
Gabor Borritt:

The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows

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If there is anyone equipped to make good on the claim that there is a Gettysburg Address “that nobody knows”, Gabor Borritt may be a good bet. He is the Robert Fluhrer Professor of Civil War Studies, founding Director of the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College, and the author, co-author, or editor of sixteen previous books about Lincoln and the Civil War. The dust jacket of the book under review here, *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows*, notes that Borritt lives on a farm in Gettysburg, and that, a native Hungarian, he participated in the failed 1956 anti-Stalinist revolt and later escaped to America, where he is soon to be the subject of a documentary film. One thinks of a cloistered scribe who sidelines as a battlefield tour guide. Such duality seems to be the essence of this book as well: a trade publication aimed at the massive Lincoln book market, yet also a work of considerable archival scholarship and sometimes probing analysis, it aims to disclose something new about one of the most, if not *the* most, studied pieces of American rhetoric, all while keeping the Civil War buffs entertained. Since Borritt does not engage directly with much previous scholarship, this reader cannot help thinking that the book may be constructed in terms suggested by Borritt’s reading of the Gettysburg Address itself as a bifurcated work. Borritt centrally argues that “Lincoln needed the masses in the middle” (p. 117) and therefore craftily deployed ambiguity in order that his references to equality could be heard with a range of connotations as audiences preferred. Much of the book is given to describing in close detail the immediate contexts within which those at Gettysburg and beyond could so variously understand Lincoln. The argument is strong, but less explicit than it could be; the supporting detail is rich and valuable, but it is overstatement to say that these elements come together to give us a speech “nobody knows”.

The Gettysburg Gospel opens with a brief preface asserting that, amid the bewildering volume of evidence, testimony, and interpretation of the Address, much of it contradictory and confusing, there is a need to “begin again from scratch” (p. 2). In particular, Borritt cites two poles of interpretation that his book will seek to thread: on the one hand, the hagiographic and mythic tradition stemming from Mary Shipman Andrews’s reverential and once enormously popular 1908 book *The Perfect Tribute* (see <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/12830>), which portrays Lincoln as a romantic visionary genius; on the other, the view represented by Garry Wills’s *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), which reads the Address as the work of a long-laboring literary scholar channeling intellectual history ancient and modern. Borritt further indicates that his aim is to demonstrate not just how received traditions about the speech became dominant, but how (and perhaps even despite the range of these views) the speech became “American Gospel”, that is, the “Good News” promising “spiritual rebirth” to Americans and people everywhere (p. 3). Although Lincoln was a believer, he was no Christian, and yet there could be found resonations between the meaning of the Address and the message of the Christian Gospel. Readers hoping for such analysis, however, need not look here.

Chapter 1 (“After Battle”, pp. 5-30) draws on fresh archival sources to paint in close detail the post-battle picture of “the greatest man-made disaster in American History” – the gruesome aftermath of pain, misery, amputation, horror, death, and ever-present stench – but also the scene of forgiveness and humanity. Borritt particularly emphasizes the role of women in the work of healing and caring for wounded and dying soldiers, Union and confederate alike, sometimes even to the consternation of rebel officers, who saw that such indiscriminate compassion would “perfectly subjugate us” and “bind us together” (p. 20). Borritt quotes an open letter published in the *Adams Sentinel* from a minister and Gettysburg native to those who sought vengeance, urging them to desist, forgive, and accept suffering as “the price we are paying for past and present complicity with iniquity” (p. 17), but also as the cost of realizing the fundamental doctrine of the Declaration – sentiments expressed later by Lincoln in his Address and Second Inaugural.

Chapter 2 (“Rebirth”, pp. 31-48) narrates Gettysburg’s gradual return to something like normal and the events leading up to the creation and dedication of a National Cemetery, from dry logistics to the grim work of exhumation and reburial. While Borritt’s telling is able and amply studded with striking detail, it falls short of supplying the full context of the nineteenth-century “culture of death” given by Garry Wills in his *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. And, somewhat awkwardly, there are impressionistic passages attempting to recreate the first hand real-time experience of a cemetery worker engaged in disinterment: “Now the bodies are dug up. Dig the dirt. What you’ll find in most spots will depend on the soil” (p. 43). The vividness may help readers’ grasp of the situation, but it does little to tell us about Lincoln’s speech.

Chapter 3 (“Lincoln Comes to Gettysburg”, pp. 49-68) continues this thick description of the circumstances, from David Wills’s invitation to Lincoln to deliver “a few appropriate words” (p. 58), which were nonetheless momentarily tasked with “giving meaning to the war” (p. 63), to small details about Lincoln’s train trip (an illustration supplies the layout of his luxurious car). Some of the minutiae are overdone. Do we really need to know that on one train bringing mourners and visitors, a “curious smell” first thought to be emanating from an amputated limb turned out to be from “a box of Dutch cheese” (p. 66)? This is indeed “the Lincoln speech that nobody knows”. It is nonetheless helpful to understand the peculiar admixture of tragic realization and national uplift, solemnity and carnival, dread and anticipation that attended the event, and this is ultimately brought out very well.

