LINCOLN AS GETTYSBURG SAW HIM

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IN PRESENTING the first two volumes of his *Lincoln the President*, James G. Randall chooses to go "no farther than the latter part of 1863, the time of the Gettysburg address." (I:X) This justifies the sub-title of these two volumes, "Springfield to Gettysburg." Professor Randall explains his purpose in the last paragraph of the "Preface," thus:

For the present purpose the Gettysburg address, marking a climax in Lincoln's thought of America's larger rôle, offers a convenient terminus. To recover the Gettysburg Lincoln, to catch up with him, to put him in his full mold, belongs to the agenda of our times. There is the challenge of today in the study of his career as a proof of the meaning and opportunity of democracy. There is need for a fuller understanding of his grasp of liberal thought, his sense of human values, his sympathy for labor, his rising above partisanship, his concept of the statesman's task in its relations to order in society, and to peace and democracy in the world.

"To recover the Gettysburg Lincoln!" That is an interesting historical exercise, but it is more. It is a worthy, indeed a practical, objective in this day of confusion of thought and purpose in public affairs. In the broader aspects toward understanding the Gettysburg Lincoln, Professor Randall has made a notable contribution. He has freshly and convincingly portrayed the wisdom, the strength, and the majesty of the Lincoln of that day. Yet in a work of such scope detailed attention to relatively minor incidents and expressions cannot be expected to be thoroughly given. It is

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3 Presidential address given at the Annual Meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, Reading, Pa., October 25, 26, 1946.
for this reason that I have ventured here to present a detailed consideration of the subject, "Lincoln as Gettysburg Saw Him" as a minor contribution to the greater end of helping "To recover the Gettysburg Lincoln."

The occasion of Abraham Lincoln's single visit to Gettysburg was his decision to participate in the exercises for the consecration of Soldiers' National Cemetery. Under Pennsylvania's leadership a commission, representative of the eighteen loyal states which had soldier-dead on the field, had purchased and prepared a suitable site for a cemetery, and had made arrangements for its consecration. The date for the ceremonies, as finally agreed upon, was November 19, 1863. Decision to postpone the exercises to a day so late in the season for open-air meetings was made because the Honorable Edward Everett of Massachusetts, who had been selected to deliver the oration, was not available at an earlier date. In completing the arrangements, formal printed invitations went forth to some hundreds of prominent persons, including the president. Contrary to expectations, Mr. Lincoln promptly responded to this invitation by writing that he intended to be present at the exercises. The members of the commission, some not so enthusiastically to say the least, directed David Wills, commissioner from Pennsylvania and in general charge of the arrangements, to invite the president to have a part in the program. Under date of November 2, Mr. Wills wrote, in part:

These grounds will be consecrated and set apart to their sacred purpose on Thursday, the 19th instant. It is the desire that you, as Chief Executive of the Nation, formally set apart these grounds to their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks. It will be a source of great gratification to the many widows and orphans that have been made almost friendless by the great battle here, to have you here personally.

Mr. Wills enclosed a private note with this official communication which said:

As the hotels in our town will be crowded and in confusion at the time referred to in the enclosed invitation I write to invite you to stop with me. I hope you will feel it your duty to lay aside pressing business for a day to come on here to perform this last sad rite to our brave
soldier dead, on the 19th. inst. Governor Curtin and Honorable Edward Everett will be my guests at that time, and if you come you will please join them at my house.

The fortnight intervening between the receipt of Mr. Wills' invitation and the day of leaving Washington for Gettysburg were extremely busy ones for the president. John Hay has written of him at this time:

... the Tycoon is in fine whack. I have rarely seen him more serene and busy. He is managing this war, the draft, foreign relations, and planning a reconstruction of the Union, all at once. I never knew with what tyrannous authority he rules the Cabinet till now. The most important things he decides and there is no cavil.

In this very month of November he had several political rows to settle. One was in Pennsylvania; another in Missouri. In addition, patronage commanded as great watchfulness as ever. Yet that which probably weighed most heavily upon his mind was "Reconstruction," and it is important to recall that it was on December 8, that he issued his "Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction," in which he set forth his well-known "Ten Per Cent Plan." Further, he had to prepare a most important message to Congress for the early December meeting.

