

A LOOK AT LINCOLN: The Personal Relationships of Abraham Lincoln

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Feature Essay

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Winkle, Kenneth J. and Borchard, Gregory A.. *A LOOK AT LINCOLN: The Personal Relationships of Abraham Lincoln*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$19.95 and \$19.95 ISBN 978-0-8093-3049-2 and 978-0-8093-3045-4

Similar in format and length, both titles are well-written contributions to the new Concise Lincoln Library series of Southern Illinois University Press edited by Richard W. Etulain, Sara Vaughn Gabbard, and Sylvia Frank Rodrigue.¹

While, at first glance, they cover separate issues, there is a common theme that runs through both--the relationships between Abraham Lincoln and his family and associates.

In Kenneth Winkle's account of the Lincolns' marriage, the author compares them to middle-class couples of Victorian America (125-126). Abraham and Mary Lincoln's entire lives are covered in under 150 pages. An incongruity characterizes their relationship. Mary was a strong asset to her spouse's political career, but her personal issues became a negative for him. The author demonstrates how Mary's grief from the assassination of her husband was equal to that of her contemporary, Queen Victoria, when she lost her beloved Albert (115). Despite the conflicts, the author insists that Abraham and Mary were true to their wedding vows reflected in the engraving on Mary's wedding band—"Love is eternal."

With the rare exception of individuals like Eleanor Roosevelt and Jacqueline Kennedy, First Ladies have, for the most part, remained invisible to the public and to historians, relegated to the private inner sphere of domesticity within the family circle. Mary Lincoln, a bright, well-educated and ambitious young woman, was born and reared in the first half of the nineteenth century when women were expected to be pious, pure, submissive, and confined to the home. Beginning in early childhood, Mary failed to conform completely to these social

norms. In addition to a propensity for elaborate clothing, she thoroughly enjoyed exercising her wit, especially in the forbidden realm of politics. Her marriage marked a determination to become an active part in Abraham Lincoln's political career. As a result, harsh criticism followed throughout her life, persisting even into contemporary times. Tragedy followed as well, leaving her vulnerable to the seduction of the spiritualist movement and to the maneuverings of her elder son, Robert, who eventually committed her to an insane asylum. History's portrait of Mary Lincoln, unlike that of her husband Abraham, is rarely flattering. Yet she was an intelligent and resourceful woman supporting a courageous husband. They were unquestionably devoted, as Kenneth Winkle ably demonstrates.

Abraham Lincoln and Horace Greeley depicts a fluctuating and stormy relationship of allies and foes between these two strong men, as if Lincoln's relationship with Mary were not challenging enough. Both Lincoln and Greeley supported Henry Clay's American system and their "right to rise" as self-made men (Gabor Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream*). Both were reformers who abhorred slavery. Despite the similarities, both were sometime adversaries. The intricate relationship played out in the pages of Greeley's *New York Tribune*. Borchard explains the growth of these two leaders while discussing the end of the Whig Party, formation of the new Republican Party, and the advocating of "manifest destiny" to the Pacific. Of course, the Civil War plays a major role in the lives of both men. Borchard's book is insightful, offering an excellent introduction to a political relationship between Lincoln and Greeley. It is well-researched, engaging, and should capture readers interested in the Middle Period of our history.

The author's use of pointed barbs from the *Tribune*, as well as the papers of both Lincoln and Greeley, gives us useful source material, too. Both men met during their single congressional terms and became friends. They voted the same on bills ninety-five times. Greeley would later recall that I first met Mr. Lincoln late in 1848 at Washington, as a Representative in the Thirtieth Congress, the only one to which he was ever elected. His was, as apportioned under the census of 1840, a Whig district and he was elected from it in 1846 by the largest majority it ever gave anyone. He was then not quite forty years old; a genial, cheerful, rather comely man, noticeably tall, and the only Whig from Illinois, not remarkable otherwise, to the best of my recollection. He was generally liked on our side of the House; he made two or three moderate and sensible speeches which attracted little attention; he voted generally to forbid the introduction of slavery into the still untainted Territories; but he did not vote for Daniel Gott's

resolve looking to the immediate abolition of slavery in the Federal District, being deterred by the somewhat fiery preamble thereto.” (37 & Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (288) .

Both were dedicated to freedom with a lifelong record of opposing slavery (13).

Yet there was also conflict between them. For example, when in 1858 Greeley became a leader of some eastern Republicans who endorsed Senator Stephen A. Douglas for reelection in Illinois. While his efforts were to split the Democratic Party, his actions angered Douglas’s likely Republican opponent in Illinois-Abraham Lincoln. The way this and other intermittent conflicts were resolved such as emancipation, presidential power ,and the winning of the war, are told with great verve by the author.

What is evident from these two volumes is how Lincoln used his potent political skills both at home and in his public career. They are dramatic stories about a pivotal moment in United States history. Both authors share a gift for capturing a sense of narrative and a talent for enabling readers to see and feel history in the making. In these pages, Lincoln appears almost larger-than-life. Yet despite enormous ambition, he demonstrates, most of the time, considerable humility.

Taken together, these brief volumes on Lincoln’s life create a detailed picture of an immensely complicated and, sometimes, conflicted individual. They also reveal a prism by which to view his time in American life and politics during which the country experienced tumultuous and divisive cultural change.

Frank J. Williams is founding Chair of The Lincoln Forum and author of the forthcoming Lincoln as Hero, and serves as contributing columnist for the Civil War sesquicentennial.

Note:

1- Other books in the Concise Lincoln Library include *Lincoln and the Civil War* by Michael Burlingame, *Lincoln and the Constitution* by Brian R. Dirck, *Lincoln and Race* by Richard Striner and *Lincoln and the Election of 1860* by

Michael S. Green.