

Writing the Gettysburg Address

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Review

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Johnson, Martin P. *Writing the Gettysburg Address*. University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-1933-7

How A Great Document Came into Being

In *Writing the Gettysburg Address* Miami University professor of history Martin P. Johnson has offered the third book in a trilogy, of sorts, for those wishing to fully understand the influences on and writing of the Gettysburg Address. Gary Wills' 1992 *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* focused on both the political and oratorical influences upon the speech going back to the Ancient Greeks. A. E. Elmore's 2008 *Lincoln at Gettysburg: Echoes of the Bible and Book of Common Prayer* looked at the origins of the specific words Lincoln selected, revealing the religious influences upon the speech. Johnson's new book offers a timeline, essentially, of when and where Lincoln wrote the specific drafts of the Gettysburg Address – including those that may have been discarded – arguing, “these mysteries of the manuscripts are important because the search for a secure history of Lincoln's best-known speech is at heart an effort to understand his ideas and purposes at a crucial moment in the war” (2). Ultimately, Johnson provides three major interpretive conclusions that shift our understanding of Lincoln's greatest speech.

Johnson's first chapter covers Lincoln's decision to attend what promised to be an “interesting ceremony” in Gettysburg on November 19, 1863. The author suggests that Lincoln did not decide to attend the ceremonies until just two or three days prior, and that the first or “Washington Draft” of the Gettysburg Address was not written until the evening of November 17. This is important, Johnson contends, because, “In the national memory, Lincoln went to Gettysburg in order to give the Gettysburg Address, but Lincoln's own testimony, by words and actions, suggests otherwise” (33). Rather, Lincoln went to Gettysburg “because it would be a grand, unprecedented celebration gathering a large crowd from across the Union and some of the most eminent politicians

and orators of the day. He went because he hoped to console the living and commemorate the dead. He went because it was his duty. He went because he wanted to see the battlefield. He went because it promoted his political ideals and his own chances for reelection... But all the reasons that can be associated with Lincoln's decision revolve around his presence, not the words he might speak" (32-33). Johnson concludes that Lincoln did not initially see his speech in Gettysburg as an opportunity to redefine the war, as others have suggested.

Johnson then spends three chapters discussing what he calls the "Washington Draft," "Gettysburg Draft," and "Battlefield Draft" of the Gettysburg Address. Since the early 1900s historians have been aware of five manuscript versions of the speech in Lincoln's own hand. The last three, known as the Everett, Bancroft, and Bliss versions all can be positively identified as manuscripts Lincoln created in February and March of 1864 for charitable purposes. The first two, known as the Nicolay and Hay copies, are more mysterious. Both have been presumed to be pre-speech drafts. The traditional narrative holds that the first page of the Nicolay copy, that on a half sheet of Executive Mansion stationary (the type that can be folded to create four writing sheets, front and back), was written in Washington before Lincoln journeyed to Gettysburg, and that he added the second page on regular paper on the night of November 18 in Gettysburg. The Hay copy has long been thought to be a second draft created before the ceremony, and possibly the delivery text.

Johnson's first major contribution is to build a strong case that Lincoln carried to Gettysburg what he terms the "Washington Draft" of the speech, "a complete or nearly complete draft" written on two joined sheets of Executive Mansion stationary (64). A number of eyewitnesses noted that Lincoln retired to his room in Gettysburg on the night of November 18 for around an hour to work on that draft, and Johnson suggests that during this time Lincoln likely made some slight revisions to the second page. As a consequence of these revisions Johnson refers to the new version as the "Gettysburg Draft." Early next morning Lincoln toured the battlegrounds near the Lutheran Theological Seminary and, Johnson contends, the site of John Reynolds' mortal wounding. Touring the battlefield was for Lincoln, as it has been for so many visitors since, a sobering and moving experience, one that Johnson argues "altered his vision and inspired him to revisit the speech." Returning to his room at the David Wills house, Lincoln then revised the speech again, resulting in what Johnson dubs the "Battlefield Draft." Lincoln separated and discarded the second page from the Executive Mansion stationary he had brought with him and rewrote the second

half of the speech. He edited the final line on the first page, crossing out “to stand here” and adding the more forceful and forward-thinking “here be dedicated to” (161). Part of Johnson’s evidence for this late change comes from an 1864 conversation between Lincoln and James Speed, his attorney general, when Lincoln noted that he had “concluded [the Address] so shortly before it was to be delivered he had not time to memorize it” (20).

