A More Perfect Tribute

KENT GRAMM

Battlefield guides at Gettysburg will tell you that once in a while a tourist will ask, “How did the soldiers fight, with all these monuments in the way?” Or, “Which one is Bunker Hill?” But there is one thing nearly all Americans seem to know about American history—one absolute, incontrovertible, virtually self-evident fact: Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope while on the train to Gettysburg.

Mrs. Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews produced that fact in a little book called *The Perfect Tribute,* which in the century since its infliction upon the world has been made several times over into movies and television specials. I have devoted twenty years to teaching students that writing demands careful thought and planning; that divine inspiration in writing ought not be limited to last-minute composition; that it is irresponsible to wait until the night before an essay is due and then dash it off. But although Mrs. Andrews has from beyond the grave encouraged miscreants to conceive their divinely appointed creations only hours before turning them in to me—and although in this respect that woman has transmogrified one of America’s most responsible and careful thinkers into your average member of Sigma Delta Tau—I bear her no ill will. I’d send her a fan if I could.

After all, she simply expressed the common notion that in order to write an inspired utterance, one waits for a single, brief flash of inspiration; and that bizarre circumstances certify the fact of inspiration. She expressed a mythological picture of Lincoln that has more power than does fact. But she sentimentalized him and made him all candy and no grit, all sweetness but no light; she has eviscerated humility by presenting it as insecurity, and has domesticated compassion, courage, and conviction by reducing them to kindness. And she called her book “The Perfect Tribute.”

But she did one good thing: she cured Lincoln’s flu. Already on November 19, the day of the address, the president was showing

2. Ibid., 2–6.
the fatigue and headache of varioloid, which incapacitated him until November 30. But in The Perfect Tribute the legendary president is not only perfectly well, but upon returning to Washington, he spends a good part of November 20 on a long ramble around Washington, on foot, and completely alone. This six-foot-four-inch man, in black suit and top hat, meets a young Confederate who knows all about President Lincoln but doesn’t put things together even when the man in black says he was a lawyer and his name is Lincoln. Truly, this is a book of miracles.

But let us not anticipate. We should go back to the first criminality Andrews commits, the scene on the train to Gettysburg, November 18, 1863. Grasp your handkerchiefs: here is a passage from The Perfect Tribute. This is certainly a case of read it and weep:

. . . He glanced across the car. Edward Everett sat there, the orator of the following day, the finished gentleman, the careful student, the heir of traditions of learning and breeding, of scholarly instincts and resources. The self-made President gazed at him wistfully. From him the people might expect and would get a balanced and polished oration. For that end he had been born, and inheritance and opportunity and inclination had worked together for that end’s perfection. While Lincoln had wrested from a scanty schooling a command of English clear and forcible always, but, he feared, rough-hewn, lacking, he feared, in finish and in breadth—of what use was it for such a one to try to fashion a speech fit to take a place by the side of Everett’s silver sentences? He sighed. Yet the people had a right to the best he could give, and he would give them his best; at least he could see to it that the words were real and were short; at least he would not, so, exhaust their patience. And the work might as well be done now in the leisure of the journey. He put a hand, big, powerful, labor-knotted, into first one sagging pocket and then another, in search of a pencil, and drew out one broken across the end. He glanced about enquiringly—there was nothing to write upon. Across the car the Secretary of State had just opened a package of books and their wrapping of brown paper lay on the floor, torn carelessly in a zig-zag. The President stretched a long arm.

‘Mr. Seward, may I have this to do a little writing?’ he asked, and the Secretary protested, insisting on finding better material.

