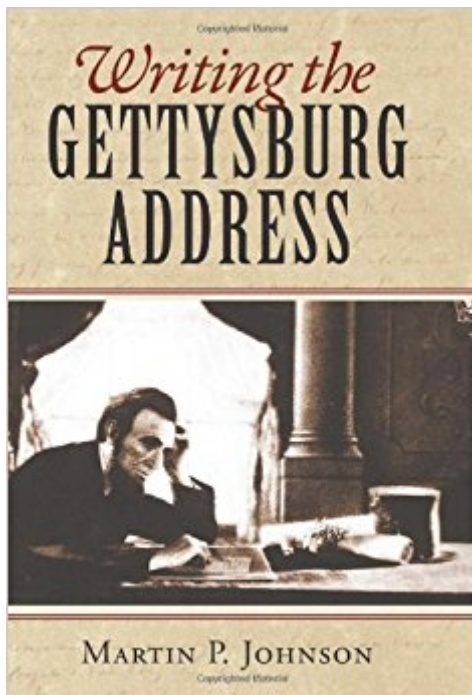


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Writing The Gettysburg Address



Synopsis

Four score and seven years ago . . . Are any six words better known, of greater import, or from a more crucial moment in our nation's history? And yet after 150 years the dramatic and surprising story of how Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address has never been fully told. Until now. Martin Johnson's remarkable work of historical and literary detection illuminates a speech, a man, and a moment in history that we thought we knew. Johnson guides readers on Lincoln's emotional and intellectual journey to the speaker's platform, revealing that Lincoln himself experienced writing the Gettysburg Address as an eventful process that was filled with the possibility of failure, but which he knew resulted finally in success beyond expectation. We listen as Lincoln talks with the cemetery designer about the ideals and aspirations behind the unprecedented cemetery project, look over Lincoln's shoulder as he rethinks and rewrites his speech on the very morning of the ceremony, and share his anxiety that he might not live up to the occasion. And then, at last, we stand with Lincoln at Gettysburg, when he created the words and image of an enduring and authentic legend. Writing the Gettysburg Address resolves the puzzles and problems that have shrouded the composition of Lincoln's most admired speech in mystery for fifteen decades. Johnson shows when Lincoln first started his speech, reveals the state of the document Lincoln brought to Gettysburg, traces the origin of the false story that Lincoln wrote his speech on the train, identifies the manuscript Lincoln held while speaking, and presents a new method for deciding what Lincoln's audience actually heard him say. Ultimately, Johnson shows that the Gettysburg Address was a speech that grew and changed with each step of Lincoln's eventful journey to the podium. His two-minute speech made the battlefield and the cemetery into landmarks of the American imagination, but it was Lincoln's own journey to Gettysburg that made the Gettysburg Address.

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Customer Reviews

"Johnson contends that the Gettysburg Address is an underappreciated and more radical signpost in Lincoln's thought than previously believed, situated as it was only weeks before his annual message to Congress in December, when Lincoln stated that emancipation would be a precondition of reunion." •Journal of Southern History"Beautifully written and closely argued, this book grips the reader much like a detective novel and teaches us how little we know about a subject we thought we knew so well." •Library Journal, starred review"A truly remarkable example of exhaustive scholarship whose findings will last generations." •Presidential Studies Quarterly"This book moves at once into the "top ten" list of Lincoln studies and offers a challenging model for all future documentary research on the writings of Lincoln." •Allen Guelzo, Journal of American History So you thought you knew everything about Lincoln's most famous three minutes? Martin Johnson has opened new windows onto a canonical moment in history, and unleashed a fresh breeze of new research and sharp analysis. This is simply one of the best books ever written about the Gettysburg Address. It will be read and appreciated by Lincoln students for years to come. Harold Holzer, Chairman, Lincoln Bicentennial Foundation With Sherlock Holmes-like ingenuity and sophistication, Johnson solves a number of mysteries surrounding the composition, delivery, and reception of the Gettysburg Address. His strikingly original conclusions rest on exhaustive research and subtle analysis. This book is a major contribution to the Lincoln literature, shedding bright light on the evolution of Lincoln's thinking about the significance of the Civil War. Michael Burlingame, author of Abraham Lincoln: A Life Through exhaustive research and detective work, Johnson provides a near hour-by-hour account of how Lincoln wrote and delivered the Gettysburg Address. The result is a masterful work of historical scholarship that erases many of the myths and mysteries that surround the speech and allows us to understand it in a new light. Louis Masur, author of Lincoln's Hundred Days: The Emancipation Proclamation and the War for the Union

Martin P. Johnson is an assistant professor of history at Miami University and is the author of two

books on European politics and several articles on Lincoln and the Civil War.

