

THE INTIMATE WORLD OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

"Groundbreaking . . . sure to be controversial . . ."

—*Publishers Weekly* (STARRED REVIEW)

C.A. TRIPP

With an introduction by
JEAN BAKER

and
a new critical
overview



The Intimate World of

Abraham
LINCOLN

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The Intimate World of

Abraham
LINCOLN

ALSO BY C. A. TRIPP

The Homosexual Matrix

To Future Lincoln Scholars
With hopes that Planck was incorrect:

A New Scientific truth does not triumph
By convincing its opponents,
But rather because its opponents die,
And a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.

— MAX PLANCK

Introduction

By Jean Baker, Goucher College

The debate over Abraham Lincoln's sexuality has become an insistent inquiry. During the 1990s the issue has been considered on call-in shows, in magazines, on websites, and in the private conversations among scholars who have devoted their lives and reputations to understanding the sixteenth president. Whisper campaigns have even included talk of a newly discovered diary written by Lincoln's lover, which turned out to be fictitious. Clearly the matter has seized the public's attention, and it needs to be addressed. But no one has seriously researched the question until C. A. Tripp's *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*. Fortunately Tripp's book is much more than an effort to answer the limited question, by applying today's categories to past sexual behavior, of whether Lincoln was a homosexual. What follows is neither polemic nor exposé, but a full-fledged character study that places Lincoln's sexuality into a larger, more significant framework of trying to understand this elusive man.

Of course Lincoln, labeled by his law partner William Herndon "the most shut-mouthed man I knew," has offered little assistance in answering questions about his love life. In fact the president left few clues about any aspect of his personal affairs, much less his sexual preferences. Such reticence extends into his relationships with his parents (scholars still argue about his feelings toward his father); his marriage (about which there seems to be unending debate); and even his paternal views of his four sons (although he did once describe his eldest son Robert as a "rare ripe sort . . . smarter at about five than ever after"). In the autobiography encouraged by his Republican

supporters in the fall of 1859 when he was emerging as a candidate for that party's nomination, Lincoln, already among the best-known men of his generation, produced a spare, less than six-hundred-word description of his first fifty years. His autobiography was short, he averred, because "there is not much of me."

Historians have taken Lincoln's comment as an example of his humility. Yet such brevity and evasiveness also demonstrate his lifelong public silence about personal matters, a conventional response among men during the nineteenth century, though less so, then as now, among aspiring politicians. In any case discussions about sex, even between long-married heterosexual couples, were rare in the nineteenth century. Physical intimacy remained a private matter about which nineteenth-century Americans, little given to the confessional outpourings of their twenty-first-century descendants, left few hints. We would not expect Abraham Lincoln to tell us that he favored sex with men, although he may have left some clues. And because scholars have only recently begun investigating sex as a time- and place-bound experience, we have little context for assessing sexual practices in Lincoln's time.

Today's focus on sex—some call it an American obsession—is radically different. Retrospective considerations of the sexuality of nineteenth-century historical figures—including Lincoln's presidential predecessor James Buchanan, whom some proclaim our first gay president—abound. Gay activism has helped stir historians to investigate what had been an invisible, unfathomable subject, unimaginable to some, improper and meaningless for others.

Homosexuals—male and female—now seek civil rights, and grudgingly some courts and legislatures have moved to protect these rights. A similar, but much slower transformation in private attitudes supporting homosexuality, has accompanied such changes, but heterosexual acceptance of "the other" is still limited and tenuous. As late as the mid-1980s over 60 percent of all Americans found homosexuality an unacceptable lifestyle. Evidence "outing" the iconic Lincoln, among many historians and much of the general public, will come as bad news dishonoring a revered figure. Some will protest that the case C. A. Tripp makes in *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* has not been proven and is largely circumstantial; others will turn away in disgust, for homosexuality is a subject that stirs deep

emotions. But many will applaud efforts to answer questions that threaten to obscure all others, on the eve of the bicentennial celebration in 2009 of Lincoln's birth. In the end Lincoln is too important a figure in our national past to censor, especially since in the argument presented here, Lincoln's sexuality is integral to understanding his presidential leadership. Whatever the response, Tripp's *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* deserves a fair reading.

