

The Lincolns: Portrait of a Marriage

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Review

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Epstein, Daniel Mark *The Lincolns: Portrait of a Marriage*. Ballantine Books, \$28.00 hardcover ISBN 9780345477996

The Lincolns' Troubled Marriage?

Would that this volume had been a novel. Daniel Mark Epstein, a poet who has also written biographies of such disparate figures as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Aimee Semple McPherson and Nat King Cole, has produced a beautifully written book about the marriage of Mary and Abraham Lincoln. Because of the enormous amount of evidence, both reliable and spurious, on every subject relating to Lincoln and because of the very limited amount of factual information that we have concerning the Lincolns' personal relationship, this subject is fraught with a multitude of scholarly pitfalls. Epstein is also the author of *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington* (2004) and thus should know the difficulties of working with Lincoln sources. Nevertheless, he chose to write a biography and not a novel, and his work must be judged by historical standards. The problems with this work fall into three categories: evidence, speculation, and historical context.

In justifying his very thin annotation, Epstein quotes David Herbert Donald's caveat that if he were to list all the sources on which he based his biography of Lincoln, the bibliography would be longer than the book. Professor Donald has earned the right to make such a statement, given his lifetime of distinguished scholarship and publication in this field; the rest of us had better cite the sources and make some attempt to demonstrate the depth of our research. Moreover, Epstein and Donald have very different standards of what is adequate documentation. Epstein offers 22 pages of very brief citations; Donald devotes 85 pages of densely packed notes, complete with concise evaluations of the major sources for each chapter. If this were a topic on which the evidence was straight-forward and not subject to considerable debate, one might be able to lightly annotate, but that is not the case. Whether one relies on William

Herndon's interpretation or on the interviews he conducted after the death of Lincoln or on past biographers, there is simply too much disagreement on fundamental questions about the Lincolns to allow one to skip steps in the evidentiary rules.

The problems of evidence become even more important when the author speculates as much as Epstein does. All historians draw conclusions from evidence—that is part of the job. But normally, historians do not make up dialogue and most try to avoid using phrases such as “might have been,” “might have thought,” or “it may well be.” When the author gives no source or explanation for why he is justified in drawing his conclusion, the reader becomes especially wary. Instances of judgments overreaching the evidence also diminish credibility. For example, Epstein asserts that Lincoln's anguish over accepting candidacy for the state legislature in 1854, “can only be explained by domestic turmoil” (173-74). Well, others, including Donald, have offered quite reasonable explanations based on Lincoln's own ambition for a higher political career. And Epstein offers no evidence to support his claim that Mary's, not Lincoln's own ambition, made the decision such an anguished one. Perhaps he has that evidence, but he has not cited it.

When he does cite a source, he sometimes draws conclusions that are suspect. For example, on page 348 Epstein states that Benjamin French, Commissioner of Public Buildings, thought Mary showed “a kind of madness,” but on the page of French's journal that Epstein cites, there is no evidence of such feeling. Indeed, on the next page, French is quite complimentary of Mary. There are enough of those sorts of problems with interpretation of evidence, that one might well question many of Epstein's conclusions.

Sometimes, a faulty historical perspective seems to skew conclusions. Without citing any evidence, Epstein gives little consideration to cultural practices of the time. He assumes that the Lincolns had marital problems because they had separate bedrooms and concludes that their sexual relationship ended because they had no children after Tad. For a woman of Mary's class and position, plenty of birth control information and devices were available, and other biographers (Jean Baker and Donald) find reasonable, practical explanations for their separate sleeping quarters. Moreover, friends and acquaintances commented on the couple's continued devotion to each other. When Epstein does offer evidence, his conclusions are questionable. For example, to corroborate his contention that the marriage was no longer happy,

Epstein points out that when Lincoln was asked to describe himself to the newspapers, he did not mention that he was married or that he had children. In the mid-nineteenth century, a politician would probably not have offered that sort of information; women and children were not normally a part of public life. He also uses Lincoln's failure to keep Mary informed about their finances as a sign of further estrangement. But most men of the time did not discuss financial matters with their wives. Occasionally, he just gets the facts wrong. Epstein describes Francis Preston Blair as "the great abolitionist" (255). A man who owned slaves until they day the institution was abolished in the District of Columbia, Blair would have been shocked by the description.

On the other hand, would that we could all write like Epstein. He can create a scene. When he describes Chicago, Cincinnati, or Columbus, we know what those western towns looked and felt like. His description of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, with the music, the politicians, the heat, and the crowds, vividly recreates the political and social climate of the time. Whether it is a dinner party at the White House or the drive to the Soldiers' Home, he firmly places us in the nation's capital during the Civil War and sweeps us along in his narrative of the Lincoln marriage. Because of the lovely writing, Epstein creates a compelling story. But it is not necessarily good history. There is simply too great a reliance on debatable historical context, too much invented dialogue, too many instances of unsubstantiated speculation, and too little concern for critical evaluation of evidence. Historical method matters. The rules of the discipline matter.

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