This is a masterful work. Johnson gets to the nub of why Lincoln changed the address after touring the battlefield, especially the spot where General Reynolds died. It was simply this: the emotion of the tour led him to change the address, to delete the static language about "standing" where the soldiers stood, to the strong and active verb of "dedicating" here. He also does a superb job of examining the various versions of the Address and making educated guesses on which is more accurate (yes, it is likely that Lincoln said "under God"). Lincoln also called a few audibles while delivering the address and Johnson writes with a sure hand about these as well. Worth the time.

I have read all of the usual suspects on the fascinating topic of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Yes, Garry Wills won the Pulitzer for his book, and an amazing read it is. Boritt's classic is also very well done. There are others that deserve acclaim, but for my money, Johnson's book is the definitive resource on this topic. Like a trained forensic examiner, Johnson wades through an 150 year-old accretion of myth and hearsay to find truth in the many primary sources available to scholars. He approaches his topic without bias, and although he has read all the important books on the subject, he lays them all aside to focus on tracing Lincoln's every step in the days, hours, and minutes leading up to this iconic moment. The result, in the hands of a lesser historian and writer, could be methodical and stilted; yet Johnson's book is a pleasure to read. If you want to know what really happened at Gettysburg on November 18 and 19, 1863, read this book. I only had a few minor issues with Johnson's statements about the other featured speakers, but they did not detract at all from his primary purpose. I read the hardcover version on high quality cream paper at the library and finally decided to purchase that version, after seeing the paperback version in stark white paper, which I personally do not prefer.

Martin Johnson provides the best single volume to understand the history surrounding the Gettysburg Address. This book helps one appreciate why the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address are the components of the DNA that makes the United States of America what it is. A job well done by Professor Johnson.

This is a well researched, extensively footnoted and meticulously explained story of the development, presentation and impact of Lincoln's epic speech. Unfortunately, it is not an easy read. I had to force myself to finish it.

It's my fourth read on the GA, and it's terrific. The research is off the charts, and each chapter is like being fed another course at the dinner table. I highly recommend for those who love Lincoln, the GA, or just those who like a good detective story.

Martin Johnson thoroughly covers personalities, politics and events at Gettysburg Nov. 18-19, 1863, as well as Lincoln's process of writing THE speech. And, he quells the myth that Lincoln wrote it on an envelope while on the train to Gettysburg., and addresses why there's more than one version of the speech.

Few American texts, and no other so short, have received the reverent attention spent upon the Gettysburg Address. Since Lincoln died, there has been no completely reliable eyewitness to its composition. The circumstances of its composition were unusual for Lincoln in that Nicolay and Hay, his clerks, were remote, if not removed, from the process. Hence, like a play of Shakespeare or even a New Testament text, getting right the exegesis of the Gettysburg Address promises a glimpse of the spark of genius. Indirect witness and the documentary evidence itself are the only routes in. Mr. Johnson does a very persuasive job of assembling and weighing the witnesses and there are many of them. When the Address rose to iconic status, many memoirists piled in with "I was there" recollections that more often muddied the waters and led to a variety of creation myths. Mr. Johnson I think gets it as right as possible in sorting out the wheat from the chaff. He hones in on some immediate points of context that I think are irrefutable and enlightening. He brings the event down to earth. These are 1) that Lincoln was for long quite undecided about going to Gettysburg at all 2) the event organizers were undecided and even ambivalent about inviting him, 3) the event organizers, when they finally chose to invite him, were very exact in hoping to keep his role in the event limited and tightly prescribed. It's quite possible they expected him to do little more than, as it were, bang the newly launched ship of the cemetery with a bottle of campaign. The more reliable memoirists were also witnesses to texts, that is, documentary evidence, we have. Johnson traces convincingly the evolution of the texts through three stages, a Washington draft, a Night before revision, and then a final Day-of-the-Address, or Battlefield version which became the delivered text. Whether all this precision is accurate or needed I can't decide. What does strike me is that the Washington draft likely embodied 95% of what Lincoln set out to say, and that the revisions reflected an effort to get the linguistic architecture of the Washington draft exactly right. In doing so, he turned the instructions of the Cemetery Committee on its head: he did not dedicate the cemetery;

he elected language that used the cemetery to dedicate the nation. This was a bold bit of impertinence . . . and political theater that he pulled off with such success that it will always be remembered as a triumph of political rhetoric.

A good book for those with an intense interest in knowing more about the several drafts and reported versions of the Gettysburg Address and how they relate to one another. Professor Johnson dispels a number of myths about that famous day and anchors the actual speech given by President Lincoln to his visit to the battleground of Gettysburg and his political vision for the nation to have a "new birth of freedom." A first time reader about this subject will likely be overwhelmed with some of the detailed explanations given by a very thorough academic scholar. The footnotes to the text are quite good.

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