Somehow he found time to give thought to what he should say at Gettysburg, and when he left Washington he carried with him the first draft of what is known as the "Gettysburg Address," more than two-thirds completed. He very evidently took his assignment seriously, and was particularly concerned that ample time be allowed for the journey. Secretary Stanton had arranged for a special train to leave Washington early in the morning of the nineteenth, to arrive in Gettysburg about noon. The president objected, writing Mr. Stanton, "I do not wish to so go that by the slightest accident we fail entirely, and at best the whole to be a mere running of the gauntlet." Arrangements were then made to have the special train, consisting of four coaches, one of which was a director's car, leave Washington at noon on the eighteenth, due to arrive in Gettysburg about 6 P. M. The train proceeded by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to Baltimore, where a baggage
car was added in which luncheon was served. In Baltimore the
transfer of the cars was made by horse power to the tracks of
the Northern Central Railroad which carried the train to Han-
over Junction. At that point it was run by the Hanover Junction,
Hanover, and Gettysburg Railroad to its terminal at Gettysburg.
This line, by the completion of the trackage between Hanover and
Gettysburg, had been formally opened for service on December
16, 1858, and was the only railroad then entering Gettysburg.

On that late autumn day darkness had fallen when, according
to schedule, Abraham Lincoln arrived in Gettysburg. Here he was
to remain for a little more than twenty-four hours. Here his
name was to become inseparably linked with the name of the
town. What did the people of Gettysburg see in this visitor?

Mr. Lincoln left the train at the station which still stands but
little changed today, and went the short distance, a little more than
a block, to Mr. Wills' residence. This was a large, three-story,
double house on the southeast corner of the "Diamond" (as the
typical center square was known for many years). The building
in recent years has been converted largely to business uses. After
supper, at which there was a number of guests, a large crowd of
people gathered outside and clamored for the president's appear-
ance. Mr. Lincoln was willing to be seen, as he had been on several
car platform appearances that afternoon, but was unwilling to
make a speech for which they called. Informally, however, he
addressed the people:

I appear before you, fellow-citizens, to thank you for
the compliment. The inference is a fair one that you
would hear me for awhile, were I to commence to make
a speech. I do not appear before you for the purpose of
doing so, and for several substantial reasons. The most
substantial is that I have nothing to say. (Laughter.)
In my position it is somewhat important that I should
not say foolish things. (A voice, 'If you can help it.')
It very often happens that the only way to help it is to
say nothing at all. (Laughter.) Believing that is my
present condition this evening, I must beg you to excuse
me from addressing you further.

After some general conversation with those present at the Will's
house Mr. Lincoln retired to his room in the southwest corner
of the second floor. What he did there that evening will be de-
scribed later. After breakfast the next morning he went again to his room where he wrote out the second draft of his "few appropriate remarks," and at ten o'clock appeared at the east, or York St., door of the house to take his place in the procession to the cemetery. There he took his place on the platform, and patiently sat through the lengthy exercises until his turn to speak came. After his address a dirge was sung, the benediction was pronounced, and the procession returned to the town. After luncheon the president held a reception until five o'clock when he went to the Presbyterian Church to attend a patriotic meeting. As his train was due to depart in the early evening, he was required to leave before the exercises were concluded. The special train made the trip to Washington without incident, and Abraham Lincoln's visit to Gettysburg was over. On the return trip he felt ill and reclined most of the way. A day or two later it was discovered that he had developed a case of varioloid, a mild form of smallpox.

A running account of the events in Gettysburg on November 18 and 19, 1863, as they involved Mr. Lincoln, has been presented. The more important interest remains, namely, to interpret the events to the end of learning what the people of Gettysburg saw in him. What manner of man was he at this climactic point in his career? What was the "Gettysburg Lincoln" like; what were his outstanding features?

