Review Essay

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In recent years, Abraham Lincoln’s speeches have become a hot topic for historians. There is no obvious reason for this, except perhaps Garry Wills’s 1992 book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Just since 2002, though, a book on Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address and two books on Lincoln’s 1860 speech at the Cooper Union in New York have hit the bookshelves. (A corollary to this trend is Allen C. Guelzo’s *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America*, which also uses a single document as a launching point.) Now Ronald C. White Jr., who weighed in on the Second Inaugural three years ago with *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech*, follows up with a study of some of Lincoln’s most notable addresses—and several lesser-known writings—from the time he was elected president through that last inaugural speech.

*Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words* begins with the significant reminder that Lincoln’s most memorable words were not crafted for a marble wall in Washington, D.C., or even for the day’s newspapers, but for a living, breathing audience of listeners. Such treasures as the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural were intended for the ear, White says, and one cannot fully appreciate them without reading them aloud or hearing them read. In this well-written book, White also argues that one cannot fully appreciate the import of any of the president’s public comments without understanding Lincoln’s growth as a speaker and a writer. White’s book, then, is ostensibly a study of the sixteenth president’s growth as a speaker by examining what he calls Lincoln’s “string of pearls” (a lovely phrase that White unfortunately overuses): a series of speeches and writings, some of which are familiar to a lay audience and some, such as Lincoln’s “Meditation on the Divine Will,” whose existence is less well known. White argues that, for Lincoln, words were ac-
tion, which is why his speeches are worth studying. Perhaps. But what makes this book important is its deep and thoughtful analysis of Lincoln’s development as a thinker.

_The Eloquent President_ opens just before Lincoln assumes office, with his farewell address to the people of Springfield, Illinois. This speech, delivered off the back of the train taking the president-elect to Washington, was unusual for Lincoln in that it was entirely extemporaneous and, perhaps because of that, was unusually emotional. Lincoln was fundamentally a rationalist, and he was known to keep his feelings to himself. In this speech, though, he bared himself to the townspeople who had known him for a quarter century and who had witnessed the arc of his career and his adult life. White, whose close reading of these texts is most impressive, points out, though, that this speech reflects a man whose speaking powers have not yet reached full flower. Lincoln is far wordier, for instance, than he would be in later speeches. As readers, we get a nice sense in this early chapter of some of White’s own delightful attention to detail. Who knew that Lincoln’s preferred writing instrument was the Faber pencil?

Lincoln’s first major address as president was his inauguration speech. Unlike later speeches, this one was an argument. Lincoln the lawyer was trying the case of the Union while telling Confederates that if war were to come, it would come at their initiative. This speech is telling, White points out, in a couple of ways. First, Lincoln consulted others, especially Secretary of State William Seward, on the speech. Seward made several suggestions that Lincoln incorporated into the address, though in much more graceful language than Seward had offered. Second, some of Lincoln’s trademark habits emerge here, including his use of alliteration and opposites (“in your hands . . . and not in mine”).

Lincoln’s speeches early in his term of office serve to underscore his spectacular personal and intellectual growth while in office. This trend begins to emerge about halfway through the book, when White discusses Lincoln’s August 1862 letter to New York editor Horace Greeley, who had published a plea for emancipation under the heading “The Prayer of Twenty Millions.” Clearly, this was not a speech. White argues for this letter’s inclusion because of nineteenth-century Americans’ habit of reading aloud to one another. For that reason, he argues, Lincoln’s letter was written for the ear, not for the eye, and therefore meets the rubric for a book on Lincoln’s eloquence. It is at this point, though, that the book subtly shifts subject, with Lincoln’s ability to marshal words to his purposes taking a backseat to his intellectual development. From this chapter on, while the book continues
to examine Lincoln’s writings, it deals much more fundamentally with how Lincoln’s thinking is changing on a range of issues, from slavery to God.

