

EARL SCHENCK MIERS

Historian

BY PAUL M. ANGLE

Mr. Angle, the noted Lincoln historian, is associated with the Chicago Historical Society and served as its director for many years.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: *Earl Schenck Miers, who died November 18, 1972, had served for many years as chairman of the board of the Associated Friends of the Rutgers University Library. He was born in Brooklyn on May 27, 1910, and grew up in Hackensack. He was graduated from Rutgers in 1933 and two years later became an editor at Rutgers University Press, which he subsequently directed for seven years.*)

I DO NOT remember exactly when I first met Earl Miers. (In speaking of him to others I could never insert the Schenck, although I was always irritated when I heard the middle name pronounced "Shenk" instead of "Skenk." And to hear "Meers" instead of "Myers," as I sometimes did, taxed my limited tolerance.)

But to return to our first meeting. I know it took place in Springfield, Illinois, and before the summer of 1945, because in July of that year I left Springfield to become director of the Chicago Historical Society. I still remember my impression of Miers as he walked into my office. He reminded me then, as he did many times later, of a weather-beaten crow—tall, thin, awkward, with a leather-like face and a kind of beak for a nose, but with a smile that won one immediately.

Somehow, I knew of the impression he had made as the director of the Rutgers University Press. I knew of two books that he had published, *Grounds for Living*, that had gone into paperback and had been unusually successful, and a slender, beautifully designed volume entitled *Bookmaking and Kindred Amenities*. And, in some equally mysterious manner, he knew that I was working on a book in which I proposed to select and appraise the relatively few Lincoln books that I thought had intrinsic merit. He wanted that book for his press, and he got it. (It was published in 1946 with the title, *A Shelf of Lincoln Books*.)

I do not believe that Earl at this time had thought much about writing history. He had been writing, of course, but mostly on other subjects: sports, books, and his own college experience (notably *The Ivy Years*). Then he turned to history, which continued to be his principal concern, though not his only one, to the end of his life. Books too numerous to list here came from his typewriter. Some were solid books, his own composition from beginning to end, some were compilations of original narratives, done with so much imagination that it made them creative works. As I count them I come to a total of seventeen in the adult field, which may not be quite accurate, and a much larger number of juveniles.

Not many writers can do books for both adults and teenagers. Miers could. He never wrote down to younger readers, but merely made his narratives simpler, more personal, and more dramatic. Intuitively, he knew what would interest boys and girls in high school and that he gave them without ever distorting historical accuracy.

Miers was never a professional historian. I am not sure what a professional historian is, but I think the term means a person with a Ph.D. in history who teaches in a college or university. Miers could not meet this standard. Not for him was what is currently fashionable in historical writing: the use of the computer, minute analyses of small subjects, and endless revisions of interpretations sound enough in the beginning. Instead, he was in the tradition of other nonprofessionals, notably Bruce Catton, Barbara Tuchman, and in the not-too-distant past, Lloyd Lewis. Like them, he stressed the essential drama of events and brought the human beings of the past back to life.

Much of my knowledge of Miers' methods as a historian was derived from the years of our collaboration. We did two major books together, *The Living Lincoln* (1955) and *Tragic Years, 1860-1865* (1960), several shorter ones, and a long series of appraisals of influential books and descriptions of American cultural institutions. In everything we did we considered these goals paramount: accuracy, writing that was simple and clear, making names into recognizable human beings, and emphasizing whatever drama was inherent in the events with which we were dealing. To achieve these goals was not always easy, and in the effort I learned much about writing from Miers. Sometimes, in reading what I had written, he would say:

"I don't understand this sentence. What do you mean?"

I would paraphrase, putting the idea, if I had one, in simpler terms.

"Fine," he would respond, "write it that way," and the problem of muddy language would be solved.

As to personalities in history, I remember one experience when we were working on *Tragic Years*. On the second page of the book we had to deal with Governor Henry Gist of South Carolina, who led his state out of the Union months before Lincoln took office.

"What kind of person was this man Gist?" Miers asked. I turned to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, where I read that Gist had killed a man in a duel over derogatory remarks about a lady, that he was an ardent Methodist and president of his church's State Sunday School Convention, and a staunch prohibitionist.

"Let's pin the bastard to the cross," Miers said.

So we worked for an hour until we had one sentence exactly as we wanted it. It read:

"William Henry Gist, wealthy planter, prohibitionist, former president of the Methodist State Sunday School Convention who once killed a man for a lady's honor, now threatened death to the Union."

I learned from Miers how a craftsman endowed a shadowy figure with life.

"Don't say 'the corpulent cop approached the witness stand.' Put it something like this: 'The cop, his face red, his belly hanging over his belt, walked to the witness stand on squeaky shoes.'"

Maybe the shoes squeaked and maybe they didn't, but the image is unforgettable.

Primarily, Miers was a writer. He loved the art of putting words on paper in such a way that large numbers of people would read the result. Among his books three were autobiographical: *The Ivy Years* (1945), *Why Did This Have to Happen* (1958), and *The Trouble Bush* (1966). His juveniles included half a dozen on sports, *The Story Book of Science*, *Mark Twain on the Mississippi*, and others as diverse as the FBI, John F. Kennedy, and Winston Churchill. He even wrote a mystery—*The Christmas Card Murders*—in which I am proud to say two characters are named after my children.

In writing, Miers was a purist. He avoided cliches, schoolmarm-

isms like “firstly” and “importantly,” and such suddenly popular and soon overworked words as “hopefully,” “ambivalence,” and “charisma.” Standard English was good enough for him, although when there was a choice he preferred American spellings: “stanch,” for example, instead of “staunch.”

One of Miers' passionate interests was the state of New Jersey as several of his books—notably *New Jersey and the Civil War* (1964), *Where the Raritan Flows* (1964), and *Down in Jersey* (1973)—attest. For years I could never understand his affection for and pride in a state that I knew only as a horrible stretch of stench and smog that hung over the Atlantic coast. Then, one Sunday, he and Starling (Mrs. Miers) took me on a long drive back into the central part of the state. In a few hours I discovered how little I had known about New Jersey and how lovely much of it was. And I understood, for the first time, why Earl loved it.

Miers wrote everything, and history particularly, at a heavy cost. Afflicted with cerebral palsy from birth, his hands shook so that writing with pen or pencil required a supreme effort. Strangely, he managed a typewriter quite well, just as he drove a car acceptably. But handling books was difficult for him, yet the historian has to handle books constantly: source books, the works of other historians, books of reference. How he managed I never knew, although I am certain that Starling took much dictation and did a great deal of typing for him. He wrote, candidly, about his disability in the three autobiographical books I have mentioned, but I never heard him complain about anything except the reams of paper a writer had to struggle with, and I do not think that he ever considered his spastic muscles a very severe handicap.

I shall not attempt to rank Miers' historical writings in order of merit, but I will state some of my own preferences. They include *Gettysburg* (1948), which he did with Richard A. Brown, where he first used the form to which he would resort again and again in the future: making a continuous, compelling narrative of first-hand accounts woven together by the editor. Essentially the form is an anthology, but one which a skillful editor can turn into a creative work. This Miers proved in *Gettysburg*. At his suggestion, I used the form in *The Lincoln Reader*, which he published; together we used it in *Tragic Years*. I cannot say with assurance that Miers was the first to

employ it, although I believe he was, but certainly he exhibited a higher degree of editorial skill than any predecessor.

I admire greatly *Robert E. Lee, A Great Life in Brief*. Although a short book it offers a more incisive portrait of the great Confederate leader than all but ardent Civil War enthusiasts will derive from Freeman's four ponderous volumes.

In my opinion *The Great Rebellion* (1958) is Miers' finest book, and one not nearly as well known as it should be. The narrative focuses on three critical weeks in 1860, 1861, and 1865: the week when South Carolina seceded from the Union, the week when the South fired on Fort Sumter, and the week of Lincoln's assassination. Of course these pivotal events are only a framework, and the author did not hesitate to reach into the past for background and to sketch, quite thoroughly, the men who played decisive roles in the climactic periods. The plan of the book gave Miers ample opportunity to generalize and express his own opinions, which he did freely. Aside from his autobiographical writings I consider it the most personal of his books, which I suppose is the reason why I hold it in high regard.

To call Miers a great historian would be an exaggeration, as I think he himself would have admitted. But to how many of the thousands practicing the craft can that designation be applied? This is not to say that his work is unimportant. The felicity of his style, his sense of drama, and his skill at characterization gave his writings a wide appeal. To large numbers of young people as well as adults he made segments of the past come to life. And that is no small accomplishment.

Books by

EARL SCHENCK MIERS

Adult

The Chronicles of Colonel Henry (with Ernest E. McMahon), Rutgers, 1935

Composing Sticks and Mortar Boards, Haddon Craftsmen, 1941

Bookmaking and Kindred Amenities (ed. with Richard Ellis), Rutgers, 1942

Valley in Arms, Westminster, 1943

Grass Roots, Westminster, 1944

The Ivy Years, Rutgers, 1945

- Gettysburg* (ed. with R. A. Brown), Rutgers, 1948; paperback, Colliers, 1962
- The General Who Marched to Hell*, Knopf, 1951; paperback, Colliers, 1965
- The Living Lincoln* (ed. with Paul M. Angle), Rutgers, 1955; History Book Club, 1955
- The Web of Victory*, Knopf, 1955; History Book Club, 1955
- Robert E. Lee, A Great Life in Brief*, Knopf, 1956; paperback, Vantage, 1961
- The American Story* (ed.), Channel Press, 1956; Book-of-the-Month Club, 1957; London, Allen and Unwin, 1957; Arabic edition, 1960
- When the World Ended* (ed.), Oxford, 1957
- Blood of Freedom*, Colonial Williamsburg, 1958
- Why Did This Have to Happen*, St. Martin's Press, 1958; Arabic, 1960
- A Rebel War Clerk's Diary* (ed.), Sagamore Press, 1958; paperback, Barnes, 1960
- The Great Rebellion*, World, 1958; paperback, Colliers, 1961; Negro Universities Press, 1971
- Lincoln Day by Day* (ed. in chief), Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission (3 vols.), 1960
- Tragic Years 1860-1865* (with Paul M. Angle), Simon & Schuster, 1960
- The American Civil War*, Golden Press, 1961
- Ride to War*, Rutgers, 1961
- Sherman's Civil War* (ed.), paperback, Colliers, 1962
- Grant's Civil War* (ed.), paperback, Colliers, 1962
- New Jersey and the Civil War* (ed.), D. Van Nostrand Co., 1964; New Jersey Tercentenary Commission, 1964
- Where the Raritan Flows*, Rutgers, 1964
- The Trouble Bush*, Rand, McNally, 1966
- Crossroads of Freedom*, Rutgers, 1971
- The Last Campaign*, J. B. Lippincott, 1972; Military Book Club, 1973
- Down in Jersey*, Rutgers, 1973
- The Christmas Card Murders*, Knopf, 1951 (as David William Meredith)

Juvenile

- The Backfield Feud*, Appleton-Century, 1936
- Career Coach*, Westminster, 1941
- Big Ben*, Westminster, 1942; Armed Services edition, 1944
- Monkey Shines*, World, 1952; World Junior Library, 1955
- Touchdown Trouble*, World, 1953
- The Kid Who Beat the Dodgers*, World, 1954
- The Rainbow Book of American History*, World, 1955; revised, 1968
- The Story of Thomas Jefferson*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1955; Young People's Book Club, 1955

- Rebel's Roost*, Colonial Williamsburg, 1956; Parents' Magazine Book Club, 1956
- Ball of Fire*, World, 1956
- Mark Twain on the Mississippi*, World, 1957; paperback, Colliers, 1963
- Guns of Vicksburg*, Putnam, 1957
- We Were There When Washington Won at Yorktown*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1958; Young People's Book Club, 1958
- The Story Book of Science*, Rand McNally, 1959
- Billy Yank and Johnny Reb*, Rand McNally, 1959
- America and Its Presidents*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1959; revised, 1962, 1966; Tempo Books, 1964
- We Were There When Grant Met Lee at Appomattox*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1960
- How and Why Wonder Book of the Civil War*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1961
- Our Fifty States*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1961
- We Were There With Lincoln in the White House*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1963; Young People's Book Club, 1964
- Yankee Doodle Dandy*, Rand McNally, 1963
- Wild and Woolly West*, Rand McNally, 1964
- Abraham Lincoln in Peace and War*, American Heritage Junior Library, 1964
- The Story of John F. Kennedy*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1964
- The Story of the F.B.I.*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1965
- The Story of the American Negro*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1965; revised and re-titled *Black Americans*, 1969
- The Story of Winston Churchill*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1965
- The Capitol and Our Lawmakers*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1965
- The White House and the Presidency*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1965
- Freedom*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1965
- Men of Valor*, Rand McNally, 1965
- Pirate Chase*, Colonial Williamsburg, 1965
- Where Liberty Stands Guard*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1966
- Baseball*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1966
- Football*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1967
- Menehune Magic*, Nokaio Press, 1967
- That Lincoln Boy*, World, 1968
- Magnificent Mutineers*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968
- The Bill of Rights*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1968
- Basketball*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1969
- The Night We Stopped the Trolley*, Four Winds Press, 1969; paperback, Scholastic Book Services, 1969
- Emancipation*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1969
- A Blazing Star*, Rand McNally, 1970
- The Golden Book History of the United States*, Golden Press, 1963, 1970
- That Jefferson Boy*, 1970