But Lincoln, with few words, had his way, and soon the untidy stump of a pencil was at work and the great head, the
deep-lined face, bent over Seward’s bit of brown paper, the whole man absorbed in his task.²

As Frank Klement wrote, the claim that President Lincoln “went to Gettysburg unprepared, is “slanderous.”³ It is also ludicrous, but Andrews had plenty of company in that department. Rumors of Lincoln writing the address hastily must have circulated shortly after the event, for only three years later, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote that the president had composed the address in only a few moments. She had been nowhere near the president, of course—unless Boston would be considered near. More interesting is Andrew Carnegie’s story. The future plutocrat said that it was he who had given Lincoln the broken pencil with which the president had scribbled the address—on the train, of course. But Carnegie would have needed arms longer than Lincoln’s to have done this, as the entrepreneur was in Pittsburgh at the time.⁴ Andrews was not interested in Harriet Beecher Stowe or Andrew Carnegie. Edward Everett was her man, and she hoisted him bodily onto the presidential train with admirable dexterity. In fact, Everett was already in Gettysburg; he greeted the presidential party upon their arrival at the Gettysburg station.⁵

Perhaps Mr. Lincoln had written some sort of memo on the train, giving rise to the rumors? Not according to presidential secretary John Nicolay, who wrote that his boss made no notes, did no writing at all on the way to Gettysburg. Unlike Stowe, Carnegie, and Everett, Nicolay actually was on the train with the president.⁶

The address was written and ready, except for the last sentence, which Lincoln was not yet satisfied with. By the next morning the president had rewritten the ending, for Nicolay reported that the second page of the address, unlike the first, which was on White House stationary in ink, was blue paper written upon in pencil. Lincoln had added the words “under God,”—but not as an afterthought or as a sop to his audience. “Under God” not only balances the first sentence, just as the “new birth” takes up again the birth theme of the first paragraph; “under God” is the assumption upon which the whole speech rests. For all men to have been created equal, there must be a Creator.

³ Frank L. Klement, The Gettysburg Soldiers’ Cemetery and Lincoln’s Address: Aspects and Angles (Shippensburg, Penn.: White Mane Publishing Co., 1993), 89.
⁴ Ibid., 86.
⁵ Ibid., 75.
⁶ Ibid., 87.
⁷ Ibid., 87.
At any rate, the alteration written in the Wills house in Gettysburg completed the speech, and now the president anticipated countless schoolchildren by being the first to memorize the Gettysburg Address. On the speakers’ platform at the Soldiers’ National Cemetery, the president held the two sheets of paper in his left hand while speaking, but he did not refer to them. He was relaxed and spoke confidently, with a deeper voice than was usual as he began speeches. He used no gestures. According to witnesses, there was a deep, strong empathy between the president, wearing a black mourning band for his son, and the listeners, many of whom were also dressed in the black of mourning. Everett’s speech seemed coldly professional, but the president understood and felt the tragedy weighing upon the people’s hearts, and they knew it. The president was interrupted by applause five times, and the end of the brief address was met by “tremendous applause” or “a hurricane of applause.” As he returned to his chair, the grateful crowd supplied “three cheers for the President.”

Now let us look at Andrews’s picture of Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg Address. “...Suddenly, the voice came, in a queer, squeaking falsetto. The effect on the audience was irrepressible, ghastly... A suppressed yet unmistakable titter caught the throng, ran through it, and was gone. Yet no one who knew the President’s face could doubt that he had heard it and had understood. Calmly enough, after a pause almost too slight to be recognized, he went on, and in a dozen words his tones had gathered volume, he had come to his power and dignity. There was no smile now on any face of those who listened. People stopped breathing rather, as if they feared to miss an inflection.” Andrews then quotes the president’s speech in its entirety. Then this follows:

There was no sound from the silent, vast assembly.... Not a hand was lifted in applause. Slowly the big, awkward man slouched back across the platform and sank into his seat, and yet there was no sound of approval, of recognition from the audience; only a long sigh ran like a ripple on an ocean through rank after rank. In Lincoln’s heart a throb of pain answered it. His speech had been, as he feared it would be, a failure.

When the ceremonies were over Everett at once found the

8. Ibid., 88.
10. Ibid., 16–18.
President. ‘Mr. President,’ he began, ‘your speech—’ but Lincoln had interrupted, flashing a kindly smile down at him, laying a hand on his shoulder.

‘We’ll manage not to talk about my speech, Mr. Everett,’ he said. ‘This isn’t the first time I’ve felt that my dignity ought not to permit me to be a public speaker.’

