

REVIEWS

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

Edited by Rodney O. Davis and Douglas L. Wilson

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. Pp. li, 341. Notes, glossary, index. \$35.00.)

Lincoln and Douglas The Debates That Defined America

By Allen C. Guelzo

(New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009. Pp. xxvii, 383. Illustrations, notes, index. Paperbound, \$19.99.)

For a century-and-a-half, the standard edition of the great debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas was in essence a collection of newspaper articles that Lincoln himself had gathered, pasted into a scrapbook, and sent off to a publisher. Lincoln felt the fairest transcript for each participant was the version printed by the partisan newspaper supporting each candidate: the *Chicago Times* for Douglas, and the *Chicago Tribune* for Lincoln. More recently, Harold Holzer published an edition of the debates which reversed that method, providing the opposing papers' accounts of each man's speech. Now, two distinguished Lincoln scholars, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, have created a new version of these debates that remedies many ills of the previous editions. The

Davis-Wilson edition largely relies on the original Lincoln method, except when it appears that a fusion of the texts furnishes a more reliable account of what the participants actually said. The result is probably the most accurate version of the debates ever produced.

In *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, Davis and Wilson have also provided pithy and informative introductions to each debate, where the historical context surrounding that particular moment within the election contest is cogently explained. In addition, annotation and a glossary are included, and since Davis and Wilson are immensely knowledgeable Lincoln scholars, this annotation reflects the breadth of their expertise. Previous editions were typically not annotated, leaving modern readers without

explanations for certain nineteenth-century colloquialisms or for various references to obscure subjects such as the Toombs bill. To the great benefit of non-specialists, that absence has now been remedied. For example, in the opening debate at Ottawa, Douglas declared that while he disagreed with Lincoln on politics, he had known Lincoln for twenty-five years, and did not intend to be insulting. He then promptly launched into an insulting reminiscence on Lincoln's personal life and political career, including a description of Lincoln as a grocery keeper in New Salem, known for his skill in wrestling and "pitching quoits or tossing a copper." Davis and Wilson helpfully explain that in antebellum parlance, a grocery keeper was a liquor salesman, and pitching quoits was a kind of ring toss game. Lincoln's tendency was to lurch into the highly-specialized language of an attorney, an opaque legalese which must have been lost on his contemporary audience, let alone modern readers. For example, at that same Ottawa debate, Lincoln said "I know the Judge is a great man, while I am only a small man, but I feel that I have got him. I demur to that plea. I waive all objections that it was not filed till after default was taken, and demur to it upon the merits" (p. 26). Thankfully, this and other instances of Lincoln's recurrent legal speak are carefully defined in the accompanying annotation.

In the scholarly introduction to the Freeport debate, Davis and Wil-

son offer sagacious comments on Douglas's declaration that despite the Dred Scott decision, the citizens of a territory could still prohibit slavery by withholding any local regulations protecting it. The editors point out that Douglas had said this several times prior to Freeport, however, in part to help his standing with Illinois Democrats. Further, the South was already alienated from Douglas due to his dramatic opposition to the Lecompton Constitution. Thus the significance of Douglas's Freeport statement, subsequently pretentiously dubbed the Freeport Doctrine, has been overblown.

In *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America*, Allen Guelzo has written a superb narrative history of the debates. It will be a revelation to those unfamiliar with the intricacies of Illinois politics in the antebellum period. In addition, the book provides wonderful portraits of the personal appearances and styles of the two protagonists: Lincoln, tremendously tall and often awkward, slow at the beginning of his speeches, but growing more animated as he spoke, and jabbing with his forefinger to emphasize a point; Douglas, short and portly—in Guelzo's clever hands, he looks "like Humpty Dumpty in a toupee"—speaking with a fiery passion that witnesses said seemed to erupt from him as he restlessly stalked the stage, occasionally raising his fist in excitement (p. 99). Further, Guelzo portrays Douglas as a compulsive risk-taker who accepted Lincoln's

challenge to a series of debates—even though meeting Lincoln face-to-face held little advantage for Douglas—because the competitor and gambler in him relished the prospect of the cut-and-thrust of a debate waged with his political career hanging in the balance.

Most importantly, Guelzo correctly delineates the key aspect of the great contest: specifically, that the election turned on an appeal to the Old Whigs. The northern portion of Illinois was solidly Republican in 1858, and the southern counties solidly Democratic. The contest would therefore be decided in the geographical center, or what Guelzo calls the Whig belt: counties with large numbers of former Whigs who disliked both slavery and abolitionism, and who tended to act as swing voters.

It was to these Old Whigs that Douglas pitched his nakedly racist attack on the Republican Party in general, and on Lincoln in specific, as supporters of black equality and racial co-mingling; Douglas's disreputable tactic unfortunately had an impact on an audience overwhelmingly racist in its attitudes and assumptions regarding black Americans. To alarm the Whigs further, Douglas also sought to characterize Lincoln as a dangerous radical who defied the Supreme Court and incited sectional war.

Guelzo then depicts Lincoln's attempts to politically navigate in this

suddenly difficult environment, on one hand trying to assure the Old Whigs of his stolid conservatism, while on the other hand still retaining his Republican coalition. Even before the race began, some Republicans had wanted to endorse Douglas because of his opposition to the infamous Lecompton Constitution; Lincoln's House Divided speech reminded these wavering Republicans why Douglas was unacceptable. However, Lincoln's rhetoric in the speech—coupled with Douglas's racist attacks—discomfited the voters of the Whig belt. Guelzo then goes on to provide the historical context explaining Lincoln's startling statement—made at the opening of the Charleston debate—that he did not favor black equality either. Guelzo argues that the Charleston statement, made after Lincoln had explicitly said in earlier speeches that black Americans were entitled to the natural rights promised in the Declaration of Independence, was an attempt at pandering to the racist Old Whigs, and Lincoln deserves no credit for it.

Both of the books represent seminal studies of the Lincoln-Douglas debates that will be standard references for many years. Each will be required reading, along with Harry Jaffa's timeless study, for students of the great contest.

DAN MONROE is professor of history at Millikin University.

