Review

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This engaging book presents intelligently chosen examples of Lincoln’s main speeches and writings, each of which is followed by an interpretive essay. Lowenthal, a professor emeritus of political science at Boston College, is the author of Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History (Free Press, 1996) and The Past Is a Foreign Country (Cambridge, 1985), both of which in different ways reveal the power of the past, but here he eschews a historical approach. Because Lincoln guarded his inner thoughts carefully, “the interpreter of Lincoln is on his own,” Lowenthal argues; “he must do his best with the facts of his speeches as they lie before him.” Those “facts” are almost entirely the words of the speeches, not their circumstances. “Follow the words of the speeches, their implications and internal logic, above all else!” we are enjoined (5). This approach attests to Lowenthal’s Straussian sensibilities, which he telegraphs by early and earnest praise for Henry V. Jaffa’s Crisis in the House Divided (Doubleday, 1959) (5).

Because interpretive sections follow the writing in question, and because Lowenthal’s comments are relatively brief, the book does not so much construct a sustained thesis as present a series of discrete essays. Perhaps the main theme is that Lincoln was an adept practitioner of the “politics of self-restraint,” meaning that he often had to express himself on issues “where frank speech was not prudently possible and where much greater harm than good would have come from it” (4). This restrained politician is actually revolutionary, or at least disruptive, for he challenges “dearly held beliefs” all the while preserving “a conventional surface” (3).

Lowenthal divides the twenty Lincoln texts reprinted here into three parts, “The Early Speeches” to 1852, “Pre–Civil War Speeches” to 1860, and “Civil War Speeches.” This chronological organization might suggest development or evolution, but the essay devoted to each writing dwells not on connections among texts but on the inner
logic of the work in question. The texts are taken as fixed, with no consideration of early drafts or of the composition process. Occasionally, one interpretive essay will refer to other Lincoln writings, but there is relatively little sustained attempt to illuminate one text by the light of another. There is no general conclusion.

Lowenthal’s main interest is on Lincoln’s early years. The “Perpetuation Address” of 1838 receives about fourteen pages of interpretation, while the eight Civil War speeches together receive about twenty-two pages. The “House Divided” speech of 1858 elicits a two-page essay, as does the 1863 letter to Conkling. As the author admits, some of the essays tend toward summary (5). The selections lean heavily to the political, especially in the last two sections, as is perhaps appropriate, but it is illustrative that some of the more self-revelatory writings such as the Springfield Farewell are not included. Lowenthal here is above all interested in Lincoln’s mind, not in his personality or life.

An example can give a sense of the interesting possibilities offered by Lowenthal’s approach. When considering Lincoln’s “Temperance Address” of 1842, Lowenthal notes that “Lincoln writes his speech in such a way as apparently to praise the temperance revolution while, deeper down, criticizing it” (48), an example of the “conventional surface” covering Lincoln’s heterodoxy. When Lincoln states that the temperance revolution is in some ways even greater than the political revolution of 1776, he is being disingenuous. When Lincoln welcomes the reign of reason and mind over appetite and intemperance, he is being ironic. “Why engage in such rank (though well-concealed) hypocrisy?” Apparently to covertly show that freedom would be compromised by eradicating alcohol, while bowing to the popularity of a potentially “dangerous” movement (48).

It is useful and refreshing to engage with single texts, but perhaps more sustained attention to these writings, and to the larger themes that link them, might have been even more fruitful. Allen Guelzo’s Lincoln as a Man of Ideas (Southern Illinois University Press, 2009) and Douglas Wilson’s Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words (Knopf, 2006) provide alternate paths to understanding Lincoln’s mind. It is perhaps our loss that Lowenthal chose instead to adopt an episodic, pointillistic approach to the mind of a man who was a deeply historically oriented thinker, always looking backward as a first step forward. But as Lowenthal aptly notes, Lincoln “had this rare ability to join inflexible principles to the needs of particular cases” (285), and these sketches are well adapted to bring out this element in our most admired philosopher statesman.