

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

An Exceptional Burst of Poetry: 1918-1928

February 2025

But first...

A Note from the Author!

Hi Friends,

Carl Sandburg could have stopped after publishing *Chicago Poems*. His pioneering work would have secured his place in history. Instead, in the following decade he kept up an exceptional pace with four additional books.

As a Chicago native, I especially like these lines from the poem “Windy City.”

*The hands of men took hold and tugged
And the breaths of men went into the junk
And the junk stood up into the skyscrapers and asked:
Who am I? Am I a city? And if I am what is my name?
And once while the time whistles blew and blew again
The men answered: Long ago we gave you a name,
Long ago we laughed and said: You? Your name is Chicago.*

This month’s letter, “An Exceptional Burst of Poetry: 1918–1928,” continues the story of Sandburg’s early poetry. In his last book of this period, he writes:

*Your mothers, America, have labored and carried harvests of generations—
Across the spillways come further harvests, new tumultuous populations,
Young stranger, crying, “We are here! We belong! Look at us!”
Good morning, America!*

Thanks for reading,

John Quinley

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John W. Quinley



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Dear Readers,

In the decade following *Chicago Poems*, Sandburg kept up an exceptional pace in publishing books of his poems: *Cornhuskers* in 1918, *Smoke and Steel* in 1920, *Slabs of the Sunburnt West* in 1922, and *Good Morning America* in 1928. Although the character of each book differs, they all continue with a focus on the stories of ordinary American people.

In *Cornhuskers*, Sandburg turns his focus from the struggles of the city to the freedom and security of the prairie. “The prairie sings to me in the forenoon and I know in the night I rest easy/in the prairie arms, on the prairie heart.” He explains that when the passenger trains leave their city terminals and move onto the prairies, they find liberation in big skies and immense plains.

In the city among the walls the overland passenger train is choked and
The pistons hiss and the wheels curse.
On the prairie the overland flits on phantom wheels and the sky and the soil
between them muffle the pistons and cheer the wheels

Smoke and Steel, marks the culmination of his work, revealing the emotional and social milieu of his Mid-Western home. In it there is a darker tone and outlook, notes Sandburg scholar Phillip Yannella: “Here there was no heroic working class about to rise up to take its just due, no models of proper working-class behavior, no noble immigrant workers, and no happy, autonomous, humanistic workers who danced and sang in spite of their lowness.”

In the lead poem “Smoke and Steel” Sandburg describes how the smoke and heat of blast furnaces transforms “smoke into blood and blood into steel.”

A bar of steel—it is only
Smoke at the heart of it, smoke and the blood of a man.
A runner of fire ran in it, ran out, ran somewhere else,
And left—smoke and the blood of a man
And the finished steel, chilled and blue.

In his following books of poetry, Sandburg shifts his focus to the sociology of the masses and a sweep of American history and landscapes.

The book of poetry, *Slabs of the Sunburnt West*, is a study of America's westward movement and how it shaped the character of a changing nation. In the opening poem, "The Windy City," Sandburg traces the founding and growth of Chicago. The poem begins with:

The lean hands of wagon men
put out pointing fingers here,
picked this crossway, put it on a map,
set up their sawbucks, fixed shotguns,
found a hitching place for the pony express,
made a hitching place for the iron horse,
the one-eyed horse with the fire-spit head,
found a homelike spot and said, "Make a home,"
saw this corner with a mesh of rails, shuttling
 people, shunting cars, shaping the junk of
 the earth to a new city.

The hands of men took hold and tugged
And the breaths of men went into the junk
And the junk stood up into the skyscrapers and asked:
Who am I? Am I a city? And if I am what is my name?
And once while the time whistles blew and blew again
The men answered: Long ago we gave you a name,
Long ago we laughed and said: You? Your name is Chicago.

In the concluding poem of the book, Sandburg tells the story of travelers along the Santa Fe trail who paved the way into the far West. He writes: "Good night; it is scribbled on the panels/of the cold gray open desert./Good night; on the big sky blanket over the/Santa Fe trail it is woven in the oldest/Indian blanket songs."

In the final book of poetry from this period, *Good Morning America*, Sandburg pays tribute to the workers of the industrial age. In the opening poem, he asks “And who made ‘em? Who made the skyscrapers?/ Man made ‘em, the little two legged jokers, Man.” And later in the poem, he takes a panoramic and sweeping view of America, looking backwards in time as well as to the future.

You have kissed good-by to one century, one little priceless album.
You will yet kiss good-by to ten, twenty centuries. Ah! You shall have such albums!
Your mothers, America, have labored and carried harvests of generations—
Across the spillways come further harvests, new tumultuous populations,
Young stranger, crying, “We are here! We belong! Look at us!”
Good morning, America!

Sandburg published his next book of poetry, *The People, Yes* at the height of the Great Depression in 1936. Although at a slower pace, he continued to write poetry for the remainder of his life.

Thanks for reading,

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