Quite contrary to Andrews’s portrayal, Abraham Lincoln was the most effective public speaker in America, and with all due modesty and without conceit, he probably knew it. He had become accustomed to success, not failure, in public speaking. His court trials, his political stump speeches, the debates against Stephen A. Douglas, and the crucial Cooper Union speech had been essential steps in his progress to the presidency. But Andrews’s Lincoln is a defeated, sad man who must have wondered who in tarnation had elected him president and why.

Still in a funk the next day back in Washington—and not sick in bed—Andrews’s Lincoln putters around most of the day, and then goes out for a walk—all by himself—at four in the afternoon. President Lincoln, historian Richard Current has written, could not pass in the street without people taking notice because “he made such an impression.” But perhaps Andrews’s Lincoln simply blended in with all the other six-foot-four chin-bearded men in black frock coats milling around Washington that afternoon. One may search with the diligence of Herod in The Perfect Tribute for any mention of the legendary stovepipe hat and find none. One must conclude, therefore, that in order to make him less noticeable, Mrs. Andrews has deprived her president of a hat on that November 20th—not concerned that he must appear either insane or drunk in an era when even the church mice wore hats. And she brings her character not merely around the block but “into the outskirts of the city,” where he fetches up against a “young boy of fifteen years or so” who “tripped and stumbled against him.”

The teary-eyed boy is a haughty but likeable Southerner—the Northern picture of the South in a nutshell—whose older brother, a Confederate soldier, is dying in a nearby hospital. The boy is looking for a lawyer to draw up a will. Though the boy vilifies the president of the United States, he does not recognize Andrews’s

1958), 2, 4.
13. Ibid., 40.
Lincoln—who would?—and the tall man volunteers to draw up the will.

Now I should observe that from here on, Andrews does a fine job of presenting not the real Abraham Lincoln but the Lincoln in America’s heart: a tall, compassionate, modest man who, true enough to life, bore malice toward none and charity for all. It is possible to be affected a little by Andrews’s story, to believe whatever in the myth is somehow truth. So if I have been mean-spirited or snide about Andrews’s story, she could ask of me the question rightly put to all smug academics and critics: “Could you do any better?” That question, in fact, is the whole point.

But to finish quickly with Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews’s *The Perfect Tribute*. The story’s Lincoln enters a room where the dying Confederate lies. The young man has a certain nobility about him and reveals the unlikely confession that unlike his compatriots, he has always admired President Lincoln. His sister is secretary for a U.S. senator—unlikely to say the least in 1863—but she has told him that the senator had been at Gettysburg yesterday: “…He told my sister that the speech so went home to the hearts of all those thousands of people that when it was ended it was as if the whole audience held its breath—there was not a hand lifted to applaud. One might as well applaud the Lord’s Prayer—it would have been sacrilege. And they all felt it—down to the lowest. There was a long minute of reverent silence, no sound from all that great throng—it seems to me, an enemy, that it was the most perfect tribute that has ever been paid by any people to any orator.”

So there we have it. The “perfect tribute” was the silence of the crowd, given in awe and reverence to Abraham Lincoln—a perfect tribute that never happened.

But the question to us, one hundred and forty years later, is: Can we do better? Suppose this time ours is the address—a tribute—and Lincoln is the audience. He wouldn’t be interested in an intellectual performance, least of all a scholarly one. He said at Gettysburg that what matters is what we do. What can we do?

At Gettysburg, the president said that it is we the living who ought to be dedicated, not a cemetery—and our dedication should be to the great task remaining before us—a great task nobly advanced by the honored dead, yet remaining unfinished. The house divided must be made a more perfect union—not merely in the sense that the union of its parts should be perfected, but also and more meaningfully,
that the union, or “that nation” “conceived in liberty and dedicated
to the proposition that all men are created equal,” should become
more perfect in freedom and justice.

We cannot escape history. We will be remembered in spite of
ourselves. What account would we present to Mr. Lincoln? It is the
account that we are presenting to our posterity.

