

# Lincoln Love

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

By Matthew Noah Vosmeier

(continued from previous issue)

Wills perceptively analyzes the way Lincoln used an "organic and familial" imagery and language in the Gettys-

burg Address. Derived from Romantic nineteenth-century culture, this imagery was appropriate for, and expected at, the dedication of rural cemeteries. Lincoln also found it appropriate

to relay to his audience his conviction that the nation should fulfill the purposes for which the nation was founded, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. . . For example, Lincoln used a "romantic nature-imagery of birth and rebirth" to resolve that the nation "shall have a new birth of freedom," and that its popular government "shall not perish from the earth." More important to Wills's purpose is to reveal Lincoln's perception of the founders' role



BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG,  
JULY 1-3, 1863

A lithograph by E. V. C. Gelderd of the Battle of Gettysburg, based on a portion of Paul Philippoteau's Cyclorama of the events of July 3, 1863.

in the nation's life, exemplified by his proposition that the "fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." That imagery gave force to his call for a commitment to the fathers' vision (p. 88). Thus, contrary to arguments that Lincoln sensed he lived in a postheroic age and suffered from an excessive ambition that engendered a hostility toward the "fathers," Wills emphasizes that for Lincoln, the founders represented the ideals of freedom and equality that had yet to be fully realized (p. 86).

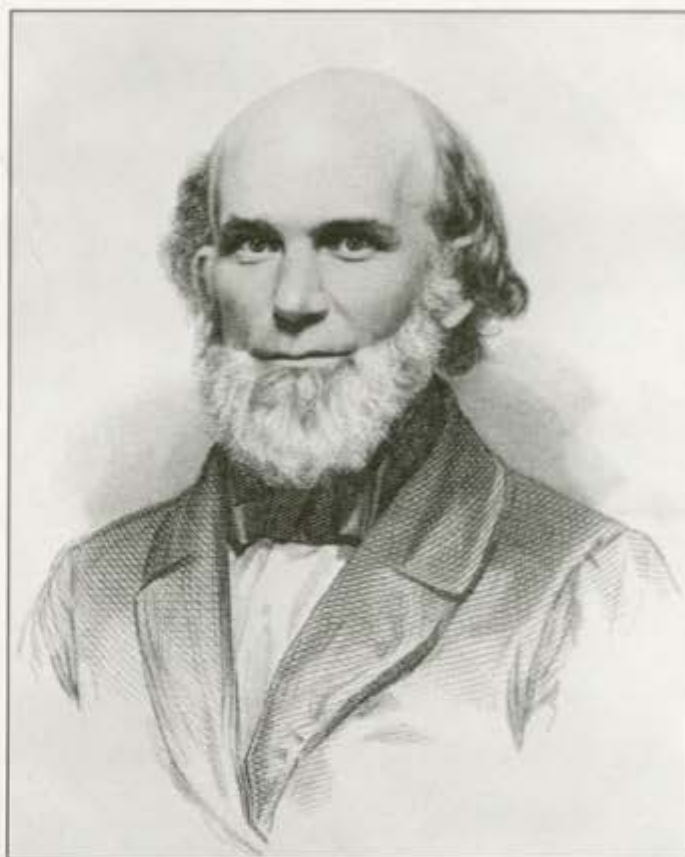
If a simple and crafted rhetorical style and a "romantic nature-imagery" gave compelling force to Lincoln's words, Transcendentalist ideas and the political thought of Daniel Webster, Wills argues, shaped Lincoln's understanding of the Declaration of Independence and its role in defining the American Union (p. 89).

According to Wills, because "Lincoln was bound to be affected by the rhetoric, assumptions, and conscious ideals of the men who shaped his culture," his conception of the Declaration as a statement of an ideal to be made progressively real "owes a great deal to the primary intellectual fashion of his period, Transcendentalism." In particular, this intellectual thought would come through "limited but deep contact with the thought of [historian] George Bancroft, and extensive exposure to [clergyman and abolitionist] Theodore Parker's views" (pp. 103-104). Bancroft, for example, had argued in 1854 that "there exists this ideal state toward which it [the actual state] should tend," and in 1860, stated that the "assertion of right [in the Declaration of Independence] was made for the entire world of mankind and all coming generations, without any exceptions whatever" (p. 105).