Johnson cements his case for the Nicolay copy (or “Battlefield Draft,” as he calls it) as the delivery text by revealing the Hay copy as a post-delivery creation. On January 30, 1864, Edward Everett, the man who had delivered the featured oration during the ceremonies, wrote asking Lincoln for a copy of the Gettysburg Address to be put with his delivery text and together auctioned off for charity. Johnson argues, “The deficiencies in the different versions of his speech led Lincoln, when responding to Everett’s request, to create a new version that intentionally combined words and phrases from both his manuscript delivery text and from the printed reports of his spoken words (perhaps influenced by what he recalled saying) along with a few new phrases and words that he almost certainly did not say” (212). The Hay version was a rough draft that Lincoln used to create the Everett copy, and likely the two final copies known as the Bancroft and Bliss copies as well. Johnson offers strong and convincing evidence for this conclusion.

In a few cases Johnson asks the reader to take one too many leaps as he seeks to support his case. In one particular account by Robert Chilton, Johnson seeks to use the parts of the story that support his argument while explaining away the rest, noting, “Thirteen years had introduced errors into Chilton’s memory, but if this scene is transposed to the night of the eighteenth, it corresponds closely to Wills’ later signed statement, aside from Lincoln being ‘partially dressed’... Chilton’s story, including the detail of Lincoln’s talking about ‘what I have been scribbling for a speech to-day,’ is undoubtedly an imperfect memory of an authentic conversation with Wills” (108). Johnson’s conclusion that a battlefield visit transformed Lincoln is largely based on the emotion he believes Lincoln would have felt in seeing the spot where John Reynolds was killed. A reasonable thought, but the argument Johnson builds to suggest that Lincoln visited that site rests upon a house of cards – albeit one that just might hold up. Perhaps most curious, while admitting that the original second page of the speech has never been found and thus not seen by historians, Johnson argues early on that the structure of that page would have been similar to the second page as actually delivered, and would have differed mainly in

“phrasing and cadence” (62). Johnson later asserts that Lincoln added the “new birth of freedom” line after the battlefield visit, something for which there is no tangible evidence. In concluding Johnson asserts “this was not a speech Lincoln set out to write,” and in some senses he is no doubt correct (239). Johnson has shown a clear evolution in Lincoln’s thinking about the speech and the impact of the visit to Gettysburg on him personally. However, given that the most revolutionary part of the speech – Lincoln’s reaffirmation of the Declaration of Independence and its assertion “that all men are created equal” – came in the first line of the first draft, it seems a stretch to say that the Nicolay, or even the final Bliss version, differs philosophically from Lincoln’s first thoughts when he put pen to paper to write the Gettysburg Address.

Ultimately, this is a very good book that makes several substantial additions to what we know about the Gettysburg Address: that Lincoln left Washington with “a complete or nearly complete draft,” that an early morning battlefield visit led him to rewrite the second page with more forceful language, that what we call the Nicolay draft was the delivery manuscript, and that the Hay draft was a post-speech creation. Johnson’s prose is strong and his detective story framework keeps readers entertained. In February 2014, *Writing the Gettysburg Address* was announced as co-winner of the 2014 Lincoln Prize bestowed by Gettysburg College and the Gilder-Lerhman Institute of American History, one of the highest honors in the field. For adding something new to such a well-trod subject, and challenging almost everything we thought we knew about the construction and evolution of the first two drafts of the speech, Johnson is certainly a worthy winner.

Reviewer Jared Peatman is the author of The Long Shadow of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, a work that considers the place of the Gettysburg Address in American and international discourse from 1863 through the Cold War.