Review Essay

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Historians seem to be fairly obsessed lately with Lincoln’s words and speeches. A steady outpouring of books over the past four years has focused on famous Lincoln speeches: Ronald C. White Jr., *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (2002); Harold Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President* (2004); and John Channing Briggs, *Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered* (2005). Although Douglas L. Wilson’s most recent book, *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (2006), does not focus exclusively on any single Lincoln speech, he has a great deal to say about the sixteenth president’s rhetoric and oratory. Now, Gabor Boritt has entered the stream with his own contribution on the Gettysburg Address. Most authors who write about a single Lincoln speech try to make the case that their Lincoln speech is surely the most important. Boritt avoids contending with the competition by claiming that Lincoln’s most famous speech, if not the most significant, is at least the one “that nobody knows.”

It is an odd thing to say about the Gettysburg Address, if only because of the fairly endless attention the speech has received since Lincoln delivered it at the dedication of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on November 19, 1863. In the fifth grade, back in the 1950s, my classmates and I were required to memorize it and recite it. So, too, have other generations of American schoolchildren. Indeed, some of my own current students—cutting-edge members of the iPod generation—report that they, too, learned the speech in elementary school. By any measure, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is America’s most famous speech. That fame was underscored only fifteen years ago when Garry Wills’s *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* was published to rave reviews, landed on bestseller lists, and earned a Pulitzer Prize. So, on the surface, it would seem that Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is the one speech everybody knows.

Why, then, does Boritt believe that nobody knows it? He makes
the case that the Gettysburg Address was at first forgotten, in part
because it was delivered in the shadow of Lincoln’s Thanksgiving
Day Proclamation of October 3, 1863, which was widely read and
celebrated (although Secretary of State William H. Seward actually
wrote it). Boritt also argues that the Gettysburg Address did not gain
great popularity until the nation’s centennial year, 1876. Apparently
his point is that in the intervening years between 1863 and 1876, Lin-
coln’s address became the speech nobody knew. However, Boritt’s
own account of those thirteen years suggests just the opposite, al-
though he does effectively show that the speech had no great popular-
ity after it was delivered or even in the wake of Lincoln’s martyrdom.
In Boritt’s estimation, the Emancipation Proclamation was celebrated
more widely than the Gettysburg Address after the assassination.
“People,” he writes, “elevated the greatest of their [Civil War] dead
[i.e., Lincoln] to sainthood and made his Emancipation Proclamation
into a hallowed document” (176).
Boritt begins the book by examining the devastation caused by the
battle and the response of Gettysburg citizens to what he repeatedly
calls “the greatest man-made disaster in American history” (3, 9, 19).
In detail, he describes the process—both political and physical—that
led to the establishment of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery. He fol-
lows Lincoln on the train from Washington to Gettysburg and lays
to rest a myth, long ago shattered by other historians, that Lincoln
wrote the Address on the back of an envelope while riding the rails to
Pennsylvania. After describing the immense crowds that gathered in
the small farm community for the cemetery’s dedication and giving
a very long summary of Edward Everett’s speech at the dedication,
which preceded Lincoln’s, Boritt gets down to considering the Get-
tysburg Address itself. Much of his interest is focused on the event
of the cemetery dedication and how it unfolded. His final chapter consid-
ers how the Gettysburg Address rose in popularity in America and
around the world. Lengthy appendices include the text of Everett’s
speech in full, the program of the dedication ceremony, facsimiles of
the five versions of the Address in Lincoln’s hand, an examination
of the textual differences found in various versions of the Address,
and the fate of the five autograph versions as they made their way
through the marketplace and into repositories.
One of Boritt’s main arguments—which is intended to challenge
directly a point now generally accepted by Lincoln scholars but made
most forcefully by Garry Wills—is that Lincoln had little time to com-
pose the Gettysburg Address with any great care or purposiveness.
Boritt says that Wills is wrong in maintaining that Lincoln spent con-
siderable time on the speech and wrote it entirely in Washington before leaving for the cemetery dedication. Wills’s error, says Boritt, was in failing to distance himself properly from Lincoln and thus assuming that Lincoln treated the Address as the masterpiece it would become. Boritt contends that Lincoln was far too busy to spend much time on the speech beforehand and relies on testimony from John Nicolay (one of Lincoln’s secretaries), David Wills (the Gettysburg attorney who invited Lincoln to the dedication), and James Speed (who later became Lincoln’s attorney general) to prove that Lincoln’s remarks were “rapidly written” (155). Yet Boritt is willing to concede that the conflicting evidence, or the lack of it, leaves us knowing less than we would like to know about the composition of the Address. With candor, he asks, “Did Lincoln work on his remarks after he returned to his room [in Gettysburg, on the evening of November 18]? Indeed, when did he write his speech?” Then, even more candidly, he answers, “We do not know” (80).