For himself, Lincoln's antislavery arguments were expressed in ways meant to accomplish that which he believed was politically possible at the time. Nevertheless, for Lincoln also, the Declaration of Independence stated a transcendent ideal to be attained and also stood as a founding document of a single American people. As Wills points out by quoting Lincoln, the founders

meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere (p. 102).

Consistent with this belief, writes Wills, Lincoln argued that the Constitution was an "early and provisional embodiment of that ideal." It represented (in Lincoln's words) the "spirit of that age" (from the time of the framing of the Constitution to the Missouri Compromise) which expressed



Theodore Parker

"hostility in the PRINCIPLE [of slavery], and toleration ONLY BY NECESSITY" (pp. 101-102).

Wills argues that Lincoln was exposed to Transcendentalist ideas, "every time he went into his Springfield office and talked with his partner," William Herndon (an admirer of Theodore Parker), who "pushed upon Lincoln" Parker's writings (pp. 105-106). He then traces the similarities in Lincoln's and Parker's thoughts about the Declaration as a statement of ideal and about the "Slave Power conspiracy," which they argued was undermining America's progression toward that ideal. But Lincoln made no specific mention of slavery or emancipation in the Gettysburg Address, Wills argues, because, in the end, "a nation free to proclaim its ideal is freed, again, to approximate that ideal over the years, in ways that run far beyond any specific or limited reforms, even one so important as emancipation" (pp. 106-120).

However, Lincoln admired Whigs Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. Unlike Parker, he "felt they [Clay and Webster] proved that one can remain opposed to slavery while making temporary concessions to the South in order to keep the nation together" (p. 123). Wills quotes from Lincoln's eulogy for Henry Clay in 1852, for instance, in which Lincoln criticized abolitionists because they "would shiver into fragments the Union of these States, tear to tat-



Daniel Webster

ters its now venerated Constitution; and even burn the last copy of the Bible, rather than slavery should continue a single hour" (p. 124). Wills writes that Lincoln viewed the Declaration of Independence as a "founding document" (p. 132). His ideas about the nature of the Union were largely drawn, Wills argues, from the political thought of Daniel Webster (p. 125). In his famous Reply to Hayne in 1830, and in other writings, Webster had asserted that the United States was not a compact of states, but a true union formed by the people who had joined together to win independence and to adopt the Articles of Confederation "as articles of perpetual union." In his First Inaugural Address in 1861, Lincoln repeated this historical progression towards an indissoluble Union in the years before the Federal Convention of 1787, and he told of the Constitution's declared object "to form a more perfect union" (pp. 130-131). This interpretation carried important implications for policies during the Civil War. If the Constitution was the creation and working law of a unified people, then, for Lincoln, the war could only be an "insurrection," and emancipation carried out as a war measure (pp. 133-144).

Ultimately, Lincoln's use of the Declaration of Independence as a founding document differs from Webster's, howev-

er, for Wills explains that, "Lincoln does not argue law or history, as Daniel Webster did. He makes history. He does not come to present a theory, but to impose a symbol ..." (p. 174).

Here, then, is how Lincoln succeeded in making his "verbal coup." A dedication address is not merely a speech that forwards logical arguments, but a verbal act that announces a reality. For Wills, Lincoln's dedicatory act at Gettysburg possessed power because Lincoln combined all the right elements — a modern style of prose that contained the simple dignity and conviction found in an ancient Attic funeral address, a romantic imagery appealing to a nineteenth-century American "culture of death," and a reliance on the Declaration of Independence as a founding document and as a commitment to fulfill the ideal that "all men are created equal." With these elements, the Gettysburg Address enabled Lincoln to effect "an intellectual revolution." Writes Wills, "no other words could have done it....[A]t Gettysburg he wove a spell that has not, yet, been broken" (p. 175).

In *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, Garry Wills has made insightful contributions to our understanding of the Gettysburg Address. If the book at times tends toward overstatement, it nevertheless makes plain the force of Lincoln's speech. It emphasizes that, for Lincoln, the solemn dedication ceremony at Gettysburg was more than a ceremony; it was an occasion he did not want to risk missing for fear that his effort might "fail entirely." His carefully composed dedicatory remarks certainly point beyond the immediate occasion. It is commonplace to note that the Address is a compelling statement of Lincoln's vision for the nation at a time it was tested by civil war, and yet Wills's close analysis of the piece brings out much that is passed over by too much familiarity. His varied sources allow him to make intriguing observations about Lincoln's cultural context, his masterful facility with words, and the continuing influence of the Gettysburg Address in shaping Americans' perception of their country. Wills's *Lincoln at Gettysburg* has brought out even more the irony of Lincoln's thanking Everett for his judgment that "the little I did say was not entirely a failure."

