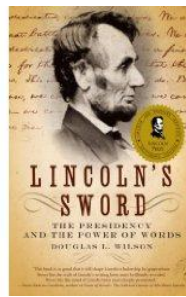


2007 LINCOLN PRIZE WINNER DOUGLAS WILSON FOR *LINCOLN'S SWORD: THE
PRESIDENCY AND THE POWER OF WORDS*



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

I trust it goes without saying that I am gratified and deeply honored to be here tonight to accept this award. I thank the sponsors of the Lincoln Prize, the Lincoln and Soldiers Institute at Gettysburg College; I thank the underwriters, Lewis Lehrman and Richard Gilder, of whose support and encouragement of the study of American history this prize is only a small part; and I want to offer a special thanks tonight to the majordomo of the Lincoln Prize, my longtime friend, Gabor Boritt, whose own fine book on the Gettysburg Address, *The Gettysburg Gospel*, might very well have won this prize had he permitted it to be considered. I also need to thank my co-director at the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College, Rodney O. Davis, without whose collaboration over the years in teaching and research I could never have written such books as *Honor's Voice* and *Lincoln's Sword*. And because *writing* a book is only part of a total process, I need to acknowledge – again – a resourceful agent to whom I owe much, Lydia Wills, and a sagacious and patient editor at Alfred A. Knopf, Ashbel Green. It is humbling to accept an award like this, and that this should be a repeat performance is, frankly, a little overwhelming. But I rejoice that my audience also has cause to be gratified that this is the second time for me, mindful as they must be of what Lincoln himself said at his own repeat performance on March 4, 1865, that “there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first.” So I intend to be brief.

While it is customary to say something about the origins of one’s book, or the events and ideas that prompted it, I ask the indulgence of my audience if I give that formula a different twist tonight and talk instead about some of the things that *didn't* make it into *Lincoln's Sword*. I do this, first of all, as an antidote to the pervasive but much mistaken notion that there is nothing left

to write about concerning Abraham Lincoln. A second reason is to call attention to the fact that historical investigation, no matter how well defined or focused, is by nature open-ended. The simplest analogy I can think of is the trip that we all make from time to time to the attic. We go up there to find a cancelled check, but in the process of searching, we are subject to any number of distractions, and we return, often as not, without the cancelled check but with something else, such as a long forgotten photo album, or a lamp that nobody remembers ever having seen before. This is what it means to be diverted – in both senses of the word. In the course of researching and writing my book, I started a number of ideas that I very much wanted to pursue but which I finally had to concede would require more time than I had available or would lead me too far afield. I want to share just a few of these which, in an ideal world might constitute a preview of coming attractions, but since there is never world enough and time, may largely prove a short wish list.

In tracing Lincoln's career as a writer before the presidency, I decided to try and place him in a literary context by looking at his writing alongside that of the most accomplished of his writing contemporaries. The 1850s was an auspicious time for American literature. An easy way to highlight this is simply to name some of the works that first appeared in that decade that turned out to be American classics of the first order: 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*; 1851, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*; 1854, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*; 1855, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*; 1858, Emily Dickinson's first hand-sown collection of manuscript poems. A work that seems destined to be accorded similar stature is Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which was published in 1855.

Now if we consider that this sudden eruption of landmark works marks a revolution in the nature and quality of American writing, it is hardly an accident that Abraham Lincoln suddenly found a new voice in 1854 in enunciating a powerful political reawakening in what is known as his Peoria speech, the greatest of his pre-presidential speeches. If we set aside the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, both of which are occasional speeches, both quite brief and in some ways more like poetry than prose, the Peoria speech is arguably the most artful and representative of all his speeches. In this perspective, Lincoln's emergence in the 1850s, which has always been regarded in a political aspect, can be seen as a part of the flowering of literary art and expression that F. O. Matthiesen famously called an "American Renaissance."

But eager as I was to explore this promising venue, it soon became clear that this was a book-length subject in itself, and I was obliged to put it aside for another day.

The mention of Frederick Douglass brings up another siren song, for in the preparation of my book I found myself following in considerable detail the connection between Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, another important historical figure who is under-appreciated, in my view, as a writer. I was especially interested in the way the sharp and critical tone of Douglass's writing about Lincoln changed after their first meeting in August of 1863. It is clear from the many accounts Douglass gave of this meeting that it functioned as a kind of turning point, not only in his view of Lincoln personally, but in his growing understanding of how measures that he had first seen as unjust or vacillating or indecisive might, in the hands of a master strategist, be made to produce the very results that he himself desired but which could not be obtained by the means he employed. Here was a provocative connection, and the ready comparison between the former slave and the self-educated hoosier was so evident as to be emphasized in later years by Douglass himself. Unfortunately, exploring this fascinating connection threatened to take me too far afield from the subject of Lincoln's presidential writing, but it is a pleasure to note that since the publication of *Lincoln's Sword*, James Oakes, who is here tonight, has given a brilliant account of some of these very issues in his admirable new book, *The Radical and the Republican*.