First it must be maintained that we are still the best hope of
earth. Let us not call it arrogance to say so, for much of the world
seems to agree. No other country is as desirable to emigrate to as
the United States. It was true in Abraham Lincoln’s time, and it is
still the case today. The American Dream still beckons the tired, the
poor, and those longing to be free.

However, the content of that dream is the question posed by our
audience and our posterity. The United States of America has done
very well in significant ways. After a hundred years of betrayal and
despair after President Lincoln’s Civil War, people of color are on
the law books as being political and economic equals with white
people, entitled to the same vote, the same jobs, the same housing.
That law is not yet written on our hearts to perfection, but here too
we are doing better than before: Americans as a whole think more
like Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass than like John C.
Calhoun, concerning who God created equal to whom. Today the
half of our population without the franchise during Lincoln’s time
are legally empowered to vote, work, and hold public office equally
with men. Unfortunately—as an examination of salaries, economic
status, leadership positions, and advertising will show—the equality
enjoyed by women in our country is considerably less than per-
fected. Thirdly, we have welcomed millions more people born abroad,
extending to them the legal rights, privileges, and responsibilities
of our laws and our economy. But, just as in Lincoln’s time, some
of these new people are acceptable to us and some are not.

Our progress, though real, has been slow and anything but
steady. As of the 1990s, those in the lower 40 percent of the popu-
lation financially were “worse off . . . than their counterparts” twenty
years before, and a smaller percentage of workers could count on
the security of unemployment insurance. Toward the end of the
last decade, “5 million elderly Americans had no food in their
homes . . . and one in five children lived in poverty—more than a
quarter of them homeless. All told, a larger proportion of Ameri-
cans were poor than three decades earlier.”

Anyone who is uncer-
tain as to whether poverty impairs justice and diminishes equality
can ask someone living on a reservation or in a barrio or in an inner
city. Lincoln would see some unfinished work in this country.

And once again we are at war. What would Lincoln be doing about the current state of America and the world? Academic historians tend to reject such questions as “What would Lincoln have done about September 11, 2001?” Rightly, they do not presume to say how a historical figure imperfectly known would have responded to unfamiliar circumstances. But the non-historian asks such questions all the time, making quite different use of history from what the professional makes, wishing to figure out how past events and persons might help us solve today’s problems.

The situation after September 11, 2001, was not so very different after all from what President Lincoln addressed in November 1863. And remember: Mr. Lincoln is watching. Undoubtedly he wishes to see whether we have learned anything from him. What more perfect tribute would there be than for us to learn from his example and to act upon his words?

President Lincoln conducted a war. He was dedicated to the war’s goals and worked for them to the verge of exhaustion. He approached everything from within the framework of law. The president wanted always to do what is right in a moral sense as well as a legal one. Yet his mature fear of God’s justice and mystery, together with his understanding of human nature, prevented him from believing his enemies to be more evil than himself.

Most of all, at Gettysburg, in the midst of horror and tragedy, Lincoln reminded the country of who and what we are.

Some of the foregoing commends us, and some of it is a reproach. But one thing seems sure: After September 11, Lincoln would have told us not to return to the malls but to return to our principles. He would have told us not to get back on our airplanes but to get back on the glory road to “that nation” where a person is judged not by the content of their portfolio but by the content of their character. And that must be our dream today, as it was Lincoln’s dream when he spoke at Gettysburg of a new birth of freedom for a humankind all equal under God. For the world is watching now, as it was then. That much also has not changed. We have taken comfort in our possessions and our power, rather than drawing strength from our principles.

The American Dream is not wealth but freedom; it is not pleasure
and prosperity for quite a few, but it is liberty and justice for all. And American strength comes not from chariots and horses but from the right, as God guides us to see the right. And the American Dream works for “a just, and a lasting, peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

The echoes of the Gettysburg Address have not quite died away. They are to us the last, fading presence of Abraham Lincoln, still watching the country he once inspired. To say that Lincoln is watching is to know that the world is watching, and that the generations who come after us will judge. We cannot escape history. Will we nobly save, or meanly lose, the last, best hope of humankind? Will our actions in the months and years ahead become an ever more perfected tribute, or will they be a self-proclaimed perfect tribute that never happened?