

RECONSTRUCTION STUDIED ANEW

In "The Tragic Era" Claude C. Bowers Makes New Appraisements of Old Heroes and Presents Material Calculated to Upset Old Concepts

BY THOMAS F. FORD

THE TRAGIC ERA. The Revolution After Lincoln. By Claude G. Bowers. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Claude G. Bowers in "The Tragic Era, the Revolution After Lincoln," makes new appraisals of old heroes and presents some material calculated to upset old concepts. Some of the statements made and propositions argued are that "At the moment the bullet of Booth closed the career of Lincoln, he was less the leader of his party than Thaddeus Stevens; that "within eight hours of Lincoln's death, a caucus was conferring on plans to rid the government of the Lincoln influence;" that the activity thus started developed into a conspiracy aimed at Johnson because he was loyal to Lincoln's plan of reconstruction; that Johnson was a patriotic, far-seeing statesman fighting in the cause of constitutional liberty and beset by as unscrupulous a bunch of crooked politicians as have ever dogged the footsteps of an honest man; that with the administration of Grant, the conspirators and crooks came into full control, hoodwinking the President when necessary; that the work of the electoral commission that decided the election of 1876 was a farce.

It was in refusing to follow the fanatical Thaddeus Stevens and the pious, but equally fanatical Charles Sumner in a policy of confiscation of southern property and the bestowal of the vote on the negro, that Johnson brought down upon his head the vindictiveness that the Radicals, led by Stevens, were preparing to inflict on Lincoln for his refusal to follow their lead in such a course. That Johnson is shown as a man of admitted intellectual ability and a gentleman who conducted himself with dignity, instead of the boorish nonentity his detractors sought to make him out, is one of the claims of Mr. Bowers and in substantiating his claim he draws from numerous authoritative sources, many of them opposed to Johnson's policies but still fair enough to give a sturdy opponent his just dues.

The account of the conspiracy to impeach President Johnson and the sketches of the men who hatched it, coupled with an analysis of their motives, is one of the most scathing denunciations of men and aims and methods that can be imagined. Fanatics like Thad Stevens, purblind politicians like Charles Sumner, powerful agitators like Ben Butler, and scores of less prominent political figures, all capable of incalculable skulduggery, swarmed about Washington and with money filched from the treasuries of the States and the national government, spent with a lavish hand, and practiced the fine art of corruption. Time and again we are treated to the spectacle of Cabinet members, Senators, Congressmen and others in less prominent positions, being haled before the bar of justice for corrupt practices flagrantly committed, only to be whitewashed by the courts or legislative bodies called upon to take action on their cases.

The scandals that marked the Grant administrations are all given a new airing. The Credit Mobilier, the Whisky Ring, the Mulligan Letters in which James G. Blaine, "the Plumed Knight" figured so prominently, and the robbing and looting of the South through the carpetbaggers.

Mr. Bowers points out that President Grant's efforts on behalf of

his appointees caught in the Whisky Ring conspiracy made his most loyal supporters gasp. When the investigation first got under way and it was evident that there was something rotten in Denmark, he made a brave gesture. But as soon as his trusted friends began to give off the odors that emanate from corruption, he sought to have the investigation made by the military authorities, whom he could control. The lawyers in his Cabinet soon made it clear to him that this would not do. Then when Henderson, who was prosecuting the case vigorously and honestly, showed that O. E. Babcock, the President's own secretary, was involved, to the extent of acting as a go-between for the Whisky Ring conspirators and the Treasury officials, he had Henderson removed, or consented to his removal, which Bowers interprets as the same thing. That Babcock was the recipient of favors from this gang was clearly proven. He received \$5000 cash at one time and a valuable diamond at another. When he complained that the diamond had a flaw in it, he was given another and a more valuable one.

The prejudiced and frantic activities of Wendell Phillips in the reconstruction fight are made to seem like fanatical frothings. As Mr. Bowers documents his statements, we have to weigh and consider them. If some of his conclusions are tinged with partisanship, that has to be proven. He makes too good a case to be merely dismissed.

In his account of the election controversy of 1876, Mr. Bowers follows closely the conclusions of James Ford Rhodes, the historian. According to Rhodes the State of Louisiana was given to Hayes by James Madison Wells, surveyor of the port of New Orleans, described by Phil Sheridan to Secretary Stanton as "a political trickster and dishonest man whose conduct was as sinuous as the mark left in the dust by the movement of a snake," and the historian Rhodes in reviewing the incident later, said: "As a matter of fact, Wells and his satellites in secret conclave determined the Presidency of the United States; but, before returning the vote of Louisiana for Hayes, there is little doubt that he offered to give it to Tilden for \$200,000.

Each reader will be inclined to appraise "The Tragic Era" according to his own political bias, which may be good politics, but is poor citizenship. Some of us will smile at the subtle partisanship of Mr. Bowers himself in calling the conservative Republican leaders of the time, the "radicals" and in the implications of the subtitle "The Revolution After Lincoln." The "revolution" of course, refers to the subversive and unconstitutional methods used by the crowd that, all enlightened students of history now agree, were a bad lot.

"The Tragic Era" is one of those books that once you get your nose into it you will read to the end. It is a fine and thoroughly documented piece of work which shows on every page that the author spared neither time nor labor in conducting the research that gives the book its splendid air of authoritativeness.