One of the reasons Lincoln's writing attracted so little notice and so few admirers at first was that it employed a plain style in an age that admired ornamentation. That ornamentation was fossilizing and that new and more authentic styles were needed was admittedly understood by very few American observers, but there was one notable person who had been lamenting the anemic state of American writing for years and advocating that new kinds of writing were necessary to express the distinctive character of American experience. When Lincoln was just starting out as a lawyer, twenty-four years before becoming president, Ralph Waldo Emerson was already urging the need for writing that turned its back on European models. "Our day of dependence," he said, "our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age . . . ?" This, it can be argued, was true prophecy, and all the more remarkable that a prairie president should be one of those to answer

Emerson's call, but the prophet himself, alas, was slow to recognize such clear evidence of its fulfillment.

As readers of *Lincoln's Sword* are aware, I brought Emerson and his assessments of Lincoln into my narrative several times, but there was much about the Lincoln-Emerson connection that I couldn't include without going too far off the track. For example, Emerson wrote in his journal that when he was taken to the White House to be introduced, the President said to him "Oh, Mr. Emerson, I once heard you say in a lecture, that a Kentuckian seems to say by his air and manners, 'Here I am; if you don't like me, the worse for you.'" So Lincoln had been in the audience for one of Emerson's famous lectures, but when? Where? And which lecture? And what, if anything, did Lincoln make of what Emerson had to say?

For the first two questions there is a fairly straightforward answer. While delivering a series of lectures in St. Louis, Emerson was inveigled by an enthusiastic admirer into coming over to Springfield, Illinois in January of 1853 and delivering a course of three lectures on successive nights. The state legislature, the state Supreme Court, and the U. S. District Court were all in session, and the town was bursting at its seams, so the prospects for an audience were promising, but the weather was bad and traveling conditions deplorable. From his Springfield hotel, Emerson wrote to his wife:

Here I am in the deep mud of the prairie, misled, I fear, into this bog, not by a will of the wisp, such as shine in bogs, but by a young [man], who overestimated the strength of both of us, & fancied I should glitter in the prairie & draw the prairie birds & waders. In the prairie, it rains, & thaws incessantly, &, if we step off the short street, we go up to the shoulders, perhaps, in mud.

The cramped conditions at his hotel kept him from his work, but he told his wife that he had finished reading the sensational best seller of the day, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The editor of a Springfield paper "had prepared the public with the warning that this man, master of wonderful style and thought, was not a lecturer in the usual sense but a monologist, talking rather to himself than to the audience." Emerson called his first lecture "The Anglo-Saxon," essentially a comparison of the new culture being wrought by Americans with that of their English forbears. We have no clear indication that Lincoln was in attendance, but his friend Orville H. Browning was, and wrote in his diary: "He limned a good picture of an Englishman, and gave us some hard raps for our apishness of English fashions & manners." Emerson's second lecture was followed by a supper and a social hour where the members of the audience could

converse with the speaker, and this is the lecture whose subject would presumably have most appealed to Lincoln – “Power.”

It is interesting to peruse this lecture with the possibility of Lincoln’s presence in mind, for here the genteel sage of Concord takes the gloves off and lays bare an aspect of his thought that is absent in the familiar image of the dreamy transcendental visionary whose attention was fixed on such things as the Over-Soul. In “Power,” Emerson shows a fiercely practical regard for the centrality of force, in whatever form, and considers unflinchingly the often brutal role it plays in human affairs. “Life is a search after power,” he announces, which indicates why this was the Emerson that most appealed to one of his German admirers, Friedrich Nietzsche.

If Lincoln was in the audience for “Power,” we can be sure he would have been struck by a number of ideas that were similar to his own. For example, Emerson said near the beginning of his speech:

All successful men have agreed in one thing, – they were causationists. They believed that things went not by luck, but by law; . . . A belief in causality, and, in consequence, belief in compensation, or, that nothing is got for nothing, – characterizes all valuable minds . . .

If Herndon and other of Lincoln’s close friends can be believed, this fit Lincoln’s thinking perfectly. Like Emerson, Lincoln admitted that his belief in strict causality did not seem to accord very well with the idea of free will, and also like Emerson, he allowed that he was somewhat at a loss to account for this seeming inconsistency. In fact, this lecture and the series it belonged to was in some respects an Emersonian project to reconcile the opposing concepts of freedom and fate. By now I hope I have made my point. What starts as a small question about when and where Lincoln might have heard Emerson lecture soon develops into something more substantial and potentially illuminating. It may not have fit into the book I was writing at the time, but who can doubt the value of a study that could possibly do for Emerson and Lincoln something of what Mr. Oakes has done for Lincoln and Douglass? This may be a case of another trip to the attic and yet another lamp, but if it is, “let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.”