First of all, it can be said, that he appeared to be a man with a serious purpose. In spite of his extremely engrossing occupations at the time, he was determined to go to Gettysburg. He doubtless felt, as Mr. Wills did, that his presence on this occasion would indeed be "a source of great gratification to the many widows and orphans that have been made almost friendless by the great battle here." He apparently agreed with Mr. Wills who rather officiously suggested to him that it was his "duty to lay aside pressing business for a day to come on here to perform this sad rite to our brave soldier dead, . . ." He also very probably considered this an opportunity to combat a vicious story that, while riding over the battlefield of Antietam, shortly after the battle there, about a year before the time to come to Gettysburg, "amidst the indications of the awful cost of that battle in human life, he had called for the singing of a ribald song. . . ." That he felt his obligation to be present is further suggested by the fact that he
left Washington with a mind sorely troubled by the serious illness of his son, Tad. A telegram sent by Mrs. Lincoln on the evening of the eighteenth saying: “The Dr. has just left. We hope dear Taddie is slightly better. Will send you a telegram in the morning,” did, however, somewhat relieve him of this anxiety.

The strongest evidence of his seriousness of purpose seems to be that he had given such thought and effort to the preparation of what he should say, when he would “formally set apart these grounds to their sacred use,” that he carried with him from Washington an almost completed first draft of what he later developed into his famous “Address.” Further, he excused himself from the company at the Wills house about nine o’clock in the evening of the eighteenth, and shortly thereafter sent for Mr. Wills to come to his room. There, according to the latter, Mr. Lincoln said “that he had just seated himself to put upon paper a few thoughts for the morrow’s exercises and had sent for me to ascertain what part he was to take in them and what was expected of him. After a full talk on that subject I left him.” Later in the evening Mr. Lincoln, carrying what he had been working on with him, called upon Mr. Seward who was staying at the Harper house next door, and consulted with him.

The next morning, immediately after breakfast, he again retired to his room where for an hour he worked and produced what is known as the “Second Draft” of his address. This is preserved in the Library of Congress and was the version which he held in his hand later in the day when he made his “few appropriate remarks.” He was indeed a man with a serious purpose, determined to honor the occasion with his best. Fictional accounts of hasty jotting down of random thoughts on scrap paper, with a borrowed pencil, are not only contrary to well-established facts, but are clearly incongruous in the light of the quality of his thought and expression.

In the second place, Gettysburg saw him as a homely man with a friendly attitude and an humble spirit. Common opinion had been that Mr. Lincoln was naturally a friendly man. His Gettysburg attitude confirms this impression. His natural kindliness was manifest in his behaviour in general, and in several recorded instances. He appears to have been warmly greeted and his response was similar. In addition to appearing and addressing the crowd at the Wills house, he exchanged greetings with many who
thronged around him as he sat on his horse awaiting the movement of the procession—an hour's delay—and in the afternoon held an informal reception after a late luncheon. *The Adams Sentinel* for November 24 reported this as follows:

After the ceremonies were concluded, a salute was fired by the artillery, and the military portion of the procession reformed and escorted the President to his lodgings, where he subsequently was visited by a large number of persons, and more than an hour was the victim of a 'hands shaking' that must have tested his good nature to the utmost.

One eye-witness of the events of those November days, an intelligent Gettysburg resident, recounts:

Standing on the upward slope of Baltimore Street, near the approach to the cemetery, and looking on the front of this procession, the cheers of the crowd lining the sidewalks told me of the approach of the President. On all sides he was greeted with enthusiasm. With appreciative smiles and continual bows, 'the tallest and grandest man in the procession' acknowledged the many cries of welcome, such as "Hurrah for Old Abe!" "We are coming, Father Abraham."

Edward Everett, the next day, in a note to Mr. Lincoln, said among other things: "I beg leave to thank you very sincerely for your great thoughtfulness for my daughter's accommodation on the platform yesterday, and much kindness to me and mine at Gettysburg."

Mackinlay Kantor, in the last lines of his poem, "Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg," expressed most effectively the general impression of Lincoln's friendliness thus:

I was a dog at Gettysburg. I trotted near the train.
And nosed among the officers, who kicked me to my pain.
A man came by . . . I could not see. I howled. The light was dim.
But when I brushed against his legs, I liked the smell of him.

