

Lincoln's Masterful Pen

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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The co-winner of the 24th Lincoln Prize, Professor Martin Johnson, has written a masterpiece of modern scholarship. Clearly written and rigorously argued, his book, "Writing the Gettysburg Address," is a compelling story, too. The narrative is easily accessible to a vast readership interested in Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address. The author's fidelity to the evidence makes his case irresistible. It is bold and original, not least because of his rejection of certain reigning conceits of past academic and popular writing on the peerless eulogy of our fallen soldier-boys.

As one reads this book on the Gettysburg Address, one hardly knows which of the author's purposes to emphasize. His stark departures from conventional, academic opinion arrest your attention at once. What is his story line? Let the author speak for himself (I quote him):

"Lincoln's journey to Gettysburg is encoded in the manuscripts and words of his speech, and reflected in the texts of his revisions. Through these documents, we can trace, word-by-word, the arc of his thought. Lincoln's own words reveal that he experienced (the) writing (of) the Gettysburg Address as an eventful process, . . . fraught with the possibility of failure, but that he knew, finally, . . . success beyond expectation."

From the pages of this book we learn that Mr. Lincoln at Gettysburg was not only morally inspired, but that the 16th president was also a keen tactician in the subtle uses of the English language. Indeed, he was its profound master. For example, with about 270 fitting words at Gettysburg, he committed his countrymen, forever, to the restoration of the central principle of the American Founding, spelled out, as Mr. Lincoln reminds us, in the Declaration of Independence -- namely the proposition that all men are created equal.

The archival scholarship of the Lincoln Laureate's book is itself one hard nut to crack; because not unlike his sober judgment, the author's prose is direct, analytical, and incisive, and so are the book's conclusions -- born as they are of the author's mastery of the primary and secondary sources. We learn from his analysis that President Lincoln evoked not only the vocabulary of poets and philosophers, but at Gettysburg, the commander-in-chief had also divined the unearthly meaning of the vast burial ground which he had come to commemorate.

For my own part, I wish to say here that upon arriving at the last page of this book, "Writing the Gettysburg Address," one sees again that Mr. Lincoln's iron will -- and his masterful pen -- inspired his victorious national strategy and policy. But as the Lincoln laureate shows, there is so much more to Mr. Lincoln's creative genius. This great man, with fewer than 12 months of formal schooling -- but through the most diligent study of a lifetime -- had developed a most profound intimacy, and thus supreme command, of the protean genius of the English tongue -- its arcane subtleties, its ancient sounds, its simple elegance. In a word, the 16th president had taken

our magnificent language into battle. Lincoln's pen was, in Doug Wilson's phrase, Lincoln's sword.

In his linguistic pilgrimage to the Gettysburg battlefield, the president had brought with him his special poetry to hallow the preeminent cemetery of our common country, making himself forever the soldier's poet, winning for them a just and everlasting honor.

The Lincoln laureate has given us a brilliant work of historical research, worthy, I believe, of the Gettysburg Address itself. It is therefore, I think, a national treasure.

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