No one asks if Andrew Jackson, Franklin Pierce, Ulysses S. Grant, or Andrew Johnson were homosexuals. They seemed "too robustly sexual," meaning, of course, that they responded to women. On the other hand, even if Lincoln himself has left few obvious indications of his possible homosexuality, there were always hints observed and commented upon by historians. Some, like Ida Tarbell writing her two-volume *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* in 1900 and Margaret Leech in her 1941 *Reveille in Washington 1860-1865*, discovered evidence of Lincoln in bed with another man in 1862, but for reasons of prudery, implausibility or ignorance about homosexuality, they declined to develop this material into any argument about Lincoln's homosexuality. (In terms of Lincoln scholarship it is not surprising that two women, among the disproportionate host of male historians, found these clues.)

In 1924, Carl Sandburg, in the first volume of *The Prairie Years*, poetically described Lincoln's "streak of lavender and spots soft as May violets," but Sandburg pursued the issue no farther. There is also fragmentary evidence about Lincoln's homosexuality in the comments of Lincoln's contemporaries made to that oral historian par excellence, William Herndon, when the latter was gathering material about the president after his assassination. To some, Lincoln was not a garden-variety heterosexual.

What others have avoided, ignored, denied, dismissed, and overlooked C. A. Tripp confronts openly in *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*. While Tripp is not the first recent observer to do so, he is the most systematic and simultaneously the most speculative. Earlier Charley Shively considered the issue of Lincoln's sexual preferences in his 1989 study of the poet Walt Whitman. Published by the Gay Sunshine Press, Shively's conclusions in *Drum Beats* were little noted, save by gays who discovered in Lincoln's possible preferences an affiliation with an illustrious and greatly admired American president.

Not by chance did a group of Republican gay advocates in 1996 choose a name that associated them with Lincoln, proclaiming themselves "Log-Cabin Republicans." In 2001 Jonathan Ned Katz featured Lincoln's relationship with Joshua Speed, his first friend in Springfield in 1837 and his four-year bedmate, as a love story—or as Katz puts it, an example of "sex between men before the invention of homosexuality."

In *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* C. A. Tripp goes farther than any earlier studies to present the greatest amount of evidence and the strongest argument currently available that Lincoln's primary erotic response was that of a homosexual. As he says in his preface, Lincoln's personal history reflects "a plentiful homosexual response and action. . . ." It is safe to say that short of the dubious proposition of finding new Lincoln letters or a previously undiscovered nineteenth-century diary written by one of the president's lovers, or discovering a somehow previously overlooked observation from a contemporary of the president's, Tripp's *The Intimate World* will define the issue for years to come.

Born in Texas in 1919, trained as a photographer at the Rochester Institute of Technology, C. A. Tripp became part of Alfred Kinsey's staff after World War II. After reading Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in The Human Male* in 1948, in a style maintained throughout his life, he audaciously phoned the famous sex researcher, and at Kinsey's invitation immediately visited the Institute for Sex Research in Bloomington, Indiana. Tripp was promptly hired, and became part of a team engaged in pivotal work on human sexuality. With his impressive empirical studies based on surveying the sexual practices of 3,500 men and his groundbreaking approach to the hidden topic of sex, Kinsey indelibly influenced Tripp. The older man (Kinsey died in 1956) pushed Tripp to see sexology as a scientific field, and sexual behavior as a discernable part of human experience that should be studied.

Tripp became convinced that Kinsey's data would promote greater understanding among Americans who had little knowledge and much misinformation about sex. Moreover Kinsey's figures on the pervasiveness of the homosexual experiences of men dazzled the ever-inquisitive Tripp. (More than one-third of Kinsey's sample had engaged in a homosexual act during their lifetime and while a slim 4 to 6 percent

identified themselves as exclusively homosexual, only about a half of the entire sample were exclusively heterosexual.) The idea of the universality and ubiquity of men loving men confirmed Tripp's intuitive judgments, and ratified his own homosexual experience. So too did the associated findings that as a matter of science, sexual behavior could not be classified as normal and abnormal, that Freud's deductive categories of human behavior such as the Oedipus complex rested on hopelessly weak evidential reeds, and that the sex drive of all humans was an intermixing of biological, psychological, and sociological factors, with biological ones mostly holding the trumps. Yet the vagaries of experience—in some cases a satisfying early adventure—encouraged some men to engage in homosexual acts more readily than others.

