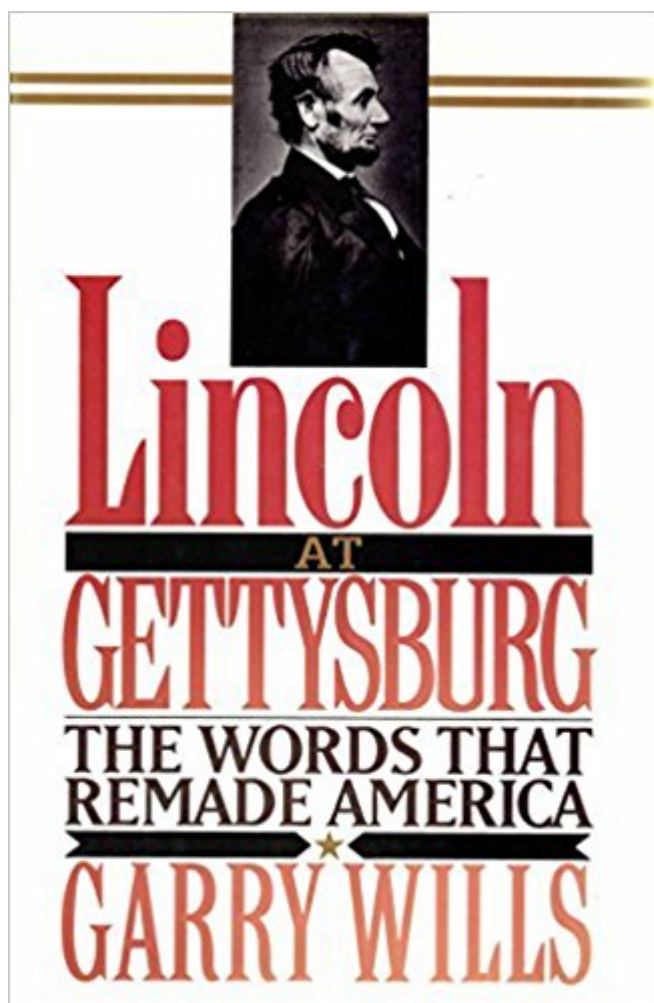


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Lincoln At Gettysburg: The Words That Re-Made America



Synopsis

An account of Lincoln's revolutionary speech describes how, in the space of a mere 272 words, the President brought to bear the rhetoric of the Greek Revival, the categories of transcendentalism, and the imagery of the Rural Cemetery Movement. 25,000 first printing.

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Customer Reviews

A former professor of Greek at Yale University, Wills painstakingly deconstructs Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and discovers heavy influence from the early Greeks (Pericles) and the 19th century Transcendentalists (Edward Everett). The author also probes Lincoln's decision to rely more on the Declaration of Independence than the U.S. Constitution, a decision Wills says represented a "revolution in thought." He speaks effusively of the 272-word address: "All modern political prose descends from [it]. The Address does what all great art accomplishes. [I]t tease[s] us out of thought." Wills' book won the 1992 National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism. --This text refers to the Audio Cassette edition.

Wills (*Inventing America*) combines semantics and political analysis in this account of the most famous speech in U.S. history. He puts Lincoln's words in their cultural and intellectual contexts, establishing the contributions of New England Transcendentalism and the Greek Revival to the structure and the substance of the address. He also interprets the speech as revolutionary, since it's a speech, too for in it Lincoln bypassed as is, seems that Wills, not Lincoln, is bypassing the

Constitution to justify civic equality and national union on the basis of the Declaration of Independence. Wills's analysis of the matrix of Lincoln's text is more convincing than his present-minded critique of "original intent." Nevertheless, he makes a strong case for his argument that the concept of "a single people dedicated to a proposition" has been overwhelmingly accepted by successive generations of Americans. BOMC, History Book Club and QPB alternates; author tour. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The Gettysburg Address is one of the best-known and least-understood speeches in world history, and that is a sad reflection, because this 272-word, 10-sentence oration is one of the most important definitions of the purpose of government and the philosophy of what the United States thinks it should be, ranking alongside the Declaration of Independence and The Constitution.

Simultaneously, it pays tribute to the incredible sacrifices of men who gave their lives to save that country and make its philosophy of government permanent. Professor Wills's book attempts to plumb the well of how this speech came to be, its immediate, rhetorical, and historical roots. No, President Lincoln did not write it on the back of an envelope on the way up to Gettysburg. He dedicated considerable time to the speech in advance. He even gave a preview of it right after the Gettysburg victory, making a brief, off-the-cuff speech to people at the White House, celebrating that triumph and Vicksburg, referring to some of the themes he would expand upon. Yes, reaction to the speech was mixed -- the media of the day was as partisan as it is today -- and some newspapers publicly called it "dishwater utterances," with one paper in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, openly hoping that the "veil of oblivion" would pass over the remarks. The keynote speaker, on the other hand, Edward Everett, who spent two hours narrating the course of the encounter, sent Lincoln a note wishing he had come to the point as well in two hours as Lincoln did in two minutes. All of these subjects, and more, are taken up by Professor Wills, and his literary, historical, and scholarly analysis shows why this speech rapidly became an almost sacred text in the United States, all 272 words being reprinted on plaques across America, ranging from one side of the interior of the Lincoln Memorial to an obscure marker in a side alcove in the City Hall of Newark, New Jersey. One cannot go anywhere in America without being confronted with this speech and its vitally important message. There is, of course, an irony. My father's generation was required in its public school to learn and memorize the speech. I was merely required to learn it -- we didn't have the time to memorize it. I tried anyway, and didn't do very well. A few months ago, I got a call from a communications person at a public relations firm who wanted my boss, Cory A. Booker, at that time Mayor of Newark, to appear at her PR company with the "Grumpy Cat." I said, "Aren't all cats

