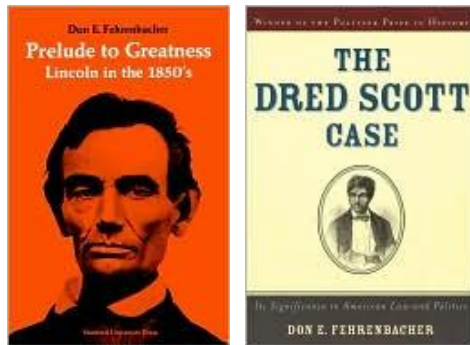


1997 LINCOLN PRIZE & LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD WINNER DON FEHRENBACHER
FOR *PRELUDE TO GREATNESS: LINCOLN IN THE 1850'S* AND *THE DRED SCOTT CASE: ITS
SIGNIFICANCE IN AMERICAN LAW AND POLITICS*



ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

(GIVEN BY DR. GABOR BORITT IN MEMORY OF DON FEHRENBACHER)

Don Fehrenbacher died in his home in Stanford, California, on December 13, 1997. He was an important historian of the era of the American Civil War during which, to quote his words, “not only the survival but the constitutional form and moral character of the nation was at stake.”

He was born in Sterling, Illinois, in 1920, was educated in, and with, the U.S. Army during World War II, flying thirty combat missions over Germany and Occupied Europe (“including one that gave us a splendid view of the D-Day armada”); at Cornell College, Iowa; and at the University of Chicago, where he obtained his Ph.D. as part of a distinguished cohort of students mentored by Avery Craven. He is survived by his wife and co-worker, Virginia, two daughters, a son, eight grandchildren, the many students of his teaching years (nearly all of them at Stanford, from 1949 to 1984), and a significant body of scholarly work.

His first book, *Chicago Giant* (1957), about the Illinois politician John Wentworth, won the award

of the Association for State and Local History. His second book, *Preparation for Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850's* (1962) established him as one of the leading figures of a century and more of Lincoln scholarship. This careful analysis of the political milieu of Lincoln's rise was followed by four other substantial contributions, including two collections of Lincoln's speeches and writings: *Abraham Lincoln: A Documentary Portrait* (1964; trs. Spanish and Pak-Bengali), and *Lincoln* (2 vols., 1989) for The Library of America; also the *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (1996), a treasure trove of carefully evaluated recollected comments, compiled and edited with Virginia Fehrenbacher; and studies chiefly of sources: *Lincoln in Text and Context: Collected Essays* (1987).

In 1976 Don completed *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* that the death of his Stanford colleague, David Potter, had left unfinished. Harvard's William E. Gienapp described the volume as "the best analysis of the period." The book received the Pulitzer Prize. Don further edited, or coedited, three other Potter volumes. In *The South and Three Sectional Crises* (1980), delivered as the Fleming Lectures at LSU, he looked at three major crises in the Congress of ante-bellum.

Probably Don's major work is *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (1978). The book focused on the crucial slavery case decided by the Supreme Court in 1857, and it, too, won the Pulitzer Prize. After generations of study, at last a scholar had carefully deciphered not only the highly complicated origins of the case, but also the equally difficult to understand opinions expressed by the members of the Court. The large role played by the Dred Scott case in the coming of the Civil War is considered as well.

Columbia University's Barbara Fields summed up matters eloquently about Don Fehrenbacher: "All of his books display an uncanny flair for communicating the most abstruse and technical points of law or historical evidence in prose that reads as though sculpted by a master's hand."

Don's honors included the presidency of the Pacific Branch of the AHA; two Guggenheim and one NEH fellowship; Harnsworth Professorship at Oxford; Harrison Professorship at William and Mary;

the Commonwealth Fund Lectures at the University College, London; the Fortenbaugh Lecture at Gettysburg College; and the Seagram Lectures at the University of Toronto.

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In 1997 Don Fehrenbacher received the Lincoln Prize for a lifetime of contributions to the study of the Civil War era. He was not well enough to attend the award banquet which was therefore canceled. In July, my wife, Liz, and I had the privilege of taking the Prize to him in California. The presentation dinner included an intimate group: Don and his wife, Virginia; one of their daughters and her husband; Carl and Catherine Degler, for the historical profession; and representing the Lincoln Prize, Richard Gilder.

Don did not deliver the acceptance address that follows, which recounts his beginnings as a scholar. But he sang his own version of Gilbert and Sullivan's "I am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General." We all came in on the refrain—led by Liz Boritt, the soprano who sang on the same stage with Joan Sutherland, Beverly Sills, and Renata Scotto.

When I was little more than a babe,
I saw a pretty picture of honest Abe.
I gazed at his face with admiring eyes,
And now I am the winner of the Lincoln Prize.
(He gazed at his face with admiring eyes,
And now he is the winner of the Lincoln Prize.)

Stanza followed stanza in an unforgettable evening. After completing the song, Don told Virginia, "inside this shell of a body, I still feel like a little boy."

On Saturday, December 13, 1997, Don spent the morning working on the next to last chapter of his book, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*. In the afternoon he did research in the Stanford Library, went home, ate dinner with his wife of 53 years, and died in her arms.