Kinsey eventually persuaded Tripp that he should go back to school, and in 1951, age thirty-four, Tripp returned to college, majoring in sociology and psychology at the New School for Social Research in New York, an institution he later proclaimed the best he ever attended. Two years later C. A. Tripp (who was universally known as "Tripp" among his friends) entered New York University's doctoral program, emerging in 1957 with a doctorate in clinical psychology. Several internships followed, and by 1960 he had developed a successful practice as a psychotherapist amid the competitive overabundance of listening rooms in New York City. As was often the case at a time when homosexuality was seen as a condition to be corrected therapeutically, many of his patients were homosexuals.

These patients provided the evidence and understandings for Tripp's first book, *The Homosexual Matrix*. So too did his ten-year study of the literature of homosexuality. Published in 1975, reviewed unfavorably by the *New York Times* but an overnight best-seller, *The Homosexual Matrix* provided an informed, opinionated, yet commonsense look at every aspect of homosexuality from the similarity of sexual developmental processes among heterosexuals and homosexuals, to the meanings of sexual techniques, especially inversions, to the downgrading of parental pathology as the cause of homosexuality. No longer were overbearing mothers and timid fathers the cause of homosexuality in males, as Freudian psychiatrists had long argued.

Tripp's book became a manual of what every American wanted to ask (and was afraid to) about gays and lesbians, with the added

benefit of Tripp's insights into the origins of heterosexuality. "Perhaps the most troubling assumption," wrote Tripp, "has been that every mature person would be heterosexual were it not for various fears and neuroses developed from parental and social misfortunes." Homosexuals were not impaired heterosexuals waiting to be released from their abnormal orientation. Conservatives and religious fundamentalists disliked *The Homosexual Matrix* because it humanized homosexuality as a pervasive natural practice of physical loving, while monogamous heterosexuals disputed Tripp's dismissal of their sexual relationships as ultimately unsatisfying, lacking the tension and resistance of successful sex. Suspicious feminists found demeaning and incorrect Tripp's insistence that too much independence on the part of women "blotted out the image of ultimate submission that sexual allure [to men] requires." But the public bought the book, and *The Homosexual Matrix*, after four printings, sold 500,000 copies.

Sometime during the 1990s the ever-inquisitive Tripp began to study Abraham Lincoln, who, as has been the case for so many Americans, fascinated him. Tripp did so from the perspective of a meticulous sex researcher well-versed in the conceptual apparatus of Kinsey's work. Like all Americans, Tripp intended "to get right with Lincoln" (in David Donald's phrase), which, for him, meant reclaiming the president's intimate life for a new generation. The fact that Lincoln was a homosexual was not, for Tripp, the dispositive matter in understanding this inscrutable president. Sexual preference and activity never defined anyone, he believed, although in the case of homosexuals—male and female—society often made it so. Instead Lincoln's homosexuality was part of a cluster of attributes that explain his leadership during the Civil War.

Tripp's evaluation of evidence long familiar to Lincoln scholars, such as the Ann Rutledge story and the meaning of the Speed-Lincoln friendship, clearly diverged from that of mainstream scholars. Given his background, Tripp saw things obscured to those untrained in sexuality. On the other hand, his notion of factual verification defied the canons of the discipline of history, and because of the nature of the subject, there is considerable circumstantial evidence in *The Intimate World*. Tripp paid little attention to what David Hackett Fischer once called fallacies of substantive distraction, that is

shifting the argument to sometimes irrelevant issues. (This is especially true in the digressions in the last chapter.) Yet the final result is an intriguing public and private Lincoln. No previous writer on Lincoln's homosexuality had molded this sexual orientation into a complete biographical understanding.