In the letter to Greeley, White says in chapter 12, Lincoln performs a brilliant sleight of hand on the subject of slavery and emancipation. If he could save the Union with slavery, he said, he would do it. If he could save the Union by freeing all the slaves, he would do that. If he could save the nation by freeing some and leaving others enslaved, he would do that, too. Lincoln’s main message, clearly, was that he would save the Union at any cost. For more than a year, Lincoln had done nothing to free the slaves. This did not mean that he endorsed slavery in any way. In 1864 he wrote to a Kentucky editor that he had always thought “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.” The problem was that the Constitution, as he understood it, did not allow him to abolish slavery where it already existed (260).

From the time the war broke out, Lincoln believed that if he did not employ hard-war tactics, Southern Unionists would emerge in force, renounce the Confederate government, and return their states to the Union. Like many in the North, Lincoln had far overestimated Unionist sentiment in the seceded states. By the summer of 1862, he realized it was time to turn the screws on the South and to strike at its greatest military and economic resource: slaves. He justified this dramatic move by citing his powers as commander in chief. When he wrote his letter to Greeley, Lincoln already had drafted the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. This was not known beyond the confines of his cabinet while he waited for a military victory to issue it. This letter was certainly dissembling to some degree—he would not touch slavery if he thought it would save the Union, he wrote, even as the proclamation sat in his desk drawer—but the note also proved to be an opportunity to gauge and prepare Northern opinion about emancipation. Greeley realized this later and admitted that his Tribune had been used “to feel the public pulse” while making him look like an “officious meddler” in state affairs (151). Lincoln continued to stay just ahead of public opinion on racial issues when he allowed blacks to join the Union army. He even chided white opponents of this policy a year later, saying: “You say you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you . . . (190).”

About the same time he wrote the letter to Greeley, Lincoln was thinking a great deal about God. He and Mary had lost their favorite son, Willie, in February 1862; Northern armies were losing losing losing all that summer; thousands of men were dead because the South had seceded because Lincoln had been elected. Lincoln was trying to
make sense of his world when he wrote a fragment later dubbed the “Meditation on the Divine Will.” This was not discovered until after his death, but its logic infused many of Lincoln’s subsequent writings. In this exercise, Lincoln wrote that God might be for the Union or the Confederacy—many on each side claimed he was with them—but he could not be for both, and he may not be for either. In fact, it was “quite possible” that God intended something different than either party expected. Lincoln concluded that God could have saved or destroyed the Union without war, yet the war came (158). Clearly, then, God wanted this war; the fact that it was not over showed that God did not think the time had yet come to end it. This understanding—that God, not he, would determine when and how the war ended—was a crucial moment in what White calls Lincoln’s “journey from fatalism to providence,” a passage that would culminate in the majestic Second Inaugural Address (161).

That the central themes of the Meditation appear in the Second Inaugural are not surprising, given Lincoln’s predilection for recycling ideas and sometimes even phrases, White points out. He tended to write his speeches with earlier addresses, notes, or spontaneous comments stacked beside him. “Lincoln,” White says, “never started out to write a speech from scratch” (235). Thus, the “eighty odd years” since the Declaration of Independence that Lincoln alluded to in July 1863 turned into “four score and seven years ago” in the Gettysburg address, delivered four months later.

By this time, Lincoln had reached his “maturity,” as White calls it, as a writer. No longer did he have Seward read his speeches with an editor’s eye. Seward may have read the Gettysburg Address, but there is no evidence that his contributed anything toward it. In fact, Seward said he had not: “No one but Abraham Lincoln could have made that address,” he said (259).

One could say that about most of Lincoln’s writings, even those before he realized his full powers. Suffused with the rhythms of Shakespeare and the Bible, yet often expressed in the most common vernacular (Lincoln tended to prefer shorter Saxon words to longer Latinate ones, White notes), Lincoln’s writings always reflected a rigorous and powerful mind. As president, though, Lincoln was able to harness his gifts in previously unrealized ways. The culmination of his oratorical powers allowed him to connect better with his audiences, not just through logic and persuasion, but also by allowing Americans of all generations to see the depth of his character and his development as both a president and a human being.