#### Notes

2. AL to Edwin M. Stanton, [17 November 1863], in Basler, et al., eds., *Collected Works*, 7:16; AL to Edward Everett, 20 November 1863, in *ibid.*, 7:24.



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## NEWS FROM THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN ASSOCIATION

### 1993 A.L.A. BANQUET FEATURES ADDRESS BY WILLS, AWARD OF ACHIEVEMENT TO NORTHRUP

The distinguished scholar Garry Wills delivered the major address at the annual ALA banquet February 12, 1993, comparing the early days of the Lincoln administration to the first weeks of the presidency of Bill Clinton.

Professor Wills's talk was heard by an audience of nearly 400 attendees, including Illinois Governor Jim Edgar and U.S. Senator Paul Simon.

At the same dinner, longtime ALA Membership Chairwoman Georgia L. Northrup received the Association's coveted Award of Achievement. In presenting her the third annual award (previous winners: Mario M. Cuomo and Harold Holzer in 1991 and William Bunn, Jr., in 1992), board member Richard Hart cited Mrs. Northrup's "wisdom and principled voice...charm and good nature...quiet attention to detail," concluding, "You are the critical glue which has held us together." Georgia Northrup has served on the ALA Board of Directors for more than twenty years.

To join the ALA — or to obtain more information on membership benefits—write Georgia Northrup, c/o The Abraham Lincoln Association, Old State Capitol, Springfield, IL 62701. Memberships are available at several levels, all of which include a subscription to the *Journal*, soon to be published twice annually: Individual (\$25); patron (\$50); sponsor (\$125); benefactor (\$250); and corporate (\$500).



Georgia L. Northrup accepts the third annual ALA Award of Achievement at the Association's Lincoln Birthday banquet in Springfield. Looking on are (from left): ALA president Frank J. Williams, presenter Richard Hart, and author Garry Wills.

### A.L.A. CONTRIBUTES LINCOLNIANA TO ILLINOIS STATE HISTORICAL LIBRARY

The Association recently purchased a number of rare books to add to the great Henry Horner Lincoln Collection at the Illinois State Historical Library in Springfield, one of the nation's leading Lincoln research centers.

Among the books donated to the Library were two volumes that helped propel Lincoln to the presidency in 1860: the published version of his debates with Stephen A. Douglas, issued at

Lincoln's urging, and appearing around the time of the 1860 Republican National Convention; and the first printing of Lincoln's Cooper Union Address in New York, the speech that had successfully introduced him to Republicans in the East the previous February.

ALA President Frank J. Williams commented: "This donation reaffirms our commitment to supporting the scholarship and preservation activities of the Illinois State Historical Library. Its collection, one of the greatest in the world, is now even more complete."

Thomas F. Schwartz is curator of the Henry Horner Collection.



Professor Garry Wills delivers the principal address at this year's Springfield banquet.

### THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN ASSOCIATION PRIZE

The ALA has issued a call for manuscripts in the competition for its first Abraham Lincoln Association Prize for the best new book-length study of the sixteenth president. The winner will receive a \$1,000 award together with a publication contract from Southern Illinois University Press, cosponsors of the competition.

The prize, which is designed to encourage and support new research and writing on Lincoln, is open to any original, unpublished nonfiction manuscript of at least 50,000 words.

The submissions will be judged by a panel of leading Lincoln scholars: Richard Nelson Current, formerly of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Robert W. Johannsen, of the University of Illinois; and Mark E. Neely, Jr., of St. Louis University. John Y. Simon of Southern Illinois University/Carbondale, who serves as Executive Director of the Ulysses S. Grant Association, chairs the panel.

To enter the competition, submit a manuscript to (or to request further details about requirements, write to): Editorial Director, Southern Illinois University Press, P.O. Box 3697, Carbondale, IL 62902-3697. The deadline is September 1, and the winner will be announced at the next annual ALA banquet in Springfield on February 12, 1994.