

# Lincoln Love

Number 1835

January 1992



## LINCOLN AND THE "CENTRAL IDEA OF THE OCCASION": GARRY WILLS'S *LINCOLN AT GETTYSBURG: THE WORDS THAT REMADE AMERICA*

By Matthew Noah Vosmeier

The day after Lincoln delivered his dedicatory remarks at the cemetery at Gettysburg, he received a note from the principal speaker of the ceremony, Edward Everett, in which the latter expressed his appreciation for Lincoln's words: "I should be glad, if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes." In his latest book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*, published by Simon and Schuster in 1992 and winner of the 1993 Pulitzer Prize in general non-fiction, Garry Wills argues that Lincoln did more than come near the central idea of the occasion. Lincoln, writes Wills, meant "to 'win' the whole Civil War in ideological terms as well as military ones" (p. 37).

According to Wills, Lincoln's oratorical effort at Gettysburg produced "a new founding of the nation" (p. 39). Lincoln drew from the cultural and intellectual currents of his time and skillfully crafted into the short address a distillation of the political thought he had developed for over a decade. He combined these elements so simply and compellingly that he gave new meaning to the war. Ultimately, his almost magical words "wove a spell" and "called up a new nation out of the blood and trauma" (p. 175). Essential to Lincoln's powerful address is his understanding of the Constitution in the light of the Declaration of Independence, a founding document of a united people committed to creating a government "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Because Lincoln brought to bear his political convictions and his rhetorical skill so successfully, Wills writes that, "for most people now, the Declaration means what Lincoln told us it means, as a way of correcting the Constitution itself without overthrowing it" (p. 147). Thus, after the Gettysburg Address, Americans understood the Constitution differently than they had before:

He [Lincoln] altered the document from within, by appeal from its letter to the spirit, subtly changing the recalcitrant stuff of legal compromise, bringing it to its own indictment. By implicitly doing this, he



Lincoln, writes Wills, "wove a spell that has not, yet, been broken — he called up a new nation out of the blood and trauma" (p. 175). In this charcoal drawing commissioned by the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, artist M. Leone Bracker envisioned Lincoln's delivery of the Gettysburg Address.





Edward Everett, principal speaker at the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg.

performed one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting. Everyone in that vast throng of thousands was having his or her intellectual pocket picked. The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought there with them. ...Lincoln had revolutionized the Revolution, giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely (p. 38).

Much of Wills's study is a close analysis of the speech's framework — its imagery, language, ideals, and style — to discover how Lincoln made this "stunning verbal coup" (p. 40). Contrary to apocryphal stories that Lincoln wrote the address on the spur of the moment, Wills emphasizes how carefully Lincoln constructed his "few appropriate remarks." Wills employs varied sources to illuminate the rich meaning of the Address — including the oratory of the Greek Revival and of the funereal addresses of ancient Athens, the imagery of the nineteenth-century rural cemetery movement, the Transcendentalist thought of Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker, and the constitutional arguments of Daniel Webster. Although the Gettysburg Address can stand alone as a masterful expression of Lincoln's political thought and eloquence, Wills's analysis

provides intriguing insights into Lincoln's Address by exploring the cultural and intellectual world of nineteenth-century America.

Wills looks, for example, at the "Oratory of the Greek Revival" to place Lincoln's address in its historical and stylistic context. If late eighteenth-century America was influenced by ancient Rome and strove to become a disciplined, virtuous republic, nineteenth-century America looked to the democratic ideals of ancient Greece. The news of the findings of archaeologists in Greece and of the fight for Greek independence, the works of romantic poets, and the building designs of architects marked the period of the Greek Revival in nineteenth-century America. Throughout the period, classical scholar Edward Everett encouraged the ideas and ideals of the Greek Revival through his oratory. His studied, detailed addresses at revolutionary war battlefields and other sites tied these places of recent events to the history of ancient Athens as a way to enliven the ideals of the ancient democracy in the young American one. At Gettysburg, writes Wills, Everett tried to combine the values of the ancient Greek funeral oration (or *Epitaphios Logos*) with the drama of the events of the July battle to create an American identity and sense of history (pp. 42-52).

Wills explains, however, that Lincoln's short dedicatory remarks were closer to the mark that Pericles set in his funeral oration during Athens' war with Sparta over two thousand years before. Stylistically, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is spare, dignified, and unornamented. By refraining from references to any particular events or persons of the Battle of Gettysburg, it transformed the battle into an ideal type that was part of the nation's greater movement to realize the ideals for which the country was founded (pp. 52-54). In addition, Lincoln's address shared other stylistic similarities with ancient *epitaphioi*. Lincoln made use of antithesis, as when he contrasted life and death, for example, and his Gettysburg Address followed the ancient funeral oration pattern by honoring the dead and exhorting the living to remain true to their cause (pp. 55-60).

Although Wills's analysis uses Attic oratory to reveal the simple style and subtle strength of Lincoln's prose, he does not connect the Address directly to the oratorical patterns of ancient Athens or of the Greek Revival, for "Lincoln brought nothing of Everett's superb [classically learned] background" to Gettysburg; rather, he "sensed, from his own developed artistry, the demands that bring forth classic art — compression, grasp of the essential, balance, ideality, an awareness of the deepest polarities of the situation...." The result, Wills argues, is that Lincoln did not produce a backward-looking piece that failed to imitate Attic oratory, as had Everett; rather, like Pericles, he addressed "the challenge of the moment" (p. 52).