Boritt’s greatest effort, though, is aimed at demolishing Garry Wills’s argument that the Gettysburg Address “remade” America by cleansing the Constitution of its silent sanction of slavery and elevating the idea of equality, as contained in the Declaration of Independence, to become a new American commitment. Boritt says that Wills grants the Gettysburg Address “miraculous powers” by asserting that its words remade America. “The words did not do that,” Boritt avers. “How could a speech do that, especially one that was not heard distinctly in his [Lincoln’s] own day?” (200). Boritt regards Wills’s interpretation as promoting a myth about the Address that “many would believe” by the end of the twentieth century (90). It is Wills’s argument that seems to have convinced Boritt that the Gettysburg Address is a gospel nobody knows.

Why is the Gettysburg Address a gospel? Like previous historians, Boritt examines the significance of Lincoln’s use of religious imagery in the Gettysburg Address and explains that his own use of the word gospel “suggests spiritual rebirth” (3). But he also concludes that Lincoln’s “words pointing to rebirth went even deeper than the Christian message, if that was possible, reaching the primeval longing for a new birth that humankind has yearned for and celebrated with every spring since time immemorial” (120). Boritt sees the Gettysburg Address as gospel in the sense that the speech took on qualities of a “sacred text” a generation after Lincoln delivered it. Later, like the Biblical gospels, that text would be collated by scholars to determine what Lincoln actually said at Gettysburg as opposed to the versions he copied out afterward for charity and friends. “Out of the sacred space [the Get-
The battle of Gettysburg] the sacred text would grow,” writes Boritt (161). Lincoln’s desire, he says, was not to make the Battle of Gettysburg “the central event of the war, although most probably understood him that way” (129). It was Everett’s speech that “made people see the battle as the decisive moment of the Civil War” (160). Because Lincoln “did not share the vision of Gettysburg’s central significance, it was ironic that the president’s words, too, however modestly, would support that perception simply by being associated with the battle” (160).

Boritt suggests that the speech did not become sacred text until perhaps 1876, or more likely 1894 (when John Nicolay published an article about the Address in *Century Magazine*), and at least not until the end of the nineteenth century. “People have strived to establish definitive texts since the beginning of sacred scripture. The Gettysburg Address [by 1900] was on its way to becoming that.” He does not believe that Lincoln’s speech contained a message of “good news” for the Union when it was delivered. The speech, he says, “rose to be American Gospel, the Good News, for it was not that at birth” (3). He examines the sanctification of the Address in his final and strongest chapter. As Boritt explains, whatever Lincoln had meant for the speech to accomplish—eulogy or elegy—the speech took on its own meaning throughout the modern era, reflecting the changing concerns of Americans as they marched out of centennial celebrations into a future of industrial might, imperial expansion, and global conflict and commerce. Boritt shows how the speech went unheralded in popular histories and prints, slipping almost entirely from view in the years immediately after the war and Lincoln’s assassination.

Because, Boritt argues, reconciliation between the North and South changed the meaning of the war—cleansing the nation of its sins as it achieved reunion—so, too, was it necessary for the Gettysburg Address “to be cleansed to become a sacred document” (187). Eventually that cleansing belied that Lincoln had only been speaking of Union soldiers when he referred to those who had given their “last full measure of devotion” at Gettysburg. In time, especially throughout the twentieth century, Americans came to believe that Lincoln surely must have been speaking of fallen Union and Confederate soldiers, since soldiers on both sides had given their lives equally for causes they deemed just. Citing numerous examples, Boritt shows how the Gettysburg Address was used to promote patriotism in two world wars and in the cold war. “Myth, symbol, reality—the Gettysburg Gospel is all that,” says Boritt (201–202). “If the power of the words shines brightly, the uses to which they have been put, in the United States and around the world, also continue to reverberate” (201).
Boritt’s exegesis provides useful insights into the Gettysburg Address and its place in American history. But it is difficult to understand why he settled on the book’s subtitle (borrowed from one of his earlier works, *The Gettysburg Nobody Knows* [1997], the title of which was borrowed in turn from Richard N. Current’s *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* [1958]). “Since long years of research on the subject made clear that a great deal about Lincoln’s speech was unknown not only to the literate public but also to scholars,” he writes, “the subtitle offered itself.” He further explains that he was under pressure from his publisher to come up with something “that would catch the eye” (401). The subtitle succeeds in doing just that, but the book proves exactly the opposite of what the subtitle asserts. Boritt’s final chapter—the best chapter in the book—shows how extensively Americans and foreigners alike have gained an intimate knowledge of Lincoln’s speech and have readily applied its broad meanings to their own times and places.