Chapter 4 (“Carousing Crowds”, pp. 69-90) takes this vein yet further, portraying the festive mood in Gettysburg on the eve of the speech. While the local newspaper strained to represent an orderly, disciplined, and decorous scene, Borritt gives credibility to contrary reports, such as that of the *Buffalo Daily Courier*, which reckoned the “National ‘Wake’ [...] a relic of barbarism” (p. 88) with its parading and drinking, serenading and speechifying, and plenty of politicking. Borritt makes a number of conjectures in this chapter (in the form of questions) about whether Lincoln worked on the speech in Gettysburg, but on this whole notoriously speculative matter he admits that there simply may never be answers forthcoming. (One is prompted to ask in reply: ‘So why ask again?’). This chapter does yield one keen insight in reference to the President’s demurring anti-speech to a group of serenaders on the eve of the dedication (“The inference is a very fair one that you would hear me for a little while at least, 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 of these is that I have no speech to make”, p. 74). Dismissed by Lincoln’s secretary, John Hay, as “his half dozen words, meaning nothing” (p. 75), the little speech is given importance by Borritt as Lincoln’s serious attempt to win over public sentiment. The President’s Address the following day would be solemn, but he understood the rhetorical moment well enough to recognize his audience’s need, even amid tragedy, to celebrate and enjoy themselves.

With Chapter 5 (“The Gettysburg Gospel”, pp. 91-129) Borritt again colorfully escorts his readers through myriad details of the day, at last bringing us to the speech itself. First, however, he discusses the benediction by Methodist minister Thomas Stockton (wrote Hay, “Mr. Stockton gave a prayer which thought it was an oration”, pp. 97), and he summarizes the day’s main event, the lengthy oration of Edward Everett. Many scholars treat Everett as something of a foil for Lincoln – the old-school orator’s dramatic two-hour dilation on the battle faring poorly against Lincoln’s finely honed poetic economy. But Borritt is more judicious, implicitly arguing against, but never directly engaging, Garry Wills’s thesis that the Address marked a radical revolution in thought and style, rendering Everett’s speech “obsolete within a half-hour of the time when it was spoken” (*Lincoln at Gettysburg*, p. 148). Borritt reminds readers that, in addition to the expansive *narratio*, Everett’s speech contained a strong political argument, one that was “something new, something needed” (p. 116). Lincoln himself remarked that it was new even to *him*, and that it was “one of the best arguments for natural supremacy” (p. 109): since the officeholders of the states took an oath to the Constitution, the states were agents of the federal government, not the other way around, as secessionists would have it. Moreover, Everett argued, reconciliation was possible precisely because of this common rootedness among the temporary opponents. Rather than reading the Address as utterly superannuating, as some critics have done, Borritt thus opens the way for us to appreciate the fundamental complementarity of the two speeches. And when we finally reach the Address itself, there is more valuable insight. Many have noted that Lincoln’s transcendental idiom allowed him to soar over the fray, but Borritt adds this: being above politics was itself political. It allowed Lincoln not only the lofty presidential look, but also the ambiguity on the one hand to appeal to people desiring a quick radical route to equality, and, on the other, to keep in the fold those who did not care about the issue of slavery or were actively hostile to the idea of Emancipation (p. 116). The latter had to be willfully blind to Lincoln’s intentions, but, as Borritt puts it, “people are always good at fuzzy thinking” (p. 117). Thus the freight is paid on a box of Dutch cheese, and on the preceding hundred pages’ mists of minute observation, re-creation, and factoids urging us to interpret the speech solely in terms of its immediate context and reception, rather than trying to get at intended meaning, as Garry Wills does, through intellectual genealogy. Readers can judge for themselves whether such labors, interesting as they are, were necessary to make this not altogether new argument.

Chapter 6 (“Echoes”, pp. 130-162) takes up the day’s immediate afterlife: the range of reactions, mostly predictable (and mostly well known), from politicians, newspapers, and others. Everett’s speech drew most attention, both praising and damning, as it was the main event, and as advance copies had been sent to newspapers days before. By comparison, Lincoln’s words – often heavily mangled and conveniently misquoted – initially made barely a ripple. There were glimmers of the recognition to come, though the speech mostly raised the annoyance of Democrats, the *Chicago Times* dubbing it a lie and a mockery, the *Detroit Free Press* mocking back in objection to “obstetrical analogies” (p. 142). It was not until the ensuing months that there was growing realization of the Address’s momentousness, and not until the 1880s was there widespread appreciation of Lincoln’s achievement. Even Lincoln, who echoed some of his own words in later remarks and took pride especially in Everett’s praise for the Address, may not have seen its full importance, Borritt speculates, until others began to extol its canonical worth (p. 155). Some went overboard, such as Charles Sumner, who, in his eulogy of Lincoln, held that “the battle itself was less important than the speech”. When Borritt here remarks that this is what “intellectuals are wont to do, for they prize ideas” (p. 159), one cannot help reading this as meta-historiography. In the context of Sumner’s hyperbole, Borritt’s remark is apt, but it also may prompt readers to glance back at his book’s audacious subtitle and realize that, throughout the book, Borritt seems less interested in Lincoln’s ideas than in counting and recounting their

