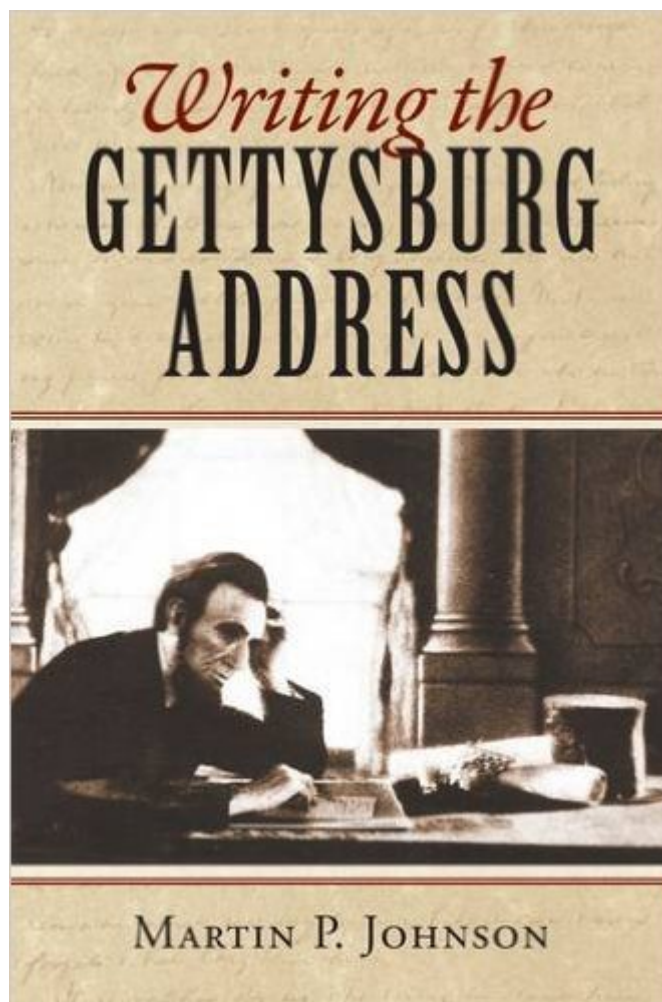


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Writing The Gettysburg Address



Synopsis

Four score and seven years ago . . . Are any six words better known, of greater import, or from a more crucial moment in our nation's history? And yet after 150 years the dramatic and surprising story of how Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address has never been fully told. Until now. Martin Johnson's remarkable work of historical and literary detection illuminates a speech, a man, and a moment in history that we thought we knew. Johnson guides readers on Lincoln's emotional and intellectual journey to the speaker's platform, revealing that Lincoln himself experienced writing the Gettysburg Address as an eventful process that was filled with the possibility of failure, but which he knew resulted finally in success beyond expectation. We listen as Lincoln talks with the cemetery designer about the ideals and aspirations behind the unprecedented cemetery project, look over Lincoln's shoulder as he rethinks and rewrites his speech on the very morning of the ceremony, and share his anxiety that he might not live up to the occasion. And then, at last, we stand with Lincoln at Gettysburg, when he created the words and image of an enduring and authentic legend. Writing the Gettysburg Address resolves the puzzles and problems that have shrouded the composition of Lincoln's most admired speech in mystery for fifteen decades. Johnson shows when Lincoln first started his speech, reveals the state of the document Lincoln brought to Gettysburg, traces the origin of the false story that Lincoln wrote his speech on the train, identifies the manuscript Lincoln held while speaking, and presents a new method for deciding what Lincoln's audience actually heard him say. Ultimately, Johnson shows that the Gettysburg Address was a speech that grew and changed with each step of Lincoln's eventful journey to the podium. His two-minute speech made the battlefield and the cemetery into landmarks of the American imagination, but it was Lincoln's own journey to Gettysburg that made the Gettysburg Address.

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Customer Reviews

This is a masterful work. Johnson gets to the nub of why Lincoln changed the address after touring the battlefield, especially the spot where General Reynolds died. It was simply this: the emotion of the tour led him to change the address, to delete the static language about "standing" where the soldiers stood, to the strong and active verb of "dedicating" here. He also does a superb job of examining the various versions of the Address and making educated guesses on which is more accurate (yes, it is likely that Lincoln said "under God"). Lincoln also called a few audibles while delivering the address and Johnson writes with a sure hand about these as well. Worth the time.

A good book for those with an intense interest in knowing more about the several drafts and reported versions of the Gettysburg Address and how they relate to one another. Professor Johnson dispels a number of myths about that famous day and anchors the actual speech given by President Lincoln to his visit to the battleground of Gettysburg and his political vision for the nation to have a "new birth of freedom." A first time reader about this subject will likely be overwhelmed with some of the detailed explanations given by a very thorough academic scholar. The footnotes to the text are quite good.

Martin Johnson provides the best single volume to understand the history surrounding the Gettysburg Address. This book helps one appreciate why the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address are the components of the DNA that makes the United States of America what it is. A job well done by Professor Johnson.

Very scholarly and should be read in conjunction with the Wills book. Sometimes however, the author gets so deep in the explanation for the various copies and in his argument of explaining the reason for the various texts, that one gets lost in the forest. The best parts of the book are the factual outlines of what is occurring with Lincoln in Gettysburg on November 18th and 19th, i.e. Hays and Nicolays dealings with various drunken guests and politicians in town for the dedication, Curtin's and Seward's movements during the two days, and Lincoln's abhorance with making

extemporaneous speeches to the masses. By the time I got to the giving of the speech, however, I was very confused with Johnson's explanations for the various texts, whether Lincoln said, "Under God", his modifications in pencil or ink, his use of a yellow envelope or foolscap paper, etc etc. At some point, he should admit that there is missing evidence, and leave it at that. Why didn't anyone ever interview Lincoln's servant, Mr. Johnson, who was with Lincoln in the Wills House bedroom the entire time to see if he recalled whether Lincoln wrote the Address there, modified it there, or what? All these various visitors to Abe's room all have different recollections of when the speech was written, and modified. The author raises as many questions as he answers, but it is still a highly enjoyable work.

Martin Johnson thoroughly covers personalities, politics and events at Gettysburg Nov. 18-19, 1863, as well as Lincoln's process of writing THE speech. And, he quells the myth that Lincoln wrote it on an envelope while on the train to Gettysburg., and addresses why there's more than one version of the speech.

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