Review Essay

JAMES A. RAWLEY


A book, an entire book, on Lincoln’s Cooper Union Address! It seems hyperbolical to write a book on an address that runs but a few pages in Roy P. Basler’s *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*. But there is a book by Garry Wills on the very short Gettysburg Address, and Ronald C. White Jr. has published a book on the Second Inaugural.

Lincoln’s invitation to speak, first in Brooklyn (the site was later changed to New York City), is not issued until page 43 of Corry’s 197-page text. The first segment of the volume considers slavery in the colonial and early federal years. While Lincoln served in the Illinois legislature, he joined a colleague in a protest based on constitutional issues, moral objections, and the rejection of abolition. Congress was powerless to interfere with slavery in the states. Slavery, he said, is based on both injustice and bad policy, and abolitionists tended “to increase than to abate its evils.” Corry neglects to tell his readers that in President Polk’s pre-emptive war against Mexico, Lincoln voted many times for the Wilmot Proviso, which would have excluded slavery from any territory secured from Mexico. Here we have the stand of the Republican Party: powerless to emancipate in the states, power to emancipate in the territories. The author also neglects mention of Lincoln’s effort to end slavery in the District of Columbia and his introduction of a resolution challenging Polk to say on what “spot”—Mexico or Texas—the war began.

Slavery virtually dominated politics until the outbreak of hostilities. Lincoln in 1850 witnessed a compromise on new territories involving popular sovereignty and in 1854 a measure introduced by Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas that negated the thirty-four-year-old Missouri Compromise, which prohibited slavery in the Louisiana Purchase Territory north of 36°30’latitude.

Lincoln believed that restricting the extension of slavery would choke it; slavery must expand or die. He returned to political activ-
ity, confronting Douglas for the U.S. Senate in a series of debates that gained wide publicity. Meanwhile, the United States Supreme Court, in an inflammatory case, had ruled that blacks could not become citizens and that Congress could not prohibit slavery in the territories.

The Dred Scott decision was handed down days after President Buchanan’s inauguration, not in early 1858 as the author asserts. In his inaugural address in March 1857, Buchanan said that the Supreme Court would speedily rule on extension of slavery. An incoming president should not know what the Supreme Court would do; there had been a leak from the Court to the president-elect.

Lincoln, in a speech on August 12, 1858, said a virtual conspiracy had brought about the decision; the participants were Stephen A. Douglas, Franklin Pierce, Roger Taney, and James Buchanan. His words were: “. . . I said that though I could not open the bosoms of men and find out their secret motives, yet, when I found the framework for a barn or a bridge, or any other structure, built by a number of carpenters—Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James—and so built that each tenon had its proper mortice, and the whole forming a symmetrical piece of workmanship, I should say that these carpenters all worked on an intelligent plan, and understood each other from the beginning.”

Lincoln’s skill as an orator—showcased in debates with Douglas, a possible Democratic nominee for president—contributed to his receiving an invitation to speak in New York. Here we approach the heart of the book. Corry does this very well and justifies his work.

Discussion of the speech begins on page 98. In treating the text, Corry quotes a paragraph or so, then offers comments on it. The comments may be his own, or from a variety of others including political leaders and Lincoln specialists. This context enriches the reader’s understanding and stimulates thought.

In preparing his speech, Lincoln had carefully examined congressional speeches and votes published in the *Annals of Congress* and the *Congressional Globe*. “Does . . . anything in the Constitution forbid our Federal Government to control as to slavery in our Federal Territories?” From those sources he concluded there was constitutional support for the concept that the federal government could control slavery in the territories. This conclusion directly contradicted Chief Justice Taney’s Supreme Court ruling that prohibited congressional legislation banning slavery in the territories and contradicted Stephen Douglas’s contention that people in the territories held the right to decide under popular sovereignty. Lincoln and the Republican Party were following the founding fathers.
Lincoln continued by taking up the Southern allegation that Republicans “stir up insurrection among your slaves.” He responded, “John Brown was no Republican.” Cleverly he went on to point out that the largest slave insurrection in the nation’s history had been led by a black man, Nat Turner, in Virginia in 1831. The Deep South was threatening secession. Lincoln responded: “Your purpose then, plainly stated, is that you will destroy the government,” etc.

Corry’s analysis of Lincoln’s address is very good. It is done in sections with comments, and it often references or compares to other statements made by Lincoln and others.

Nonetheless, it is flawed, possessing errors, omissions, and misspellings. In addition to the incorrect date for the Dred Scott decision and the assertion that Seward, born in 1801, was eleven years older than Lincoln, born in 1809, he says Buchanan and Cameron served as ambassadors. The United States did not have ambassadors until 1893.

The names of eminent historians are misspelled. Carl Sandburg’s surname is not spelled with an e; Robert Remini is not Rimini; Reinhard Luthin is not Lutkin.

Though flawed in these ways, the central part of the book is worth reading.