

# Mr. Bowers Rebuilds the Stormy Reconstruction Period

"The Tragic Era" Completes the Work of Revaluating President Johnson's Place in American History

**THE TRAGIC ERA: The Revolution After Lincoln.** By Claude G. Bowers. 567 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. \$5.

By ARTHUR KROCK

IF Mr. Edison should assemble several hundred American citizens of 40 and under, and should ask them for their impressions of Andrew Johnson, the composite reply would probably be:

The only President who ever was impeached. A well-meaning but weak man who provides the historical valley after the mountain-peak of Lincoln. Somewhat addicted to liquor. A poor white. A tailor. A political accident. The least of our Presidents. Was happily replaced by General Grant.

If Mr. Edison, not yet despairing of knowledge of the facts of American history by Americans, should seek views as to Chief Justice Chase, and Thaddeus Stevens, and the figures and events of Reconstruction generally, he would be told that Chase was noble and impregnable, as all Chief Justices are in this great Republic; and that Stevens was a Torquemada without redeeming quality. And as for dashing, dancing Phil Sheridan, Rupert of the Union cavalry, it would be remembered that he rode from Winchester, "twenty miles away," but not that he put a wall of bayonets between the people of Louisiana and their legal right to rule themselves.

Mr. Bowers has taken up the labor of revising the proportions of occupants of the national Hall of Fame from the hour when Lincoln was shot down to the election of Hayes and the end of carpet-bag rule in the South. He has finished, with that prodigious documentation of which he, more than any other modern historian, is capable, the task of rehabilitating Andrew Johnson begun two years ago by Judge Winston of North Carolina and recently carried further still by Lloyd Paul Stryker's biography. If the history instructors in American schools and colleges will put into the hands of their students the Winston, Stryker and Bowers books there will be no further excuse for the crass and biased ignorance surrounding the simple and honest figure of the Democrat who did most to preserve the Union and defend the Constitution. But Mr. Bowers has gone far beyond the limitations of a Johnson vindication. He has spread the broadest canvas in contemporary writing of history, a canvas spotted with blood, tyranny and corruption yet shining here and

there with the gold of consistency and zealotry. He has painted, with fire and feeling, and yet with deep regard for personal dimension, a forensic battle-scene in detailed panorama. What has before been viewed in sections, Mr. Bowers has assembled in one vast piece. Allowing for his strong prejudices (and historians who lack them leave their readers without thrill); allowing for the surprising presence in the midst of fine passages of slovenly phrases and aged stereotypes, "The Tragic Era" seems to this reviewer the first compilation of the case and comment of Reconstruction worthy of its titanic theme.

In style the book is a skillful blending of the "old" and "new" historical writing. The footnote system is followed with so much care that any searcher, quarreling with Mr. Bowers's conclusions, can be certain to find on what documentation the assertion is based. There are six pages of references, and a painstaking index nearly twenty pages long. But when the historian comes to write of such a duel as that between Stevens and Johnson, he pauses—in what is called the "new manner"—to draw a portrait of his characters, to set the stage, to strike up the orchestra, to pull the switch for the raising of the curtain. In this way he prepares his audience for the drama and invests with entertainment and thrill the usually dull preliminaries. Nor is it surprising that Mr. Bowers does this sort of thing so well; in his "Party Battles of the Jackson Period," written eight years ago, he was among the inventors of the device.

The part of Chorus in this book is played by George W. Julian of Indiana, the Abolitionist and political idealist who kept a diary. This Chorus supplies hitherto unpublished material, of very great value to historians and students. While in some respects the source was biased—a criticism which can fairly be made also of the stress Mr.

Bowers gives to what The Nation and The World said in those times—Julian was a man of high probity, and in relying on his statements of things seen the historian is on reasonably firm ground. No one before, lacking the Julian diary, has been able to present, for example, the tone of the caucus held seven hours after Lincoln's death which proves how, even then, he was unpopular with the Radicals. This unpopularity is again revealed in the story of the conference to select a new Cabinet for President Johnson and to make Ben Butler the Secretary of State. What befell Johnson in trying to carry out Lincoln's policy of conciliation to the defeated South was obviously intended to be the fate of Lincoln, had he lived. Those who find pleasure in musing on the might-have-beens of history will find in these pages material for much reflection upon the proportions of the inevitably approaching struggle between two such men as the rail-splitter from Pennsylvania.

The clack of linotypes and the roar of presses are in the ears of Mr. Bowers as he earns his daily bread in the Pulitzer Building. And so it is in character for him to present "news" to this generation when, in the quiet of libraries, pursuing the task of a historian. No writer before has given the proceedings behind locked doors when the House committee was drawing up the articles of impeachment against Johnson; or Julian's colorful picture (he was a member of the committee) of Stevens and Bingham snarling and cursing at each other. With what grudging assent the Radicals nominated Grant, having forced him to break with Johnson, has not been made clear before. Nor has the sensational fact hitherto appeared that Ben Butler hired a detective to check the General's personal habits. It was not known heretofore that Thad Stevens, leaning back in his chair after reading



"TIME WORKS WONDERS."

(AGG. (OFF. BANGS) "FOR THAT I DO SUSPECT THE LUSTY MACK  
HATH LEAP'D INTO MY SEAT; THE THOUGHT 'WHEE!'  
BOTH LIKE A POISONOUS MINERAL GNAW MY BRAWNAGE!"

The Revels in the Senate.

About the Colored Senator Stand Henry Wilson, Oliver P. Morton, Carl Schurz and Charles Sumner.

Naft's Cartoon in Harper's Weekly for April 9, 1870.

the Johnson-Grant argument as to which was a liar, "thought the preponderance of the evidence to be

on the President's side." Mr. Bowers departs also from the practice of most historians to treat the debate in December, 1865, between Stevens and Raymond of The New York Times as an oratorical duel. He moves to the front of the scene, where it belongs, the gallant figure of Voorhees, representing the minority party which was to vote 2,700,000 strong in 1868 and had all the disfranchised Southern whites on its side. Voorhees was speaking to more white Americans of voting age than the other two combined.

From a reportorial viewpoint the chapters on Reconstruction conditions in the South are masterpieces. There are old men living now who saw New Orleans and Columbia and Raleigh and Little Rock when carpetbaggers and the freedmen they deluded bawled out their votes in assemblies between pulls from champagne bottles, bought at the expense of the helpless States. They will recognize the picture that has been painted from the best source material that has ever been gathered. The mixed society at Forney's parties in Washington, where negro guests were occasionally mistaken for waiters; the "salon" of the mulatto sisters when Scott and Moses were the carpetbag kings at Columbia; the glittering other side of society where Kate Chase Sprague, Mrs. Hamilton Fish, the Kentucky belles who married Secretary Belknap, Mme. Cat-crazy and the beautiful hired lobbyists entertained the blacklegs, statesmen, zealots and soldiers of the tragic age—the atmosphere of all this is recreated by Mr. Bowers as if he had been there the evening before. Let those who despair of modern social conditions, or who think the government is on its way to the dogs, read these pages describing what followed the War of the States, and it will make optimists of them. Every day some-

(Continued on Page 22)

# The Stormy Period

(Continued from Page 3)

thing happened in Washington or in the crushed South which modern journalism would use columns to describe. Spiritualism, as after all wars, captured the thought of the time. Men like Sumner and Sprague went on mad visionary adventures. Sprague suddenly attacking "the money power" of which he long had been a symbol and being called crazy by those who looked up long enough to listen from the flesh-pots where they were gorging themselves. The full-length portraits of the carpet-bag Governors and Senators will make this age marvel that the party which had produced Lincoln could have permitted such buzzards to feast amid the ruins of his policy. And the drama of the impeachment, which Mr. Bowers calls "the great American farce," but which was really a tragedy for Johnson, is set in a background of gambling houses, hotel lobbies and private conspiracy chambers that made its infamy shine, as Henry Winter Davis once said of something else, "like a rotten mackerel in the moonlight."

There are gentler scenes and finer figures on this immense canvas. Those who believe that Mr. Bowers's political disapproval of Hamilton crept into his study of the statesman cannot reasonably make this criticism of his pictures of Stevens or of Sumner. For what he says of Grant and Morion, he gives ample contemporary authority. His amazement at the sectional bitterness of Greeley ends in a fine sympathetic description of that piteous death after defeat. Through this book the brooding Lamar, the magnificent Bill Hill and the charming John Quincy Adams 2d find places in American history to which their talents, characters and contributions entitle them.

With a flaming brand Mr. Bowers has searched out the darkest places in our history, and he has cast a light upon them which has both lengthened and diminished the shadows of many who dwell therein. His own opinion is that his researches into the causes of the shoddy melodrama make "many statues in our public squares and parks seem a bit grotesque." But if this review has made it appear that the inquiry is mere muck-raking, it has not properly reflected either the purpose or content of this immensely important contribution to history.

## WESTERN HE-MAN STUFF

*JIM THE CONQUEROR.* By Peter B. Kyne. 303 pp. New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation. \$2.

**I**N "Jim the Conqueror," Mr. Kyne has added a few variants to the formulized Western adventure story and romance. The hero, for instance, is part Spanish, but the name Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes becomes simply Jimmy Higgins to his rancher friends and enemies. The heroine is not in this story, the daughter of the aged rancher, about to be evicted from his home, or worse, by the villain, but an Eastern society girl, whose visit to Los Algodones, Texas, is prompted by the report that Jimmy has shot and killed her uncle Tom Antrim. Aside from these trifling differences "Jim the Conqueror" follows carefully and skillfully the conventional pattern of preceding tales about the great open spaces. Mr. Kyne is too practiced a writer to overlook the slightest possibility to introduce dramatic climaxes in his narrative, and the passages connecting these stirring episodes are marked by an economy of phraseology. A battle royal between Jimmy and a gang of sheep thieves concludes the novel.