Pamphlets

(For Curtis Paper Company)

- The Declaration of Independence as Written by Thomas Jefferson*, 1955
The Fundamental Creed of Abraham Lincoln, 1956
Seed of Liberty: Proceedings of the Assembly at Jamestown, 1957
The Fundamental Creed of Robert E. Lee, 1958
In Behalf of Parents, 1959
Arctic Sun and Tropic Moon, 1960
Wash Roebing's War, 1961
America at Leisure, 1962
Father of Waters, 1963
On, Pale Rider! 1964
Border Romance, 1965
Golden Slippers, 1966
The Drowned River, 1967
Paradise Point, 1968
The Susquehanna, River and Legend, 1969
Horse Sense, 1970

(For National Society for Crippled Children & Adults)

- Why Did This Have to Happen*, 1957
Cerebral Palsy (with Meyer Perlstein), 1961

(American Keepsakes, for Kingsport Press, Inc.)

- Poetry and Prose by A. Lincoln* (with Paul M. Angle), 1956
Trial by Wilderness: The Emergence of George Washington, 1957; (reprinted in *Triumph Over Odds*, ed. by J. Donald Adams, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1958)
A Ballad of the North and South: The Music of the Civil War (with Paul M. Angle), 1959
Fire the Salute, Abe Lincoln Is Nominated, 1960
American Culture, Some Beginnings (with Paul M. Angle), 1961
The American Family (with Paul M. Angle), 1963

Introductions and Special Articles

- "Paul Robeson—Made in America," *The Nation*, May 27, 1950
 "Pere Goriot and Eugenie Grandet (Balzac)," Fine Editions Press, 1952
 "Moll Flanders (Defoe)," Fine Editions Press, 1953
 "Vanity Fair (Thackeray)," Fine Editions Press, 1953
 "Mr. Vessey of England (Waters)," G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1956

- "Full Color Picture Story of America," Avco Publishing Co., 1957; 16 vol. edition, Pictorial Encyclopedia of American History, Davco Publishing Co., 1963
- "Hospital Sketches (Alcott)," Sagamore, 1957
- "When in Doubt, Fight," *The Saturday Review Gallery*, Simon & Schuster, 1959
- "Lincoln's Last Days in Illinois," *Lincoln for the Ages*, Doubleday, 1960
- "The Civil War in Books, 1961," *Encyclopaedia Yearbook*, Grollier, 1961
- "Largely Lincoln (Mearnes)," St. Martin's Press, 1961
- "The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy (Davis)," Crowell, 1961
- "The American Civil War," *Book of Knowledge*, 1961
- "Robert E. Lee," "Sherman's March to the Sea," "William Tecumseh Sherman," "Oliver P. Morton," *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1961; "Barbary Wars," 1966
- "Here's One for the Record," *New Jersey Reader*, Rutgers, 1961
- "Lincoln as a Man of Letters," *Abraham Lincoln, a New Portrait*, Putnam, 1961
- "The Fighting Yankee," *Centennial Review*, Winter, 1961
- "A New Birth of Freedom," *Today*, Philadelphia *Inquirer*, April 9, 1961
- "The Great American War," *America's Historyland*, National Geographic, 1962; revised, 1967
- "Lincoln and Men of War Times (McClure)," Rolley and Reynolds, 1962
- "The Impending Crisis of the South (Helper)," Colliers, 1963
- "Our Founding Fathers," Philadelphia *Inquirer*, October 16-20, 23-30, 1967
- "The Wife of His Youth (Chesnutt)," University of Michigan Press, 1968
- "William Tecumseh Sherman," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1971