grumpy?" having had a number of them as pets. She giggled and explained that this "Grumpy Cat" had just appeared on the NBC Today Show that morning, and they wanted to get a photo of him with the Mayor. I had just turned down requests from NBC and CNN to interview the Mayor, and knew that if he was seen posing with the "Grumpy Cat," those two networks would demand my head, and I shot the request down. I then asked why on Earth a "Grumpy Cat" was newsworthy, and she told me the cat had an agent. "An agent? How do they communicate? One 'meow' is 'Yes?' Two 'meows' is 'No?'" She giggled, and our conversation moved on to the importance of importance, and it wandered over to Gettysburg, as we were close to the 150th anniversary of the Address. She didn't know what it was. "You know who the 'Grumpy Cat' is, but you don't know what the Gettysburg Address is," I said, exasperated. "And you're in the communications business." She giggled. "Is that the speech that starts off 'Four score and seven years ago?'" she asked. I told her it was. She wasn't familiar with it. I told her to order this book, gave her the link, and the conversation wrapped up. Then I wondered how many other people in positions of importance in this land there are who cannot tell me the importance of Abraham Lincoln's words. They should all read this book. Then they can get back to me. There will be a test in the morning. This is the book that explains the background for the single most important speech in American history, and maybe the world's history.

Will's Lincoln at Gettysburg was a well-written and a very engaging book that I was fortunate to have finished reading one month before the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination. It is fitting that this book first appeared in the June 1992 issue of the Atlantic Monthly, one of the oldest American literary and cultural magazines that endorsed Lincoln for President of the United States in 1860 and spent its first years covering the Civil War. What I most enjoyed about this book is that it gave a generally interdisciplinary discussion of this great funeral oration by touching on the influences of the 19th century rural cemetery movement, the Transcendentalist movement, the Greek Revival movement, as well as the influences of the 19th century American abolitionist minister Theodore Parker. In explaining how the Gettysburg Address was written in just a few words, the author made it easy to understand by literally tearing the document apart by discussing why Lincoln wrote it in the style we are familiar with. In conclusion, let me say that although the Gettysburg Address is easy enough for an elementary school student to recite, it takes an adult to fully understand the written history of this great speech, so Will's book served that purpose.

On November 19th, 1863, Lincoln delivered "dedicatory remarks" at

a service commemorating the recent battle of Gettysburg. These remarks²⁷² became known as the Gettysburg Address, which I had to memorize and recite before my classmates when I was thirteen. In *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*, Gary Wills analyzes these brief remarks and clears up several misconceptions about Lincoln's role and intentions at the Gettysburg ceremony, where he was always meant to play second fiddle. Starring in this ceremony is a "purgative" and a "large scale solemn act of oratory, a kind of performance art with great power over audiences in the middle of the nineteenth century" and "was Edward Everett, a former governor of Massachusetts and president of Harvard, who was both the Ken Burns and Demosthenes of his day. In *LaG*, Wills does offer his opinions on several historical controversies that have long dogged Lincoln's address. He tells the reader, for example, where he thinks Lincoln stood as he delivered his remarks. And he establishes the provenance of several copies of this address "those possessed by Nicolay, Hay, Everett, Bancroft, and Bliss" in order to clarify what wording Lincoln actually used as he spoke. Furthermore, he does provide Everett's full speech (more than two hours of Hellenistic reference and Gettysburg battle reportage) and funeral orations by Pericles and Gorgias. These are in the book's appendix and worth scanning, since they do establish context and precedent for Lincoln's elegance, messaging, and brevity. Nonetheless, the highpoints of this rewarding book for this reader examine: 1) what Lincoln meant to accomplish in his remarks; and 2) the intellectual influence of transcendentalism on Lincoln's intellectual assumptions. Here:

Intentions: According to Wills, Lincoln considered the constitution a document of imperfect political compromise. In contrast, he believed the Declaration of Independence represented the best statement of the American mission "namely, that all men are created equal. In the Gettysburg Address, what Lincoln accomplished is to take this mission "equality" and position it as the BIG issue implicitly addressed in the solemn event at Gettysburg and the carnage of the Civil War. In this way, he transformed the war, which to that point was largely viewed as the product of sectional disagreements and states rights, into an effort to regain first principles. Interestingly, Wills points out that this focus on the Declaration ("four score and seven years ago" counts back to 1776) provoked immediate protest from Northern Democrats, who protested in editorials that the U.S. Constitution does not use the word equality. Regardless, Lincoln, through his eloquence, did reformulate the mission of the war. Writes Wills:

“They walked off, from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America. Lincoln had revolutionized the Revolution, giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely.”

• Transcendentalist influence: Lincoln, sui generis to be sure, was also a 19th century man and influenced by the intellectual currents of his time. These included Transcendentalism, which attempted to discern and feel ideal forms embedded within experienced reality. This disposed Lincoln to favor the Declaration, where he believed America’s political ideals are stated. And this made him view the constitution which does not mention slavery as an imperfect political document that, with luck, would move, over time, closer to our founding ideals.

• There’s more of interest in this book. This includes Wills’s discussion of Daniel Webster, who profoundly affected Lincoln’s thinking on the Union; and Wills’s comments about the rural cemetery movement. He observes: “The dedication of Gettysburg must, therefore, be seen in its cultural context, as part of the nineteenth century’s fascination with death in general and cemeteries in particular.”

“Honor the 150th Anniversary. Highly recommended.

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