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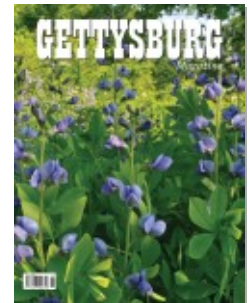
The Gettysburg Address: Perspectives on Lincoln's Greatest Speech ed. by Sean Conant (review)

Brian Matthew Jordan

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Sean Conant, ed. *The Gettysburg Address: Perspectives on Lincoln's Greatest Speech*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xvi, 350 pp. Paper, \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-19-022745-6.

Documentary filmmaker Sean Conant has assembled a first-rate collection of fifteen essays that consider the meaning and legacy of the Gettysburg Address. The editor does not provide an introduction, but a convenient appendix transcribes the five known copies of the speech. While not altogether trailblazing, the essays nonetheless approach the words Lincoln spoke on November 19, 1863, from some exciting angles.

Refreshingly, many contributors challenge Garry Wills, whose arguments about the speech have wielded considerable influence. Unlike Wills, Nicholas P. Cole maintains that Lincoln addressed his Gettysburg audience in a “frank, almost conversational style,” one that “never consciously emulate[d]” ancient oratory (20). Nor were Lincoln’s words “an exercise in deception”; quite to the contrary, Robert Pierce Forbes reasons, after decades of “obfuscations,” they were “a return to first principles” (24, 47). In a truly splendid piece that places the speech in the larger context of wartime agony and woe, Chandra Manning argues that if Lincoln’s words “remade America,” then those words were uttered neither “behind the backs” nor “to the surprise of soldiers or former slaves” (136). Finally, echoing sentiments expressed elsewhere in this volume, Allen C. Guelzo contends that the speech “hit home” because it was a defense of self-government, the principle at stake in the war (161–62). Guelzo contends that if the Union armies had not triumphed in the war’s final year, the Gettysburg Address would, in all likelihood, not be remembered as “acknowledging some great and stirring truth” but rather “as a piece of political huff-and-puff on behalf of a sinking cause” (165).

The essays that trace the speech’s oratorical and intellectual lineages are somewhat more successful than those that assess the speech’s legacies (102, 119). Nonetheless, Louis P. Masur usefully considers the address “in the context of Lincoln’s ongoing defense of emancipation,” while Alison Clark Efford cautions that because Lincoln was “deliberately vague about who was included and what equality

entailed,” subsequent generations effortlessly untangled the “nationalism” and “equality” he knotted together at Gettysburg (175, 213). And in an essay that tracks the speech’s influence beyond national borders, Don H. Doyle finds that the world “made use of” Lincoln’s words, not least of all because they “resonated with an ongoing debate about the democratic experiment” (274).

Still, many questions remain about how the speech was “transmitted and received” during and after the war (254). None of the essayists, for instance, do much to test Gabor S. Boritt’s contention from *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows* that Lincoln’s remarks were marginalized in public memory immediately after the war and then revived several decades later. Raymond Arsenault’s contribution argues that the Lincoln Memorial, dedicated in 1922, helped to keep Lincoln’s words (which were literally notched into marble) alive and resonant. His wide-ranging essay recalls Marian Anderson, the black contralto who performed at the memorial in 1939 and who subsequently “stayed close to Lincoln” (269), but he misses an opportunity to link her to the address in a more powerful way: Anderson visited Gettysburg in November of 1963 to mark the National Cemetery’s centennial.

Ultimately, this welcome anthology should be placed on the growing shelf of books reminding us that the Civil War was a struggle to defend republican self-government from sneering skeptics.

Brian Matthew Jordan
Sam Houston State University