Other shortcomings make this book less than it might have been. Boritt writes with a rather freewheeling style that includes a great many digressions and often ignores chronology. Occasionally he loses sight of his subject entirely, as he does when he recounts how Company K—soldiers from Gettysburg—fought on Little Round Top, or when he reprints in full the lyrics of songs such as “When This Cruel War is Over” and “John Brown’s Body,” or when he quotes at length a speech given by Governor Richard Yates of Illinois about the Battle of Gettysburg, or even when he quotes in full Lincoln’s Springfield farewell address, delivered three years before the speech at Gettysburg. He also places too much emphasis on the argument that Lincoln wrote his Gettysburg speech in haste (although on page 92, he concedes that the composition “would not have been that hasty”). Why does he regard this matter as so important? Perhaps he believes that if Lincoln wrote the speech rapidly, dashing off its eloquent passages on the fly over a period of thirty-six hours or less, it more fully reveals the president’s great genius. Boritt also seems unsure of when the Gettysburg Address did become gospel. His strongest argument points to the influence of Nicolay’s *Century* essay in 1894. Yet earlier in the book, he says that “the Gospel of Gettysburg” was born with a Cincinnati newspaperman’s report of the speech, which was published a few days after the cemetery dedication and which loosely paraphrased Lincoln’s words without getting any of them right (129). Boritt also understates Lincoln’s hopes for his speech. Despite what he maintains, Lincoln *did* intend his remarks to be good news, a ray of hope, for his fellow Northerners who had sacrificed so much and who would be forced to continue sacrificing their lives and fortunes for the sake of
the cause. Only in an aside does Boritt admit that Lincoln “went to Gettysburg, in large part, to nurture the mourners there, and his own soul” (145).

On a different score, the book could have used better editing. Typographical errors, grammatical mistakes, and poor grammatical choices abound in this book. In countless examples, Boritt uses future conditional verbs in sentences that are meant to be about the past. Such sentences in the conditional mood are not grammatically incorrect; but Boritt’s frequent use of future conditional verbs on nearly every page clouds his meaning and makes his prose sound archaic, as if the book were written in 1900. Worse still, Boritt slips from present to past tense and back again without warning. Occasionally, paragraphs that begin in the present tense end up in the past tense, with Boritt making the transition by resorting to future conditional verbs. His prose is also marred by a profusion of incomplete sentences, often consisting of single words for effect. Other grammatical and punctuation errors simply leave the reader totally confused, as in this sentence: “Significantly, there were three cabinet members on board [the train]; two of whom was closely allied with Lincoln: Secretary of State Seward and Postmaster Montgomery Blair; as well as the somewhat politically distant John P. Usher of Interior” (55).

Yet one of the shining qualities of this book, so rarely found in any works of history, is the passion that Boritt brings to his study of Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address. He is a fervent student of Lincoln. His enthusiasm, respect, and admiration for Lincoln overflow on every page. He possesses a vast knowledge of Lincoln’s life and times. In assessing Lincoln’s words at Gettysburg, he correctly perceives that the president spoke “from the heart” (58). So does Boritt in this book. Indeed, he writes about Lincoln with the same kind of emotion that he says a soldier expressed while listening to the president deliver the Gettysburg Address: “As he [Lincoln] spoke, a captain in the crowd with an empty sleeve buried his face in his good arm, shaking and sobbing aloud. Then he raised his eyes high and exclaimed in a low, solemn voice: ‘God Almighty bless Abraham Lincoln!’ The reporter, noting the faces around the soldier, thought that people responded with ‘Amen.’ And all the while the crowd applauded Lincoln again” (118). Although Boritt admonishes Garry Wills for getting too close to his subject, it is just such an intimacy, such a passionate involvement in all things Lincoln, that gives this book its great verve and sinew.