sprawling reception and circulation, effectively saying (although he never does just say it) that this is a “speech nobody knows” because nobody can ever really know it beyond the ephemeral. Where the “Gettysburg Gospel” is concerned, Borritt would seem to be an agnostic.

If that is the case, the title of Chapter 7 (“Gloria”, pp. 163-203) may sound perverse. Here Borritt traces a miscellany of less proximate post-Gettysburg events: equal attention goes to a heinous materiel mishap the day after the ceremonies, Lincoln’s proclamation of Thanksgiving as a national holiday, his bout with variola, his valet’s subsequent death from the disease, and a short account of Mary Todd Lincoln’s awareness of her husband’s increasing religious feeling. Lincoln’s posthumous reputation took off rapidly, but early biographies either made little or nothing of his speech at Gettysburg, and printed pages of the Emancipation Proclamation long out-sold those of the Address. Borritt then recounts how reunion – with its re-subjugation of African Americans – did the most to give the Address the status of legend: “The ‘new birth of freedom’ referred henceforth not to a nation that had, ‘under God,’ ascended through Emancipation in a crucible of war and so was reborn, but rather to a nation that had been threatened by disunion in war but, ‘under God,’ was saved” (p. 187). The stock of the emancipationist Gettysburg Address fell and rose. Notwithstanding the “unhappy cultural politics” (p. 189) driving this, the speech equally rose, asserts Borritt, on its achievement as fine language whose eschewal of grandiloquence was ahead of its time, though he never really shows how this is so. Further causes for “Gospel” status came and went over the decades: progressives adapted it to their purposes, anti-isolationists did so prior to and during America’s engagement in World War I. The speech was and continues to be memorialized in a multitude of ways in hundreds of places and on thousands of occasions small and large (most prominently of late in Barack Obama’s U.S. Presidential victory speech). Borritt mainly resorts to listing these one after another. “Gloria”, one supposes, refers to this swelling chorus, but if Borritt hears the hymn, he retains his doubts. He closes with a swipe at Garry Wills’s thesis, objecting to the idea that the Gettysburg Address can be understood as “the words that remade America”. Borritt asks, “How could a speech do that, especially one that was not heard distinctly in its own day?” (p. 200). Careful readers of Wills’s work know his answer would be (and is) that “distinctness” is a red herring: the speech is transformative because of the way its eloquence divines deep springs in Western thought and in the human condition. Borritt himself has to admit repeatedly that the poetry of the speech gives it its life (p. 201), but he too often listens for it in all the wrong places. After all of the scholarly data-gathering he has done – for which readers can be grateful – he lacks Wills’s well-tuned aesthetic sensibilities for that poetry, as well as Wills’s learned grasp of the intellectual and human currents the Gettysburg Address navigates.

A brief and unnecessary Chapter 8 (“Coda”, pp. 204-206) recounts a one-year anniversary commemoration of September 11, at which the New York Governor recited the Gettysburg Address.

The “Coda” is followed by a raft of appendices, along with a bibliographic essay (110 pages in all, not including notes, more than a fourth of the volume total). The appendices include: (A) the full program of the ceremonies at the National Cemetery, including Everett’s speech, images of the program, Stockton’s oratorical prayer, musical scores, and other ephemera; (B) facsimiles of the five versions of the Gettysburg Address in Lincoln’s hand; (C) four line-by-line comparisons of (1) Lincoln’s five versions, (2) a sample of five press versions, (3) four possible sources of what Lincoln read, including a linguistic distance diagram mapping dots spatially according to a statistical analysis of their differences from one another, (4) four sources showing further statistical analyses; and (D) “Dollar Signs: A Brief Look at the Monetary Afterlives of the Five Versions of the Gettysburg Address”. The final dense bibliographic essay, titled “Dwarfs and Giants”, discusses Borritt’s sources. Curiously, it omits any mention of Garry Wills’s *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. More curious still, this entire post-script apparatus is in no way integrated with, nor

even mentioned in, the monograph proper. But that is just as well. Perhaps the best way to regard this book is as a useful companion volume: one long appendix to Garry Wills's standard-bearing study, to which the overwhelmed should happily return.

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