The generally accepted view of Mr. Lincoln as a man of humble spirit is likewise confirmed by several examples at Gettysburg.
The procession to the cemetery had been planned to move at ten o'clock on the morning of the nineteenth, but an hour's delay kept the president seated on his horse on York Street. During this time he showed no impatience but greeted many who came to shake his hand. At the cemetery another delay of a half-hour was caused by Mr. Everett's tardiness in returning from viewing the fields of battle. Again Mr. Lincoln patiently waited. Later in the day, he walked with John Burns the several blocks from the Wills house to the Presbyterian Church, and took his place in a pew (still lovingly preserved and suitably marked) as one of the audience. He remained, a silent participant in the patriotic exercises until, the time for the departure of his train having come, he quietly withdrew. There was nothing of "Big Brass," as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, in his demeanor at Gettysburg.

On the previous evening, after he had once consulted with Mr. Wills about the part he was to take in the exercises of the consecration, and having finished the first draft of his address, he again called for Mr. Wills and asked where he could see Mr. Seward. Mr. Wills, later describing this interview, said:

I told him that Mr. Seward was staying with my neighbor next door, and I would go and bring him over. He said, 'No, I'll go and see him.' He went and I went with him and Mr. Lincoln carried the paper on which he had written his speech with him, and we found Mr. Seward and I left the President with him. In less than half an hour Mr. Lincoln returned with the same paper in his hand.

In the third place, Gettysburg saw him as man of sincere democratic convictions which he confirmed by practice. His friendly attitude and his humble spirit made naturally, indeed inevitably, honest democratic convictions and practice. Lincoln was pre-eminently a "Man of the People." This was strikingly illustrated before the eyes of the people of Gettysburg.

Here is the account of that illustration, as The Adams Sentinel for November 24 reported it:

Toward the close of the afternoon, an incident occurred which must be inseparable from this occasion,
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and which deserves a place in the story of the war as a
noble representative fact. At the request of the President,
a committee waited upon the brave old man, John Burns,
who fought in three of our wars, it is said, and who, at
the battle of Gettysburg, dressed himself in his Sunday
clothes and went into the fight, which he did not leave
till he had received three wounds. It need hardly be told
how that patriot of the people, the honest pater patriae,
Father Abraham, received this brave and venerable man;
the meeting was extremely cordial—the ‘God bless you,
old man,’ of the nation in the person of the President.
Arm-in-arm with the President and the Secretary of
State, John Burns went to church in the evening. Cheer-
ing to the President, in his great office, must be this
simple event—most cheering to the declining years of
‘brave John Burns.’ In this touching incident, perhaps,
more than any other, Gettysburg was truly dedicated.

John Burns was a local cobbler whose greatest political honor
had been the office of constable of a country town, but he was a
patriot. His patriotism had been demonstrated in earlier service
of his country. That given on July 1, 1863 is recognized in General
Abner Doubleday’s report, dated December 14, 1863, as follows:

My thanks are especially due to a citizen of Gettys-
burg named John Burns who, although over seventy
years of age, shouldered his musket, and offered his serv-
ices to Colonel Wister, One Hundred and Fiftieth Penn-
sylvania Volunteers. Colonel Wister advised him to fight
in the woods, as there was more shelter there, but he
preferred to join our line of skirmishers in the open
fields. When the troops retired, he fought with the Iron
Brigade. He was wounded in three places.

If ever the ideals underlying the Declaration of Independence,
the principal foundation of the democratic idealism of Abraham
Lincoln, were dramatized it was on that November afternoon in
Gettysburg when the President of the United States and the Get-
tysburg cobbler and constable walked arm-in-arm through the
public streets. But then that is what those who knew him best
expected of Abraham Lincoln!

Finally, Gettysburg saw and heard Mr. Lincoln as the inter-
preter of the political idealism of the nation. He had come formally
to “set apart these grounds to their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks.” This he did most satisfactorily:

We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

Had he said nothing more he would have discharged most acceptably the obligation which he had assumed when he agreed to take part in the exercises of the day. He would have fulfilled the expectation of the editor of The Adams Sentinel whose report of his part in the program was briefly stated thus: “The President then delivered the following dedicatory remarks,” and, without comment, quoted these “remarks.”

Mr. Lincoln, however, was moved to say more than appropriate words of consecration of the ground. He had a message to the people before him, to the American people, north and south, and indeed to the people of the whole world. This the occasion gave him opportunity to deliver. I like Alexander Woollcott’s interpretation of his purpose. Mr. Woollcott, in 1938 in a radio broadcast, beamed to England, said,

That crowd at Gettysburg would have heard anything he had to say if he’d cared two cents whether they heard him or not. He wasn’t speaking to them. Well, then, to whom was he speaking? Not long ago I put that question to a man who knows as much about the Civil War as anyone of my acquaintance, John W. Thomason, Jr., of the United States Marines. By way of answer Colonel Thomason told me about a letter he once found in a trunk, in a Texas attic—a letter written in ’63 by a young Southern captain who’d been wounded at Gettysburg and was still there on crutches months later. That Texan must have been one of the scattered few—there are such in every audience—who did hear what Lincoln said. To his father back home, the young Southerner
wrote: 'Pop, we've got to stop fighting that man.' Therefore the Colonel thinks that if Lincoln was indifferent to those present at Gettysburg it was because, over their heads, he was talking to the South. It's my own notion—I can't escape it—that over the heads of the South, he was talking chiefly to posterity—talking to Americans who on that day at Gettysburg were as yet unborn and unbegot. While there was yet time he wanted to state it in words so simple that anyone could understand it and in words so few that everyone could remember it. The ceremonies at Gettysburg gave him his chance. He took it.

What had he to say that he considered so important? What did he say that has been heard around the earth? What had this "Gettysburg Lincoln" on his heart to add to his "few appropriate remarks" of consecration of a burial ground?

It was concerning popular government. "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." The "Four score and seven years ago" means to establish the Fourth of July, 1776, as the birthday of the nation indeed, with the ideas involved therein set forth in the great Declaration of that day. His great thought was to assert that the nation was really born in the declaration of certain fundamentals.

His purpose was not, however, merely to state the fact. He had a great practical end in mind—popular government must not be allowed to fail in a nation born primarily to promote it. "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." The War had to be fought; the War must continue to be fought until it is won—all in the interest of preserving this nation which has such peculiar, but yet such priceless, features.

The sacrifice at Gettysburg in the July days was a contribution to victory. All honor to "the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here." Yet theirs was not, and is not, the sole responsibility. Remembering their brave deeds, dedicating a "final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live" is not enough. "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be dedicated to
the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion. . . .” Yet dedication is not enough. “. . . . that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—. . . .” From such high resolution action must follow—action to one great end—“that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

F. Lauriston Bullard concludes his most excellent study of Lincoln at Gettysburg and the Address with this pointed paragraph:

Several times before he spoke at Gettysburg he had emphasized the theme of the famous address, Popular government must not fail. The universal problem of democracy always was in the back of his mind. ‘Must a government, of necessity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?’ ‘We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth!’ It was his devotion to democracy that justified Abraham Lincoln’s appeal at Gettysburg for the completion of ‘the unfinished work’ for which the ‘honored dead’ of that battlefield had given ‘the last full measure of devotion.’ It is for that same cause that the United States is at war today. [1944.]

It may well be added that “the unfinished work” remains in 1946.

Gettysburg, on November 19, 1863, saw Abraham Lincoln as one fervently concerned to preserve for the United States of America, and so for the world, the great idea that “governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” From the Mayflower Compact onward Americans have ever striven toward a fuller realization of the practical operation of “popular control of public policy.” This ideal was never more effectively described, nor more appealingly presented, than by the “Gettysburg Lincoln.”

“Lincoln as Gettysburg Saw Him” does not belong exclusively to the past. This man of serious purpose, with friendliness and humility of spirit, who was devoted to the democratic principle, and who was the interpreter of our traditional political idealism, appears before us this night. He calls us, “the living,” to be dedicated to “the great task” which after four score and three years more still remains before us.