A view of Forest Pond, at Mount Auburn, from *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, August 13, 1853.

Wills makes more direct connections among nineteenth-century America's "culture of death," the rural cemetery movement, and the imagery of the Gettysburg Address. Influenced by ancient Greece and nineteenth-century Romanticism, Americans designed cemeteries (beginning with Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts) that were set amid the rural beauty of nature, rather than in churchyards. There, in the symbolic borderland between life and death, the living could "commune with nature as a way of finding life in death" (p. 65).

In Lincoln's Springfield, the town's elite dedicated Oak Ridge Cemetery (where Lincoln is now entombed) in May 1860 with a formal ceremony that emphasized the cemetery's quiet and secluded natural setting as a sacred place where young and old alike could be inspired with devotion to the civic and the holy (pp. 67, 70). The ceremony at Gettysburg followed a similar order and sought to create a similar atmosphere of liminality. Wills's portrait of the melancholy Lincoln place him well in his culture and its romanticized ideas about death (pp. 75-76). He also argues that Lincoln might have attended the dedication of Oak Ridge, and would therefore have been familiar with such cemetery dedications (pp. 68-69). Wills notes that, before

the cemetery dedication at Gettysburg, Lincoln had met with the Gettysburg cemetery's designer, William Saunders, and was pleased by its "advisable and benefitting arrangement." Not only was William Saunderson's "steeped in the ideals of the rural cemetery movement," but he designed the cemetery at Gettysburg with appropriately arced rows to emphasize the equality of the soldiers who fought for the nation (pp. 75-76, 29, 22).

(To be continued)

#### Note

1. Edward Everett to Abraham Lincoln, 20 November 1863, in Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap, eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8 vols. plus Index (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 7:25n.



*Lincoln Lore* is the monthly bulletin of  
The Lincoln Museum,  
Part of Lincoln National Corporation,  
1300 South Clinton Street,  
P.O. Box 1110, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.  
© 1993 The Lincoln Museum



## GETTYSBURG CIVIL WAR INSTITUTE JUNE 27-JULY 3, 1993 LINCOLN AND HIS LIEUTENANTS: COMMAND RELATIONS (ALSO SECOND MANASSAS AND GETTYSBURG)

*For information, write the Gettysburg Civil War Institute, Campus Box 435, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania 17325.*

The 1993 session marks our 11th year. With a newly air conditioned auditorium, we are pleased to announce an expansion of our enrollment. The program includes the 1993 Lincoln Prize winner, three Pulitzer Prize winners, and the director of the miniseries "The Killer Angels," to premier on TNT at the end of this year.

### Schedule of Events

#### Sunday, June 27

Afternoon Registration/Reception

#### Monday, June 28

Morning James McPherson, "Lincoln, McClellan and the Goals of War"

Afternoon John Hennesy, "Second Manassas: Command Relations"  
Peter Vermilyea, "Bull Run: Then and Now"

Evening Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, "Mine Eyes Have Seen: The Art of War"

#### Tuesday, June 29

Morning and

Afternoon Battlefield Tour:  
Second Manassas led by John Hennesy and Robert Krick, with emphasis on command relations

Evening Tom Wicker, "Thinking of Manassas"  
Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Lincoln, Hooker, Halleck, and Defeat"

#### Wednesday, June 30

Morning Gabor Boritt, "Lincoln, Meade, and Gettysburg"

Afternoon Michael Fellman, "Lincoln, Sherman, and the West"  
Eileen Conklin, "The Women of Gettysburg"

Evening Battlefield Preservation:  
Victoria B. Greenlee, Executive Director, "Friends of the National Park at Gettysburg"  
Frances Kennedy, "The Victorious Alliance: The Conservation Fund and its Partners"

#### Thursday, July 1

Morning Gettysburg Tours; Focus on Command Relations:  
Bill Hanna and Warren Wilkinson, Beginner's Tour  
Ed Bearss, Advanced Tour  
Charlie Fennell, Greene's Brigade on Culp's Hill  
Scott Hartwig, The First Day: Contrasts in Command  
Charles Hathaway, Artillery  
Dean Schultz, Lost Avenue

Afternoon and

Evening Gabor Boritt, "Remembering a Friend: Michael Shaara"  
Ron Maxwell, "Making a Film: The Killer Angels." Showing of a film that will premier on TNT at the end of 1993.

#### Friday, July 2

Morning and

Afternoon John Y. Simon, "Lincoln, Grant, and Victory"  
Lincoln Prize Laureate Lecture: Albert Castel, "Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign, 1864"  
Don Markle, "Spymasters of the Civil War"

Evening Banquet

Saturday, July 3 — Participants depart after Breakfast

### High School Scholarships Available, Juniors Preferred

Every year, the Gettysburg Civil War Institute reserves 30 of their 250 spaces specifically for high school students and encourages you to help them promote this opportunity. Scholarships this year are provided by Brig. Gen. Hal Nelson, Washington, D.C.; Gettysburg Battlefield Guides Association; Prof. Mark Summers, Kentucky; George Lowe, Texas; and many other individuals and school districts.