

The Eloquent President:A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, Douglas L. (2005) "The Eloquent President:A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.7.3.15

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss3/15>

Review

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Summer 2005

White, Jr., Ronald C. *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through his Words*. Random House, \$25.95 hardcover ISBN 1400061199

Oration for the ages

Painting Lincoln with his own expressions

Ronald C. White is a professor of American Intellectual and Religious History and the author of a recent and widely admired book on one of Abraham Lincoln's most famous works, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (2002). In his new book, **The Eloquent President**, he has expanded his purview to include a much broader range of Lincoln's speeches and writing. As he puts it in his bibliographic essay, "Although the focus of this book is on the evolution of Lincoln's eloquence during the four years of his presidency, his entire life and career are always in view." Indeed, the "Index to Lincoln Texts" that appears in the beginning of the book lists speeches and writings that date as far back as 1838.

The attempt to understand Lincoln's presidential eloquence, White says in his Prologue, prompted for him a series of questions: "How did Lincoln, a person with so little formal education, become our most eloquent president? Why did he often stumble when attempting to speak extemporaneously? How are we to understand the lingering mystery of his long silences as president? What were his habits and methods of writing speeches? . . . What was the place of religion in the form and content of his presidential rhetoric? How were Lincoln's speeches understood in his day? How did Lincoln's rhetoric undergird his political leadership as president?"

These prove to be subjects that are systematically taken up in the course of the book, and they lend color to another focus or theme that is summed up in the book's subtitle, **A Portrait of Lincoln Through his Words**. Each chapter, while spotlighting one or more important work--the Farewell Address, the First

Inaugural, the Message of July 4, 1861, etc.--is also a narrative of Lincoln's activities and circumstances at the time. And these encounters with Lincoln are intended to help reveal the moral character that White believes, following Aristotle, is a crucial element in Lincoln's persuasive powers as president. This is a telling point, and the contextualizing of Lincoln's writing is often quite relevant and revealing. White has researched the background and occasion of each work in considerable detail, often setting the stage in such a way as to enhance the narrative aspect of Lincoln's career. Interesting as this material is, and resourceful as White has been in developing it, one must note that this approach is not always as illuminating as one would wish. A long discussion of Horace Greeley's career and his on-again, off-again relations with the president, for example, ultimately sheds little light on Lincoln's famous letter to Greeley of August 22, 1862. And it takes no account of the revealing fact that, prior to the publication of Greeley's "Prayer of Twenty Millions," the Greeley editorial attack on the President that called forth Lincoln's letter in reply, Lincoln had actually been working on a piece that succinctly explained his position--"I would save the Union etc."--and was looking for a venue in which it might be published when Greeley's "Prayer" fortuitously appeared.

White takes great care in almost all the texts he treats to lay the most indicative passages out on the page, often in rhythmic or rhetorical groupings, and this strategy is often very useful in showing aspects of Lincoln's characteristic devices, such as repetition, parallel construction, alliteration, or antithesis. In his discussion of the Greeley letter, for example, White uses this technique to advantage to vivify the fact that the word "save" occurs repeatedly--12 times in ten sentences--and in recurring patterns. And in setting these texts off in italics, White has had the happy idea of showing Lincoln's emphasis, which is always a telling and distinctive feature of his writing, with real underlining, rather than simply showing emphasized words in roman type.

An unusual feature of the book is an extensive series of appendices--111 pages in a volume with 308 pages of text--consisting of transcriptions of the major texts that White discusses. For students of the textual history of Lincoln's documents, these original transcriptions are quite interesting, but White makes virtually no reference to them in his text or to how these renditions relate to the subject of Lincoln's eloquence. In fact, White's discussions of Lincoln's speeches and writings are almost exclusively focused on what are regarded as Lincoln's final texts, rather than intermediary stages of composition, which raises the

question of how they contribute to his basic themes.

Though not primarily aimed at scholars or those already well informed on Lincoln's presidency, **The Eloquent President** is an enlightening book for the fullness of its treatment. There is clear evidence that this capable author has cast a wide net, encompassing newspapers, diaries, letters, manuscripts for primary sources, and scholarly books, articles, and dissertations for secondary sources. The discussions of Lincoln's writings, especially his speeches, are informative and perceptive, and they treat a subject of interest to a wide audience.

In regard to its major themes, it is not clear to this reviewer whether or how well the author demonstrates one of his major themes, namely, that Lincoln's eloquence changed during his presidency, that it dramatically evolved or developed. Granted that the most highly regarded works, the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, came in the latter part of Lincoln's presidency, but how, in what sense, and to what extent the qualities of these speeches represented a development, or evolution, in eloquence are questions whose answers do not come through clearly. Nonetheless, the book has useful and interesting things to say about an essential aspect of Lincoln's greatness, his matchless power with words.

Douglas L. Wilson is co-director of the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College. He is co-editor, with Rodney O. Davis, of Herndon's Informants and the author of Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln.