Roy P. Basler: An Appreciation *and* A Bibliography

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All Lincoln scholars and devotees know the name Roy P. Basler. He was lead editor of the eight-volume *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, produced by the Abraham Lincoln Association (ALA) and published by Rutgers University Press in 1953, with an Index issued in 1955. Described as "the first major scholarly effort to collect and publish the complete writings of Abraham Lincoln," the *Collected Works* "has remained an invaluable resource to Lincoln scholars." Through the efforts of the ALA, it is also available in electronic form.[1] In 2009 historian Allen Guelzo wrote: "The Basler edition has stood for over half a century as the standard text of Lincoln's writings and as a monument of documentary editing in American history."[2]

In 1946, seven years before publication of the *Collected Works*, Basler edited a book entitled *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*.[3] Featuring a preface by Carl Sandburg and an introduction by Basler, it also contains an insightful essay by him on *Lincoln's Development as a Writer*. Thirty-three years ago, browsing in a New Orleans bookstore, I bought a paperback edition of this book published by Da Capo Press. Presenting nearly 250 of Lincoln's letters, speeches, and state papers in chronological order, *His Speeches and Writings* affords the reader direct access to the mind and heart of our greatest president, and one of our most fluent writers, in one volume. Many of us recall with pleasure the most exciting and influential reading experience of our adult lives. Reading this book was mine.

1. The author expresses his warm gratitude to Ms. Georgia Chadwick, M.A., former Director of the Law Library of Louisiana, for her invaluable assistance in tracking down research materials for this article.

See http://www.abrahamlincolnassociation.org; Lincoln Scholarship, Collected Works.

2. Allen Guelzo, "The Not-So-Grand Review: Abraham Lincoln in the Journal of American History," *Journal of American History* 96 (Sept. 2009): 400–416.

3. *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1946).

Which prompts the question, Who was Mr. Basler? Where did he come from, what else did he write, and how did he come to edit the "monumental" *Collected Works*? Herewith some answers.

Roy Prentice Basler, son of a Methodist minister, was born in St. Louis on November 19, 1906. He graduated from Central College in Fayette, Missouri, in 1927. After a short stint as a high school English teacher, he enrolled as a graduate student at Duke University, where he received a Ph.D. in American literature in 1931. Initially intending to concentrate on the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Basler developed a warm friendship with an American literature professor named Jay Broadus Hubbell and decided instead to write his master's thesis on Nathaniel Hawthorne. For his dissertation topic Prof. Hubbell told Basler that he esteemed Mr. Lincoln "not only in the political sphere but in the realm of letters." He informed his young student that several poets had already written about Lincoln, suggesting "that might be a good subject, Lincoln in Literature."[4]

In a reminiscence called "An Acquaintance with Abraham Lincoln" published in 1973, Basler recalled that he "buried myself" in Lincoln literature—biography, fiction, poetry, and drama.[5] In 1931 he finished his dissertation, "Abraham Lincoln in Literature: The Growth of an American Legend," a manuscript he subsequently revised and retitled *The Lincoln Legend: A Study in Changing Conceptions*. Houghton Mifflin expressed interest in publishing it, but only if Basler would "subsidize the book to the extent of paying for the typesetting and casting of plates." This the impecunious Basler could not do, so he sought out other publishers. Alas, not one "was even interested in seeing the manuscript."[6]

At a loss, in Basler's words "the most currently unsuccessful Lincoln author decided to ask the advice of the most successful," namely, poet and Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg.[7] The famous man suggested that Basler show his manuscript to Paul Angle, secretary of the Illinois State Historical Society. Basler replied he had already done so "with negative results." Sandburg offered to send the book to a "great friend" to see what might be done. Basler had no idea who this friend

4. Roy P. Basler, "An Acquaintance with Abraham Lincoln" (hereinafter "An Acquaintance"), published in *A Touchstone for Greatness: Essays, Addresses, and Occasional Pieces about Abraham Lincoln* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 6.

5. Basler, "An Acquaintance," 7.

6. Ibid., 9–10.

7. Ibid., 10.

was, only later learning it was Oliver R. Barrett, a Chicago attorney and well-known collector of Lincoln documents.[8]

Meanwhile, Basler began his career as literature professor. He taught English and chaired the department at Ringling College in Sarasota, Florida (1931–34). From there he migrated to State Teachers College in Florence, Alabama (1934–43), where he also chaired the department. In 1935, eager to publish his Lincoln book, he capitulated to Houghton Mifflin's onerous terms and re-sent his manuscript with a $600 check "as first installment on the cost of printing."[9]

Published in the summer of that year, *The Lincoln Legend* drew a warm reception, the *New York Times* pronouncing it "memorable and important."[10] "Reviewers were so good to it," Basler later recalled, "that I have not yet recovered from the effect."[11]

Dedicated to Professor Hubbell, *The Lincoln Legend* is the precocious work of a confident young literary scholar. Vividly written and thoroughly researched, it traces the course of Lincoln's reputation as it developed after his assassination in 1865 and grew in poems by Walt Whitman, James Russell Lowell, John Gould Fletcher, Vachel Lindsay, Richard Henry Stoddard, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Edwin Arlington Robinson; in novels by Thomas Dixon, Francis Grierson, and the American Winston Churchill; and in biographies by J.G. Holland, Ida M. Tarbell, William H. Herndon, John T. Morse, Jr., Nathaniel Wright Stephenson, Lord Charnwood ("the best combination of criticism and admiration yet to appear"), Carl Sandburg, and Albert J. Beveridge. Basler also discussed works of art by Francis Carpenter, Gutzon Borglum, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and Daniel Chester French as well as plays by John Drinkwater, Test Dalton, and Thomas Dixon. A theme running through the book is the country's need for a national hero or "folk-god" around whom everyone could rally. Here is an excerpt:

> The life of the young Lincoln as it was remembered in after years by his friends who had known him as a boy, or had known people who had known him, was inevitably remembered in the spiritual presence of the savior of the nation, the martyr and saint; and the veil of sadness before their misty eyes. So what was remembered took on a new significance. Every act became in some respect

8. Ibid., 11.

9. Ibid., 10, 37. As it turned out, Oliver Barrett, with whom Basler later became close friends, received but did not read the manuscript before publication.

10. Charles Willis Thompson, "Lincoln as the Religion of Religionless America," *New York Times*, August 25, 1935, pp. 3, 20.

11. "An Acquaintance," 11.

> hallowed; as the man was great, so was the child; as the man was sad, so was the child; as the man was champion of the weak and oppressed, so was the child. What was not remembered was invented, and so the legend grew.[12]

By the early 1940s, "having read practically everything written about, as well as by, Lincoln," Basler became aware that "few among those who wrote about him considered how much his literary instinct or bent contributed to the development of his character and unique achievement as a public man." He believed "the best record of the mind of Lincoln" was in his words, a view which "controlled my continuing study and interest and largely directed my work on Lincoln."[13]

Over the next decade Basler "undertook to find and obtain a photocopy of the original manuscript, or in its absence, the original or best available printed text of his most important letters as well as his major speeches." This "intermittent search" morphed into a "concentrated effort to produce a one-volume selection edited entirely from the best available sources."[14]

Soon Basler had a new manuscript in hand, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, but again he ran into trouble finding a publisher. Carl Sandburg, with whom Basler had by then established a warm epistolary relationship, tried his best, as did others, to no avail. Happily, the book fell into the hands of Ralph Newman, proprietor of Chicago's Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, which sold more Lincoln and Civil War books than did any other dealer. Newman "was able to convince" when he told publishers this large manuscript "would make a book he could sell," and so in the fall of 1946 *His Speeches and Writings* was published by World Publishing Company.[15] In contrast to *Lincoln Legend*, Basler's *His Speeches and Writings* enjoyed "a relatively wide sale to the general public," even appearing—thanks, Basler suspected, to Sandburg's preface—on the best-seller list.[16]

Reviews were effusive. "This is the most comprehensive and readable one-volume collection of Lincoln's writings ever published," wrote David H. Donald. "All the greatest of Lincoln's writings are here," wrote James G. Randall, including "playful quips, humorous turns, and occasional flashes of unexpected self-revelation that make

12. Roy P. Basler, *The Lincoln Legend, A Study in Changing Conceptions* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935), 120.

13. "An Acquaintance," 11–12.

14. Ibid., 12.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 14.

Lincoln an unfailing source of enjoyment."[17] In the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, scholar Charles Wilson deemed the collection superior to those previously attempted, adding that "the broadly informative notations which are scattered copiously throughout the volume add immeasurably to its value."[18]

In the *New York Times*, Jay Monaghan emphasized that Basler's "rivals" in the one-volume field—Luther Robinson, Daniel Kilham Dodge, and Philip Van Doren Stern—"abridged Lincoln's best work," whereas Basler gives us every word of the original documents. Even Lincoln's devoted private secretaries, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, "deemed it proper to edit the words of their dead chief." Like others, Monaghan extolled Basler's introductory essay on Lincoln's style, inserting his own observation that Lincoln studied the "sound effects of words as a poignant accompaniment for thought, like music enhancing emotional scenes in the movies."[19]

In his preface Sandburg observed that Lincoln "the statesman and politician, the executive, the humorist, the literary artist, the great spokesman of democracy, the simple though complicated human being" is best known "by an acquaintance with all that he wrote and said." For most busy people, however, a complete and definitive collection of his writings "won't do," and therefore "why not one book . . . holding the best and most indispensable of Lincoln utterance?" He praised Basler's "persistent labors" in quest of original documents. For each letter or speech, he noted, Basler tells us who owns the original or where the printed text first appeared. Further, Basler's essay on Lincoln's development as a writer is a "scholarly treatise worth careful reading."[20]

In his brief introduction Basler confirmed that three-fourths of his selections were edited from original manuscripts or photostatic copies.

17. Comments of Donald and Randall quoted on back cover of *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990).

18. Charles Wilson, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 33, no. 4 (March 1947): 657–58.

19. Jay Monaghan, "A. Lincoln: An Analysis of His Style," *New York Times*, September 29, 1946.

20. *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), Carl Sandburg, Preface, xvii–xxi. As shown in Basler's Sources and Bibliography, many of these writings were owned by the Abraham Lincoln Association or the Illinois State Historical Society; others were owned by collector Oliver R. Barrett, the Henry E. Huntington Library, the Lincoln National Life Foundation, the Chicago Historical Society, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Pierpont Morgan Library, or libraries at Brown, Harvard, or the University of Pennsylvania. Printed material originally appeared in the *Sangamo Journal*, the *Illinois Journal*, the *New York Daily Tribune*, the *New York Herald*, the *Congressional Globe*, and other publications.

Selections for which no manuscript was available were edited from the original printed version or a later printing Lincoln himself corrected or authorized. In only 13 instances could Basler find no original source, relying instead on the version contained in Nicolay and Hay's 12-volume *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1905). In making his selections, Basler used three criteria: literary significance, historical importance, and human interest.[21]

Presciently, Basler concluded: "Until a truly definitive edition of Lincoln's complete works appears, it is hoped that the present volume may supply the reader with a superior text for Lincoln's best writings, and afterwards may remain a serviceable single volume of selections."[22] His hope came true.

This one-volume selection still strikes me as the best way for a student to begin with Lincoln. A direct, intimate connection with his words and thoughts will reveal more about the great man than a fact-ridden, cradle-to-grave biography, no matter how able the scholar. Moreover, while the *Collected Works* is indispensable, by definition it contains a substantial amount of routine documentary material, whereas *His Speeches and Writings* brings us Lincoln's best letters and speeches—from his March 1832 "Communication to the People of Sangamo County" to his August 22, 1862, Letter to Horace Greeley; from his January 27, 1838, speech to the Young Men's Lyceum to his August 22, 1864, Address to the 166th Ohio Regiment; from his November 19, 1863, Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg to his March 4, 1865, Second Inaugural Address; and to many interesting and dramatic points in between.[23]

Although best known as editor of the *Collected Works* and *His Speeches and Writings*, Basler was a prolific writer of books, essays, and speeches about Lincoln and other (mainly literary) subjects over a long career as a teacher, writer, and librarian, as shown in the bibliography that follows this article. In my humble opinion, apart from his superb editorial achievements, he shone most brightly as an astute analyst of Lincoln's writing.

21. *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), Basler Introduction, xxiii. Basler expresses his gratitude to Harry E. Pratt and W. E. Baringer, former executive secretaries of the ALA who "laid open the Association's files and continually gave invaluable suggestions." He also thanks Louis Warren, Director of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, for opening the resources of that institution.

22. Ibid., xxvii.

23. But not all points. Aside from the first in Ottawa, the Lincoln-Douglas debates are missing.

One of his earliest articles, appearing in the *North American Review*, was entitled "Abraham Lincoln, Artist."[24] Basler asserted that Lincoln's unusual "feeling for cadence" in arranging words infused the Civil War epoch with poetic significance. As others would do going forward, Basler compared William H. Seward's suggested close to the First Inaugural with Lincoln's much-improved version resembling a "prose poem." Interestingly, Basler saw the Springfield Farewell of February 11, 1861, as the final turning point in Lincoln's prose. "A new note of unfathomed emotion, at once heroic and simple, sounded in his words for the first time."[25]

"As yet," Basler opined, "only a few of Lincoln's writings have received anything like the literary analysis that is due them." He predicted that Lincoln's "prose may yet be recognized as his most permanent legacy to humanity." Basler believed there is "still a crying need for a good and fairly inclusive edition of his works prepared for the student of literature as well as for the student of history."[26] Here we may assume that at age 31 the energetic and ambitious Basler had some inkling he might be the one to do it.

A year later, Basler published another essay called "Abraham Lincoln's Rhetoric."[27] This offered an excellent technical analysis of Lincoln's prose style, featuring literary devices such as repetition, balance, parallelism, antithesis, alliteration, assonance, biblical rhythm or cadence, use of caesurae, and figurative speech "the common man" could understand. Over time these techniques became a "habit of mind" with Lincoln, as illustrated in this sentence from his November 2, 1863, letter to Shakespearean actor J. H. Hackett, written after a private letter Lincoln had sent to Hackett was made public: "I have endured a great deal of ridicule without much malice; and have received a great deal of kindness, not quite free from ridicule."[28] As for repetition, Basler noted that in the 272-word Gettysburg Address the word "we" appears ten times and "here" eight. Above all, Basler emphasized, Lincoln sought to be understood.[29]

24. Roy P. Basler, "Abraham Lincoln: Artist," *North American Review* 245, no. 1 (Spring 1938): 144–53.

25. Ibid., 148–51.

26. Ibid., 146.

27. Basler, "Abraham Lincoln's Rhetoric," *American Literature* 2, no. 2 (May 1939): 167–82.

28. Basler et al., eds., *Collected Works*, 6:558–59 (hereinafter CW).

29. "Abraham Lincoln's Rhetoric." Decades later, Lincoln scholar Douglas Wilson characterized Basler as "the author of perhaps the most penetrating studies of this subject." Wilson, "Lincoln's Rhetoric," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 11.

In the 50-page essay "Lincoln's Development as a Writer," Basler maintained that Lincoln's early education was better than commonly thought. The textbooks he studied—Thomas Dilworth's *A New Guide to the English Tongue*, William Scott's *Lessons in Elocution*, and *The Kentucky Preceptor (Containing a Number of Useful Lessons for Reading and Speaking)*—"probably provided as good an opportunity for learning the essentials and the graces of expression then, as the best modern textbooks do now." Moreover, Lincoln's "technique in telling stories to enforce a truth and his fondness for rhythmic parallelism and balanced structure" may have derived from two books he read religiously during his early years: Aesop's *Fables* and the King James Bible. Ultimately, Basler observed, "the intellectual avidity of the child is more important than methods of instruction, and good books, with the opportunity and desire to master them, need little from a teacher when in the hands of an exceptional student."[30]

During his New Salem years (1831–37) Lincoln studied grammar under the tutelage of schoolmaster Mentor Graham and befriended a man named Jack Kelso who inculcated in him a love for and knowledge of William Shakespeare and Robert Burns. Upon moving to Springfield, Lincoln continued to read widely and speak eloquently. Basler considered "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions" to be Lincoln's "first considerable literary effort" and noted that during these years Lincoln experimented with poetry ("My Childhood Home I See Again"), pseudonymous political satire (notably, the second "Rebecca" letter appearing in the *Sangamo Journal* on September 2, 1842), even the mystery story ("Remarkable Case of Arrest for Murder" published in the *Quincy Whig* on April 15, 1846). Basler cited Lincoln's "Eulogy on the Death of Benjamin Ferguson," delivered to the Washington Temperance Society on February 8, 1842, as displaying "a solemn rhythm and elegiac diction not matched in literary effect by anything he had written prior to this time."[31]

In Lincoln, Basler concluded, "we have a literary artist, constrained by social and economic circumstances and a dominant political tradition to deal with facts as facts, yet always motivated by his love of words and symbols and his eternal craving to entertain people and create beauty." This love of words "finally flowers" in the unique art

30. Basler, "Lincoln's Development as a Writer," in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 3–5.

31. Ibid., 5–11.

of the Gettysburg Address, the Springfield Farewell, and the Second Inaugural.[32]

With his Speech at Peoria in 1854, Lincoln "found a theme worthy of his best," and the high level of literary merit in his speeches and letters during this "middle period" is inextricably bound up with his new emotional conviction. Both the House Divided Speech and the Address at Cooper Institute show a "technical distinction of style that is generally credited only to his later masterpieces." Of particular and perhaps unexpected interest is Basler's high estimation of the "Last Speech in the Campaign of 1858," phrased with "lyric calm and cadenced beauty of expression which Lincoln had never before equaled . . ."[33] An excerpt:

> My friends, today closes the discussion of this canvass. The planting and the culture are over; and there remains but the preparation, and the harvest.
>
> . . . May I be indulged, in this closing scene, to say a few words of myself. I have borne a laborious, and, in some respects to myself, a painful part in this contest. Through all, I have neither assailed, nor wrestled with any part of the Constitution. The legal right of the Southern people to reclaim their fugitives I have constantly admitted. The legal right of Congress to interfere with their institution in the states, I have constantly denied. In resisting the spread of slavery to new territory, and with that, what appears to me to be a tendency to subvert the first principle of free government itself my whole effort has consisted. . . . As I have not felt, so I have not expressed any harsh sentiment towards our Southern brethren.
>
> . . . I have said that in some respects the contest has been painful to me. Myself, and those with whom I act have been constantly accused of a purpose to destroy the Union; and bespattered with every imaginable odious epithet; and some who were friends, as it were but yesterday have made themselves most active in this. I have cultivated patience, and made no attempt at a retort.
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> Ambition has been ascribed to me. . . . I claim no insensibility to political honors; but today could the Missouri restriction

32. Ibid., 12.
33. Ibid., 19–24.

> be restored, and the whole slavery question replaced on the old ground of "toleration" by necessity where it exists, with unyielding hostility to the spread of it, on principle, I would, in consideration, gladly agree, that Judge Douglas should never be out, and I never in, an office, so long as we both or either, live.[34]

Basler classified Lincoln's use of figures of speech as "one of his most distinctive stylistic traits," sometimes used "so unobtrusively that a casual reader may not even be aware of the metaphor." He cited Lincoln's "dramatic analogy" of the highwayman in his Cooper Union address:

> But you will not abide the election of a Republican president! In that supposed event, you say, you will destroy the Union; and then, you say, the great crime of having destroyed it will be upon us! That is cool. A highwayman holds a pistol to my ear, and mutters through his teeth, "Stand and deliver, or I shall kill you, and then you will be the murderer![35]

Turning to Lincoln's presidential writings, Basler compared and contrasted three famous letters of condolence—to Mrs. Lydia Bixby (November 21, 1864), Fanny McCullough (December 23, 1862), and Col. Elmer Ellsworth's parents (May 25, 1861)—noting that the "personal, fatherly tone" of the McCullough letter "would have been intolerable" in the letter sent to Mrs. Bixby, whom he did not know. Basler believed that Lincoln, not Hay, wrote the Bixby letter based on "circumstantial evidence surrounding the composition of the letter and internal evidence of style, both of which point conclusively to Lincoln's authorship."[36]

In Basler's estimation all of Lincoln's letters during this period display a "high degree of felicity in phrasing" and a "remarkable adaption of tone to theme." For example, two days before the Bixby letter Lincoln wrote a letter to General William Rosecrans on suspending the execution of a Confederate officer, "which in its limited sphere is

34. CW, 3: 334.

35. Basler, "Lincoln's Development as a Writer," pp. 25–33; CW, 3: 546–47.

36. Basler, "Lincoln's Development as a Writer," 34; Basler annotation to the Letter to Mrs. Bixby, November 21, 1864, *His Speeches and Writings*, 771. Lacking an original manuscript, this debate continues, with recent "digital" scholarship tilting substantially in Hay's favor. See Michael Burlingame, "New Light on the Bixby Letter," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1995), and "The Bixby Letter," *For the People: A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2017).

as succinct, as delicately worded, and as definitive an achievement of language as Lincoln ever composed."[37]

While Lincoln's presidential messages tend toward the "strictly utilitarian," certain passages "reach peaks of eloquence unsurpassed in the annals of history," such as the concluding paragraph of his Annual Message to Congress of December 1, 1862. It reads, in part:

> Fellow citizens, *we* cannot escape history. . . . The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. . . . In *giving* freedom to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the *free*—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth. . . . The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just—a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless.[38]

Basler emphasized that Lincoln's greatest works—the Springfield Farewell, the Gettysburg Address, and the Second Inaugural—do not differ so much from his earlier works in "technical command of style" as they do in "power of feeling and imagination." In "flashes of alliteration and assonance," Lincoln at Gettysburg sought to honor the dead and inspire his countrymen to re-dedicate themselves to the "proposition" that all men are created equal. In so doing, he created a "poetic metaphor of birth, death, and spiritual rebirth, of the life of man and the life of the nation."[39]

In Lincoln's hands, parallelism, balance, and rhythmic pattern sometimes "approach meter in their regularity." For example: "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here;" "To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me;" "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray;" and ". . . to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."[40]

37. Basler, "Lincoln's Development as a Writer," 36. The letter reads as follows: "A Major Wolf, as it seems was under sentence, in your Department, to be executed in retaliation for the murder of a Major Wilson; and I, without any particular knowledge of the facts, was induced, by appeals for mercy, to order the suspension of his execution until further order. Understanding that you so desire, this letter places the case again within your control, with the remark only that I wish you to do nothing merely for revenge, but that what you may do, shall be solely done with reference to the security of the future." Major Wolf's life was spared.

38. Basler, "Lincoln's Development as a Writer," 38; CW, 5: 537.

39. Ibid., 42.

40. Ibid., 46–47.

In his review of *His Speeches and Writings* Charles Wilson lauded this prefatory essay as "the best thing of its kind this reviewer has ever seen."[41] Since then many eminent scholars—historical and literary—have analyzed and marveled at the beauty and precision of Lincoln's writing, among them Douglas Wilson, Garry Wills, and Jacques Barzun.[42] Thirty-two years after reading Basler's remarkable essay, I agree with Charles Wilson's assessment.[43]

Returning to Basler's teaching career, in 1943 he left Florence, Alabama, to become a Professor of English at the University of Arkansas, a post he held until 1946. He then accepted a position as chair of the English Department at George Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee, where he worked until 1950. As the bibliography shows, Basler was an erudite literary scholar who wrote books and essays on major poets. In 1948 he published a book entitled *Sex, Symbolism, and Psychology in Literature*, which includes psychological interpretations of Coleridge's "Christabel," Tennyson's "Maud," Poe's "Ligeia," and Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."[44] But during this same period he was immersed in editorial labors on *His Speeches and Writings* and was developing close friendships with Lincoln scholars and ALA leaders such as Benjamin P. Thomas and William H. Townsend. In the late spring of 1947 William Baringer resigned as executive secretary and was succeeded by Roy Basler, a "young English professor" well versed in Lincoln's writings. As later recounted by Thomas F. Schwartz, only months earlier Basler's *His Speeches and Writings* had been released. His "meticulous editing" and "insightful preface" on Lincoln's development as a writer "was the best endorsement the ALA

41. Charles Wilson, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 33, no. 4 (March 1947): 658. Similarly, the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* characterized Basler's essay as "easily the best treatment of the subject in print." See vol. 4, no. 4 (December 1946): 206–8.

42. See Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); and Jacques Barzun, *On Writing, Editing and Publishing* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). The latter book contains a chapter entitled "Lincoln the Writer."

43. One historian has opined that Lincoln's literary talent has been overemphasized in comparison to his formidable political skills. Prof. Sean Wilentz wittily remarked that Lincoln is "in danger of being aestheticized: now he belongs to the English department." An interesting point, although in this writer's view the two talents are woven together. Wilentz, "Who Lincoln Was," *The New Republic*, July 15, 2009.

44. Roy P. Basler, *Sex, Symbolism, and Psychology in Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1948).

could have required."[45] Thus, upon being recruited by Paul Angle, Basler moved his family to Springfield to take over as executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association, a position he held until 1952.[46]

My impression is that while Prof. Basler was interested in teaching students and writing professional literary articles, the writings of Abraham Lincoln had become his overriding passion. Between 1947 and 1952, the ALA project, long in gestation, of completing a new edition of Lincoln's *Collected Works* dominated his life. To some extent this became his "white whale."

Initially formed in 1908 as the Lincoln Centennial Association to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, the association was re-energized in 1922 by Logan Hay, a Springfield attorney who happened to be John Hay's nephew. In 1929 he led an effort to change the organization's name to the Abraham Lincoln Association. As Basler later wrote, "the need to sift particularly the local Illinois sources of Lincoln's early career and replace encrustations of fiction and legend with recovered facts was the laudable object to which Hay and his associates dedicated the reorganized association."[47] Hay hired a young scholar named Paul Angle, who served as executive secretary from 1932 to 1936 and published well-researched articles in the ALA's *Bulletin*, later renamed the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*. The Association also published books and monographs such as Angle's *"Here I Have Lived": A History of Lincoln's Springfield* and Baringer's *Lincoln's Vandalia*.[48]

Over the years Basler developed close friendships with several ALA leaders, including Benjamin Thomas, Harry E. Pratt, and William Baringer, all of whom preceded him as executive secretary. He also relied upon his "editorial advisers," including Angle (who in 1945 had become Director of the Chicago Historical Society) and James G.

45. Thomas F. Schwartz, "Lincoln's Published Writings: A History and Supplement," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 9 (1987): 19–61. In this informative essay Schwartz writes, p. 29: "To a large extent, the ALA project was simply a continuation of Basler's 1946 book."

46. Basler, "An Acquaintance," 38. An announcement of the appointment of Dr. Roy P. Basler as Executive Secretary and Editor of the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* and of the projected *Complete Writings* of Lincoln appeared in the *Quarterly*'s March 1947 issue, p. 247.

47. Basler, "An Acquaintance," 39.

48. Ibid., 39, 42.

Randall (Professor of History at the University of Illinois). As Basler recalled, when he arrived on the scene in 1947 "there remained one big job," namely, a new edition of Lincoln's works, "for years anticipated as the culmination of the association's program." However, it "could not be brought to fulfillment" until the Robert Todd Lincoln Papers in the Library of Congress were released, an event set to occur on July 26, 1947.[49]

Although the Association had "sporadically" collected photocopies of Lincoln's speeches and letters, Basler embarked on a "major, organized effort" to collect all extant Lincoln documents. This was not easy, because many of Lincoln's letters had fallen into the hands of unknown individuals, requiring Basler and his co-editors to search for "several thousand needles in hundreds of unidentified haystacks." In addition, numerous Lincoln manuscripts placed in government files had been "lifted" over the years by persons with access "to be given to friends and autograph collectors or sold to autograph dealers." Not unreasonably, Basler condemned autograph dealers and collectors who had no qualms about receiving "stolen property."[50]

To "cast a large net," Basler sent out several thousand letters to libraries, museums, and collectors, seeking their cooperation in this monumental effort, enclosing a form for reply. If no response was received, he sent out a second letter, then a third, and a fourth. Not infrequently, meetings with reluctant collectors were necessary to obtain the desired photocopy. Records of the National Archives were scoured, as were uncatalogued papers of historical societies and libraries across the country. The catalogues of autograph dealers and auction houses were searched, occasionally leading to discovery of a manuscript thought to have been permanently lost. Newspapers of

49. Ibid., 44. The Robert Todd Lincoln Papers, a misnomer since they are his father's documents, were initially placed by Lincoln's friend and executor David Davis in a bank vault in Bloomington, Illinois, and later deposited by Robert Lincoln at the Library of Congress (LOC) with instructions they were not to be made public until 21 years after his death, which turned out to mean July 26, 1947. As recounted by Schwartz, the LOC "mounted a publicity campaign" to promote this event, and word circulated that the LOC was itself contemplating publication of an updated edition of Lincoln's writings. According to ALA Board meeting minutes, after a series of meetings in 1946 "the Library decided to let the Association undertake, without governmental competition, the re-editing of the Writings of Lincoln." Schwartz, "Lincoln's Published Writings," p. 21.

50. Basler, "An Acquaintance," 44–46.

the period were combed, and official records reviewed for speeches, telegrams, and orders where no manuscript could be found.[51]

In his reminiscence Basler gave due credit to his assistants, Marion Dolores Bonzi and Lloyd A. Dunlap.[52] Ms. Bonzi was "zealous to the point of obsession" in ensuring the accuracy of a Lincoln text, while Mr. Dunlap, one of Basler's graduate students, displayed a "phenomenal talent for finding the necessary facts" to construct a definitive footnote.[53] Basler prepared the annotations accompanying the texts, often relying upon Dunlap's research.

At long last Rutgers University Press published the *Collected Works* in 1953. As many have observed, these eight volumes are stylishly put together. Bound in gray buckram cloth, each spine presents its title in gold against a blue background, and each volume contains upwards of 550 pages of text in a readable size. Time periods are assigned to each volume, No. 1 covering Lincoln's works from 1824 to 28 August 1848, No. 8 his writings from 12 September 1864 to his death, including undated items. The frontispiece of each volume features a different photograph of Lincoln from the Frederick Hill Meserve Collection. One scholar pronounced these "the handsomest volumes to appear in many a year."[54]

In his foreword Basler noted that the *Collected Works* contain twice as many items as appeared in the *Complete Works* edited by Nicolay and Hay (1894, 1905), or *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln* edited by Arthur Brooks Lapsley (1905), and other compilations.[55] Basler and his assistant editors focused on all known Lincoln writings and public utterances, excluding most documents from his legal cases ("which the Association proposes to publish at a future date") and routine letters

51. Ibid., 46–47. In its Spring 1953 issue the *Lincoln Herald* published a symposium on Basler's *Collected Works*, including an article Basler first published in the *Library Journal* of January 15, 1953, wherein he provided details on the process he and his co-editors employed. Many persons in possession of a Lincoln autograph, he noted, would only furnish copies made by typewriter or longhand, fearing that a photostatic copy would reduce the value of the original manuscript. The symposium also includes brief reviews by Harlan Hoyt Horner and Donald W. Riddle. "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln," *Lincoln Herald* 55, no. 1 (Spring 1953): 13–16.

52. Basler, "An Acquaintance," 47–49. Ms. Bonzi later became Marion Dolores Pratt, wife of Harry E. Pratt.

53. Ibid.

54. T. Harry Williams, "Abraham Lincoln—Principle and Pragmatism in Politics: A Review Article," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 40, Issue 1 (June 1953): 89.

55. Basler, Foreword to *Collected Works*, Vol. I, pp. vii–viii. The other compilations cited are by Ida M. Tarbell (1900), Gilbert Tracy (1917), Brown University (1927), Paul M. Angle (1930), and Emanuel Hertz (1931).

and endorsements, such as nominations to office, inclusion of which would have "swell[ed] the proportions and cost" of the project to at least another volume.[56] Informative footnotes and annotations provide context and identify persons referred to in the documents. Although "definitive" to a substantial degree, the edition, Basler acknowledged, faced the impossibility of certifying that every single Lincoln document is collected within. Indeed, "even as we go to press five new and hitherto unknown Lincoln letters have come to light under circumstances wholly unexpected."[57]

Basler concluded: "To have helped in preserving an accurate record of a great man's work is a privilege of the present which the future can properly assess only by pledging itself in some degree to those principles of honesty, justice, and human brotherhood which will distinguish the writings of Lincoln as long as they are read."[58]

If the reviews of *His Speeches and Writings* were effusive, the reception given the *Collected Works* was equally laudatory, if not more so. In the *New York Times*, David Mearns adjudged it the "truly definitive edition of the writings of our foremost statesman," noting that earlier compilations "did not approach completeness."[59] He characterized the "scholarly apparatus" as "excellently conceived and admirably executed," with the source of each text supplied, persons identified, and obscure allusions explained. "Out of these volumes," he wrote, "emerges the indisputable, the indispensable American. His countrymen will run to meet him."[60]

Perhaps the highest praise came from historian T. Harry Williams in a 17-page review-essay published in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. Noting how the ALA had "nourished the idea" of publishing Lincoln's collected works for a quarter century (its first president, Logan Hay, conceived the project), Williams praised Basler for "circularizing" all libraries, repositories, archives, and private collections believed to have Lincoln materials. The task of collecting and

56. Ibid., viii–ix. In Appendix II the editors listed "all known documents which have not been included." It also includes a chronological index of all known forgeries.

57. Basler, Foreword to CW, 1: xi. Schwartz, in his 1987 article "Lincoln's Published Writings," p. 23, notes that the ALA's working title for the project was *The Complete Writings of Abraham Lincoln* up until the final page proofs.

58. Basler, Foreword to CW, 1: xv.

59. David C. Mearns, "Inseparably a Part of Lincoln's Spirit," *New York Times*, February 8, 1953. Mearns himself was editor of *The Lincoln Papers: The Story of the Collection with Selections to July 4, 1861*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1948), about the Robert Todd Lincoln Papers at LOC.

60. Mearns, "Inseparably," *New York Times*. Similar praise appeared from Sterling North, "Lincoln's Works in Nine Volumes," *Washington Post*, February 15, 1953.

cataloguing the documents, and reducing them to typescript, took five years of hard work and required a large sum of money. Basler assembled 6,870 writings, 3,312 of them "never before published."[61]

Williams also complimented Basler and his associates for adapting to changing circumstances. Early in 1952, for example, about 300 "endorsements and letters from the War Department suddenly appeared on the market." Many of these were acquired by the Illinois State Historical Library in time for the *Collected Works* editors to "stop the presses" and include them within the eight volumes. Also in 1952, the William H. Seward Papers passed from the Seward family to the Fred L. Emerson Foundation. Their sudden availability necessitated the re-setting of one volume.[62]

All told, wrote Williams, "Dr. Basler and his assistants have performed an editorial feat that can be described only in terms of superlatives."[63] He concluded: "It is something to have at last an almost definitive edition of the writings of the man who is certainly our national hero and who is accepted as the ablest spokesman of the American democratic tradition."[64] Historian David Herbert Donald joined the chorus, although not without quibbles. Basler and his assistants "have produced an edition of Lincoln's writings which meets the highest expectations of Civil War scholars." For textual accuracy it is "simply incredible," Donald noting how he went to the trouble of collating over a hundred items in the *Collected Works* with manuscript and microfilm originals and "detected not a single error in transcription." The *Collected Works* "will at once supersede all previous collections of the President's writings," and is "destined to have a permanent place in our libraries."[65]

And yet, as a deeply knowledgeable Lincoln historian, Prof. Donald questioned the inclusion of the "Memorandum on Fort Sumter," which lists "considerations in favor of withdrawing the Troops from Fort Sumpter (sic), by President Lincoln." Assigned an uncertain date of "March 18[?] 1861," this document is not in Lincoln's handwriting and "the phrasing is distinctly not Lincolnian." Donald pointed out there is no autograph in the Lincoln Papers "that resembles the manuscript," which appears in the Gideon Welles Papers. In fairness,

61. T. Harry Williams, "Abraham Lincoln—Principle and Pragmatism in Politics: A Review Article," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 40, no. 1 (June 1953): 90.

62. Williams, 92.

63. Williams, 93.

64. Williams, 90.

65. David H. Donald, "Review of The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln," *American Historical Review* 159, no. 1 (October 1953): 144.

Basler acknowledged these uncertainties in his annotation, although he appears to have concluded that Lincoln was "recapitulating the opinions of the several members of the cabinet submitted on March 15 and 16 in response to Lincoln's letter of March 15."[66]

Donald also deemed the provenance of Lincoln's letter of January 1864 to James S. Wadsworth "distressingly dubious" and inconsistent with other Lincoln statements on the subject of "Negro suffrage." "Unauthenticated in origin and un-Lincolnian in phrasing and ideas," the letter "cannot be accepted as genuine."[67] Overall, Donald quibbled with minor matters such as the spelling of Frederick Law Olmsted's name (not Olmstead) and seemed to wish Basler and his co-editors had written lengthier commentary following each document instead of adhering (as they did) to a "standard of brevity" which many believe served the project well.[68] In the end, Donald acknowledges these "reflections" cannot detract from "the real accomplishments these volumes represent."[69]

In *The New Yorker* literary scholar Edmund Wilson characterized the editing as "remarkably satisfactory, for it is scrupulous about dates and explains all possible references, supplying extracts from relevant documents such as letters and newspaper articles." Echoing Basler on the relationship between Lincoln's literary instinct and his achievements as a public man, Wilson noted that Lincoln "created himself as a poetic figure, and he thus imposed himself on the nation."[70]

Looking back 35 years later, Lincoln historian Thomas F. Schwartz emphasized that throughout the 1930s and 1940s the ALA collected a large cache of photostatic copies of original Lincoln documents under the guidance of Thomas, Pratt, and Baringer. A committee consisting

66. Ibid. at pp. 144–45; Basler, CW, IV: 289–90. Taking no position on the issue, this writer notes the Memorandum contains Lincoln's well-known misspelling of Fort Sumter.

67. Ibid. at pp. 145–46. In the *Collected Works* Basler disclosed the history of this document, reprinted in newspapers from an unverified publication called *The Southern Advocate*. Basler believed its contents are "closely in keeping with views expressed by Lincoln elsewhere" and "seems to be genuine." CW, VII: 101–2.

68. Ibid. at p. 148. In his 1987 essay, Thomas F. Schwartz praised the "brief but helpful notes" provided by Basler and his co-editors, noting the *Collected Works* "anticipated and avoided the editorial excesses that characterized the first volume of Julian Boyd's *Jefferson Papers*, published in 1950." The "general thrust" of the editorial board's policy "was to offer an accurate transcription of all significant material written by Lincoln, . . . identifying names, places, and when necessary, variant published accounts." Schwartz, "Lincoln's Published Writings," p. 25.

69. David Donald, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 159, No. 1 (October 1953): 149.

70. Edmund Wilson, "Abraham Lincoln: The Union as Religious Mysticism," *The New Yorker*, March 14, 1953, p. 116.

of Baringer, Angle, Randall, Thomas, and ALA president George W. Bunn, Jr., "made all of the early editorial decisions that essentially established the editorial foundation later employed by Basler." As a result, the *Collected Works* "is more appropriately a collective effort of the ALA rather than any single individual." Nevertheless, Roy P. Basler "established a very high standard in historical documentary editing at a time when modern standards were still in their infancy." The *Collected Works* "remains an essential research tool for any scholar studying Abraham Lincoln or the Civil War."[71]

As the year 1952 wound down and the *Collected Works* was put to bed, one might think Roy Basler, having reached the summit of this almost unscalable mountain, would have felt supremely satisfied with his efforts and confident about his future. Alas, not quite so. By the spring of 1952, Basler had to "face up to the fact that as a result of having been five years out-of-the-line of regular candidates for academic achievement, no university seemed to have the slightest interest in hiring an ex-editor of Lincoln back into the role of professor of literature." The only academic offer he received came in the form of a conditional one-year appointment at the university "where I first embarked on Lincoln scholarship," namely, Duke.[72]

In addition, the cost of producing the *Collected Works* had spiraled far beyond its budget, essentially bankrupting the ALA. According to Thomas F. Schwartz, by January 1951 "it was apparent that the project could be sustained only by liquidating all remaining ALA assets," and by the next year "the ALA coffers were exhausted." Original projections were that the task would take three years and consist of four or five volumes, at a cost of roughly $17,000. Basler himself received a modest salary as executive director of the Association, with no extra emoluments for his work on the project, and publication costs (or so the ALA thought) were to be borne by Rutgers University Press. However, the number of Lincoln documents ballooned to twice as many as anticipated, requiring more meetings with dealers and collectors, more research at libraries and archives, and retention of additional staff to complete the painstaking work of editing and annotation.[73]

As an example, the ALA brought in Mrs. Helen Bullock "on loan" from the Library of Congress Manuscripts Division from March 1948 to September 1949 and agreed to pay her salary. With extensive knowledge of the LOC and other collections in Washington, D.C., including

71. Schwartz, "Lincoln's Published Writings," p. 19.
72. Basler, *An Acquaintance*, p. 49.
73. Schwartz, "Lincoln's Published Writings," pp. 34, 32.

methods of gaining access to material ordinarily closed to the public, she was by all accounts "a diligent, meticulous, and speedy worker."[74]

The upshot was that, despite spending some $40,000 of ALA funds and exhausting a $54,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the *Collected Works* project had depleted the resources of the ALA to the point of virtual extinction.[75] These dire circumstances were aggravated by a serious miscommunication between the ALA and its publisher, Rutgers University Press.[76] Without written confirmation, the ALA assumed that Rutgers would bear the entire expense of publishing *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. By late 1949, however, as the project's size mushroomed, Rutgers advised it was no longer certain the venture was financially viable and expressed reluctance about going forward. This frightening news prompted editor Basler to write a letter to Rutgers wherein he dreaded the idea that "I shall not get through with the job of seeing it through the press before my crew here is disbanded, and for that matter before I am disbanded."[77]

Ultimately, a deal was struck whereby Rutgers agreed to pay all publication costs on condition that the ALA forgo any royalties until Rutgers recovered its full investment. These and other events delayed the publication date, initially targeted for the spring of 1952, until Lincoln's birthday, February 12, 1953.

In the event, as noted by Schwartz, the *Collected Works* turned out to be both a critical and a financial success.[78] Yet he concludes: "Perhaps it was the caprice of goddess Fortuna that allowed the troublesome issue of publication costs to continue to haunt the ALA even after its demise as an active organization; in spite of the profits from the *Collected Works*, Rutgers never paid any royalties to the Abraham Lincoln Association."[79]

74. Schwartz, "Lincoln's Published Writings," p. 30.

75. T. H. Williams, "Abraham Lincoln—Principle and Pragmatism in Politics: A Review Article," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 40, Issue 1 (June 1953): 91.

76. Although Rutgers University Press published the *Collected Works*, the ALA owned (and owns) the copyright.

77. Schwartz, "Lincoln's Published Writings," p. 32, citing Basler correspondence of December 8, 1949, ALA Papers, Box. 62, Illinois State Historical Library (now the ALPL). In his reminiscence Basler recalls that, due to "jitters" at Rutgers over publishing the *Collected Works*, he investigated the possibility of the ALA's contracting with a "major trade publishing house," but not one of them was interested. *An Acquaintance*, p. 51.

78. Although pre-publication estimates projected sales of only 500 sets of the eight-volume *Collected Works*, Basler noted that by 1963 Rutgers reported the "pleasant" news that "there are some 40,000 sets around and about in the world." *An Acquaintance*, p. 51.

79. Schwartz, "Lincoln's Published Writings," p. 34.

In his reminiscence, Basler expressed "no regrets" about the five years he spent working on the *Collected Works* "in spite of the fact that it was the only job I ever had in which I failed to receive a single raise in salary." While he understood the reasons for this, he "never understood why the officers of the Abraham Lincoln Association, all my friends, later on turned back all the royalties (a good many thousands of dollars) on *The Collected Works* to Rutgers University Press, at a time when I could have used a portion to help send my children to college."[80]

As for the ALA, it "ceased as an active organization" at the end of 1952, discontinuing publication of the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* and transferring its records to the Illinois State Historical Society. Yet it remained on the books as a non-profit corporation (with an account set up to "accept whatever royalties might accrue from the sale of *The Collected Works*") and eventually returned to full health and vibrancy. In 1979 it began publishing the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, widely regarded as a scholarly publication of the highest quality.

Declining Duke's minimal offer, Basler decided to accept a position at the Library of Congress, where he remained for the rest of his career. Years later, reflecting on Lincoln's comment that "the better part of one's life consists of his friendships," Basler noted Lincoln was "thinking only of the living."[81] He ended his reminiscence, *An Acquaintance with Abraham Lincoln*, as follows: *But how frequently those whose personality, mind, and spirit survive in some measure long after their bones are dust, have participated in our friendships among the living! And of all those, Lincoln remains in his greatness the most companionable*.[82]

In 1952, Roy Basler and his family moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked for the Library of Congress for the next 22 years. He began as chief of the General Reference and Bibliography Division (1952–54), served as Associate Director of the Reference Department (1954–58), and then became Director of the Reference Department (1958–68). Over the last six years of his tenure (1968–74) he served as chief of the Library's Manuscript Division. In addition to his duties as library administrator, he occupied the Library's Chair in American History and for 20 years supervised the Library's Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Series, featuring lectures, conferences, dramatic presentations, and festivals.[83]

80. Basler, *An Acquaintance*, p. 49.

81. Basler, CW 2: 57; *An Acquaintance*, p. 52.

82. Basler, *An Acquaintance*, p. 52.

83. Many of these events and personalities are described in the title essay, "The Muse and the Librarian."

Still a professional literary man, Basler wrote several interesting essays about poetry and poets during these years, many of which can be found in his 1974 collection, *The Muse and the Librarian*. One of them, "Yankee Vergil—Robert Frost in Washington," is a charming piece about Frost's tenure as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress, portraying him as a brilliant poet but also a hopeless egotist and an incorrigible ham. One day Basler arranged for Frost and Carl Sandburg to meet at a festive Library event, thinking they might become friends. It did not go well. On meeting Sandburg, who wore a black fedora, Frost asked: "Don't you know enough to take your hat off when you come in the house?" After Sandburg good-naturedly doffed his fedora, and "the familiar silver forelock fell over his eye," Frost struck again: "Don't you ever comb your hair?" After lunch, the Librarian of Congress tapped a spoon on his glass and asked whether one or both eminent poets might say a word or two to the distinguished guests. Frost replied: "Let Carl pay a tribute to me. He oughtta praise me, my poetry." Sandburg demurred.[84]

But, of course, over the rest of his life Basler remained best known as the editor of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, and he continued to write essays, edit books, and deliver speeches about the great man. In 1961, he and Lloyd A. Dunlap edited a new edition of John Locke Scripps's 1860 campaign biography, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*. This includes an informative Introduction by Basler wherein he concluded: "It would be difficult to estimate how much Scripps's campaign biography contributed to the successful campaign and the election of the Republican standard-bearer in 1860," but "his was one of the most carefully prepared and probably the most widely distributed of all the campaign biographies."[85]

In 1958, he wrote an interesting essay called "Lincoln Country" focusing on the "self-made civilization" created by states formed out of the Northwest Territory, discussing their literature, theater, music, and lyceum lectures. Basler emphasized that people who settled in these states were offered an escape "from the vestiges of an aristocratic and feudal past which were firmly embedded in the constitutions

84. Basler, "Yankee Vergil—Robert Frost in Washington," reprinted in *The Muse and the Librarian* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974), pp. 56–77. This essay first appeared in *Voyages, A National Literary Magazine*, Vol. II, No. 4 (Spring 1969): 8–22. Despite such humorous anecdotes, Basler concluded that Frost's presence on the Washington scene from 1958 to 1962 did more to promote the arts in our nation's capital than anything said or done by any lobbyist.

85. John Locke Scripps, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, edited with Introduction and Notes by Roy P. Basler and Lloyd A. Dunlap (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), pp. 19–20.

of older states, such as slavery, primogeniture, and limitations on suffrage." Those who settled in the Northwest "came to believe that their transplanted and federally fostered civilization was the common denominator for the nation as a whole," and their "first allegiance was to the nation rather than to the state."[86]

In a sesquicentennial lecture, "Abraham Lincoln: An Immortal Sign," Basler addressed how and why Lincoln became "one of the enduring symbols in human history." The essential effort of Lincoln's life, he contended, "was to identify himself, by words and in relationship to his contemporaries, as a representative, symbolic hero." This message is crystallized in his August 22, 1864, Speech to the 166th Ohio Regiment. "I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order that each one of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry enterprise and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations."[87]

Another interesting essay-speech is "Lincoln and Shakespeare," appearing in his 1973 collection *A Touchstone for Greatness*. Basler traced Lincoln's affection for the bard back to passages in Scott's *Lessons in Elocution* which he had memorized as a boy and to his close reading of the plays during his "mature years" in Springfield. With considerable wit Basler detailed the "notoriety" which came Lincoln's way from his attendance at Grover's National Theatre on the night of March 13, 1863, to see James H. Hackett perform the role of Falstaff in *Henry IV*, and the ensuing correspondence between actor and president. Basler also provided colorful accounts from persons who remembered Lincoln quoting Shakespeare during his presidential years, such as Francis B. Carpenter, who, during his painting of *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation*, heard Lincoln reciting the "my offense is rank" speech from *Hamlet*; and Secretary of the Senate John W. Forney who recalled Lincoln reading the "tomorrow" speech from *Macbeth* "as a consolation" after learning the number of casualties in the Battle of the Wilderness.[88]

In 1985 Basler gave a speech called "Lincoln and American Writers" at the 12th Annual Symposium of the Abraham Lincoln Association.

86. Basler, "Lincoln Country," first published in *The Centennial Review of Arts & Science* (Spring, 1958), reprinted in *A Touchstone for Greatness*, pp. 160–71.

87. Basler, "Abraham Lincoln: An Immortal Sign," first published in *The Enduring Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1959), reprinted in *A Touchstone for Greatness*, p. 185; CW 7: 512.

88. Basler, "Lincoln and Shakespeare," in *A Touchstone for Greatness*, pp. 206–27.

Pushing 80, Basler reflected on his 1935 book *The Lincoln Legend*, saying his only regret was "my uninformed poor opinion of William H. Herndon," to whom Lincoln students "owe more than to any other man except Lincoln himself." Of all one-volume Lincoln biographies, Basler judged Benjamin Thomas's *Abraham Lincoln* (1952) the best. As for *belles lettres*, he cited Melvin B. Tolson's "Abraham Lincoln of Rock Springs Farm" as the only poem meeting the high standard of Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and Edwin Arlington Robinson's "The Master." For drama, he praised Mark Van Doren's 1959 play *The Last Days of Lincoln*.[89]

Of more significance for Lincoln scholars is *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Supplement, 1832–1865*, edited by Basler and published by Greenwood Press in 1974. With permission from Rutgers University Press, this volume "employs the general editorial and typographical designs of the original set." In a brief Foreword, Basler noted that in the fall of 1952 he knew a supplemental volume "would be inevitable" and "resolved to see it through," although he did not expect it to take so long. He added, "If the contents of this Supplement seem to run to the routine and minor item more generally than was true of *The Collected Works*, perhaps such was to be expected." At the same time there are a few "discoveries of considerable, if not startling, importance," and "to have turned them up gives special satisfaction."[90]

In 1990, the year after Roy Basler died, Rutgers University Press published *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln: Second Supplement, 1848–1865*, edited by Roy P. Basler and Christian O. Basler. So far as this writer can determine, a relatively small number of copies of this volume were printed.

Probably due to their "supplemental" nature, these two volumes did not elicit the enthusiastic response accorded the original *Collected Works*. In 1992, Thomas F. Schwartz wrote: "The supplemental volumes do not reflect the same high standards of editing and selection found in the original eight volumes." Too many entries "are based

89. Basler, "Lincoln and American Writers," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 7 (1985): 6–17. In this speech Basler described Gore Vidal's *Lincoln* as "the phoniest historical novel I have ever had the pleasure of reading." Upon noting several factual errors, Basler adopted Lincoln's reproof of Stephen Douglas at the Cooper Institute: "He has no right to mislead others, who have less access to history . . ."

90. Basler, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Supplement, 1832–1865* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974) Foreword, p. vi. One discovery was a lengthy portion of Lincoln's Speech at Cincinnati, Ohio, on September 17, 1859, preserved by William Dean Howells but not included within the original *Collected Works*. Also, in the *Supplement* Lincoln's Notes on the Practice of Law were re-edited from the original manuscript, which was unavailable when the initial *Collected Works* went to press.

upon transcriptions found in dealer catalogs," which can be "notoriously unreliable." Nevertheless, Schwartz observed, the discovery and processing of new Lincoln manuscripts continues, and he wondered whether an updated edition of Lincoln's works might be necessary.[91]

Although Schwartz alleged certain "failings" associated with the *Collected Works* project, it is worth noting that in the elegant two-volume set, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings*, edited by Don Fehrenbacher and published by the Library of America in 1989, the texts, with the exception of documents subsequently discovered, are taken directly from the 1953 *Collected Works* and the 1974 *Supplement*.[92] In his Note on the Texts, Fehrenbacher praised Basler's decision not to edit or "correct" Lincoln's spelling, punctuation, diction, sentence structure, and paragraphing, as Nicolay and Hay did in their *Complete Works*. Fehrenbacher made few variations from the Basler process, primarily relating to material placed between brackets.

As of early 2023, an ongoing project is in place to make all of Lincoln's writings available online. It is based at the Presidential Library and is called the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, and is dedicated to identifying, imaging, transcribing, annotating, and publishing online all documents written by *or to* Abraham Lincoln during his lifetime.[93] The documents are arranged in five chronological segments: Legislative, Congressional, Campaign, Interregnum, and Presidential. Each is subdivided into a digital edition and a digital archive. The digital edition includes documents "essential to Lincoln's public and private life." In the digital archive will be documents complementary, supplementary, or related to digital edition documents, such as election returns, muster rolls, legal documents, legislative bills, and other documents on which Lincoln's name or signature appears but which were not written by him. All digital edition documents will receive "full editorial treatment:" transcription, oral proofreading, single proofing, annotation, fact-checking, sense reading. The edition will also include hyperlinks and identification of people, places, organizations, and events.[94]

91. Thomas F. Schwartz, "Whither the Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln?: More Unpublished Lincoln Letters," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 13 (1992), p. 48.

92. Fehrenbacher, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings* 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 1989), Note on the Texts, Vol. 1, p. 853; Vol, 2, p. 721.

93. Publishing all letters to, as well as by, Lincoln substantially expanded the project. Many of the letters in the Robert Todd Lincoln Papers, unveiled in 1947, turned out to be to, not by, Lincoln.

94. See http://www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org. See also http://www.lawpracticeofabrahamlincoln.org.

According to the ALA website, the Papers project encompasses documents from the Legislative and Congressional segments. The Papers website (live now for more than two decades as a continuation of the completed Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln) already allows searchable access to documents into 1857. The Legislative segment, consisting of 5,203 documents, is complete, while work on the Congressional and other segments continues. In contrast to the budgetary constraints facing Basler and his assistant editors from 1947 to 1952, the Papers project appears to enjoy robust financial support from, among others, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Publication & Records Commission, as well as private donors such as Iron Mountain and the Abraham Lincoln Association.[95]

Upon retiring from the Library of Congress in 1974 Roy Basler moved to Sarasota, Florida. He died on October 25, 1989, at the age of 82. Appropriately, his papers are preserved at the Library of Congress.

This appreciative essay focuses on Roy P. Basler's professional life and his remarkable contribution to our study and understanding of Abraham Lincoln, particularly his extraordinary literary gift. Those interested in an account of Basler's personal life may wish to review his papers, which include a 269-page autobiography, preserved at the Library of Congress. Upon his passing, obituaries noted that in 1929 he married Virginia Pearl Anderson, a Duke graduate from South Carolina. They had five children: Roy Prentice Basler III (1935–2016), Christian O. Basler (1939–2017), Mary Basler Dahlgren, Andrine Basler Cleaver, and Virginia Basler Davidson. In this writer's opinion, Mr. Basler's survivors and descendants have much to be proud of, and all admirers of our 16th president remain in his debt.

Roy P. Basler: A Bibliography

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Additional poems can be found in the Roy P. Basler Papers at the Library of Congress.

Papers

The Roy P. Basler Papers are preserved in 91 boxes at the Library of Congress. They include a 269-page autobiography.