criticism in poetry that emerged in the 1920s. The movement advocated for poetry filled with puzzles, obscure allusions, and varied levels of meaning. And poetry that stood apart from specific peoples, times, places, and events. Poetry that was self-contained, self-referential aesthetic verse. Sandburg called the new critics anti-democratic, writing not for the people but for each other: "I say to hell with the new poetry. They don't want poetry to say what it means. They have symbols and abstractions and a code amongst themselves—sometimes I think it is a series of ear wigglings."

Sandburg never shied away from championing social justice for the working class of his time. Nor did he abandon free-style poetry and the use of common speech, which he thought made his writing more accessible to ordinary people. He didn't see this as a weakness but as an essential part of his art and authentic to his nature.

In his poem "Style," he declared:

Go on talking
Only don't' take my style way
It's my face
Maybe no good
but anyway, my face.

I talk with it, I sing with it, I see, taste and feel with it, I know why I
want to keep it

And in an unpublished poem called "Bewares," he advises readers to "Beware of respectable people, / of people perfectly grammatical and proud of it." And to "Beware of those who laugh at original work not knowing all / original work is laughed at to begin with."

Other critics didn't agree with Sandburg's assessment of his poetry. In a negative review of *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*, fellow poet William Carlos Williams concludes that:

[Sandburg poetry shows] no development of the thought, in the technical handling of the material, in the knowledge of the forms, the art of treating the line. The same manner of using words, of presenting the image is followed in the first poem as in the last. All that can be said is that a horde walks steadily, unhurriedly through its pages, following without affection one behind the other.

In a similar light, critical reaction to Sandburg's Lincoln biographies was mixed. Some complained that he did not adhere to formal precedent about how history should be written—especially egregious was the lack of footnotes. Danny Heitman editor of *Phi Kappa Phi's Forum* said of Sandburg's Lincoln books:

They are full of immensely interesting stuff, but it seems to me that Sandburg has made a mess of the writing—indeed, there are plenty of places in which it must strike any reader that he is puzzled by his own material and can't figure out its significance.

Others protested that Sandburg put words into Lincoln's mouth, thoughts into his head. Perhaps the most cutting comment came from famed literary critic Edmund Wilson Jr.: “There are moments when one is tempted to feel that the crudest thing that has happened to Lincoln since he was shot by Booth has been to fall into the hands of Carl Sandburg.”

On the other hand, supporters declared that the Lincoln books were the most beautiful of all the biographies of American literature and the greatest book produced thus far in the twentieth century. James G. Randall, a respected authority on Lincoln biographers, said that “Sandburg made all other Lincoln books dull or stupid by comparison.” The American historian Charles A. Beard called the finished product “a noble monument of American literature,” written with “indefatigable thoroughness.” Allan Nevins, known for his extensive work on the history of the Civil War, saw it as “homely but beautiful, learned but simple, exhaustively detailed but panoramic . . . [occupying] a niche all its own, unlike any other biography or history in the language.” Nevins goes on to say that Sandburg:

...will long be adjudged to have written one of the best of our biographies—and something more. For it is not merely a biography; it is a magnificent piece of

history, a vital narrative of one of the most critical periods of the nation's life, and an epic story which for decades will hearten all believers in the virtues of democracy and the high potentialities of democratic leadership.

In reflecting on the overall assessment of Sandburg's writings, biographer Penelope Niven wrote:

Through the years, critical assessment of Sandburg the poet oscillated from praise to condemnation to, worse, dismissal and neglect. He wrote free verse when it was revolutionary and kept at it when it went out of fashion...His passion for social justice blurred the boundary between poetry and propaganda. He wrote the poetry of fireside, not the poetry of the academy. The powerful solidarity of poets and critics in the universities diluted acceptance of the poets of street and struggles.

Sandburg understood the elusive nature of fame, which he called "a figment of a pigment." In his words:

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.

It is not unprecedented for a neglected author or forgotten book to be revived by a new generation of readers, with different standards about who or what is worth reading. There also may very well be different critical appraisals of Sandburg's work in the years to come. Stay tuned.

Thanks for reading,

Quinley is the author of the book *Discovering Carl Sandburg*, the print series *Letters from a Docent*, and the play *The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg*. You may contact John at jwquinley@gmail.com.