No doubt reviewers will point to Tripp's deficiencies, but it is worth remembering that with regard to his central finding, Tripp came to the evidence believing that homosexuality is, and must be considered as, an entirely normal condition. Lincoln may have functioned as a heterosexual, but his marriage did not preclude an intense homosexual drive. Using the same speculative framework as heterosexual historians, save for the birth of the Lincoln children, one could, in Tripp's view, challenge the assumed heterosexuality of Lincoln. For the evidence of what went on in Mary and Abraham's marriage bed is as evidentially obscure as that of Lincoln's affairs with men.

What others saw as innocent, perhaps homoerotic bed-sharing in an era when there were few mattresses emerged in Tripp's analysis as evidence of an autonomous, autodidactic lover of men. Only the blinkered eyes of historians had prevented them from seeing what seemed so obvious to a sex researcher. Tripp expected as much. For years he had been sensitive to the ways in which the public's comfort level led to censorship of homosexual content, a process of bowdlerization readily apparent even in Jowett's famous translation of Plato. Now he came to believe that historians had similarly diminished and misinterpreted the evidence of Lincoln's homosexuality.

Only after ten years was Tripp ready to publish *The Intimate World*. During this time Tripp had proceeded slowly and meticulously, reading the extensive and ever-growing literature on the sixteenth president, and even calling some scholars on the phone to invite their comments (which were mostly negative) on his early chapters. Never interested in turning Lincoln into a representative of gay pride (Tripp refused to use the word), instead Tripp intended to encase Lincoln's sexuality within a larger portrait. Readers of *The Intimate World* will find that this is not a work of sexual or biological reductionism, but rather a significant effort to understand a complicated man.

During the 1990s, applying scientific methods to the vast amount of writing on Lincoln, Tripp began constructing a database of Lincolnia, which is currently available at the Lincoln Library in Springfield. Through an index, librarians there can access material by topic and subject. Certainly this database helped Tripp's research, but it also serves as testimony to his seriousness of purpose. Now including a great many books that have been scanned, this powerful research tool will remain one of Tripp's legacies to the future study of Lincoln. Indeed *The Intimate World* is dedicated to future Lincoln scholars, with the wry accompanying Max Planck epigram to the effect that it takes two generations for new ideas to take hold—because the first generation of opponents must die.

On the basis of inductive reasoning familiar to him as a Kinsey researcher and in the spirit of social science, Tripp intrepidly measures Lincoln's homosexuality and presents his findings in the first chapter. To do so he employs Kinsey's famous classification system that ranks an individual's homosexuality on a seven-point continuum, where 0 = exclusively heterosexual and 6 = exclusively homosexual.¹ Lincoln, according to Tripp, ranks as a 5, i.e. "predominantly homosexual, but incidentally heterosexual." While this scale has recently been criticized as offering few advantages over the three common terms heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual, its application to Lincoln is a clear indication of Tripp's position. There is no hedging in this book.

Tripp died in May 2003, after he finished *The Intimate World*, but before he had time to edit and revise. Had he lived he might have changed the eclectic organization of chapters that follow no clear linear or substantive progression. He might have edited a last chapter that takes readers, as if on a magic carpet, to twentieth-century intelligence gathering, Roosevelt, Churchill, and the little-known Alan Turing. Tripp probably would have added additional data; he might even have presented his material as a series of essays. But there can be no doubt that he would have enjoyed responding to the criticisms of this book.

The Intimate World begins with a chapter on Lincoln's seduction of a forty-four-year-old captain of the Pennsylvania Bucktails in the fall of 1862. Captain David Derickson, detailed to guard the president

at his summer retreat at the Old Soldier's Home in northeast Washington, is found sleeping in the president's bed during one of Mary Lincoln's absences. The captain is observed wearing the president's nightshirt, and this sharing of the bed is not a one-time incident. To Tripp it goes without saying that the two men had sex together and that this relationship is one of at least five verifiable cases of Lincoln's sexual activity with other males. If Lincoln had been found in bed with a woman, few would doubt that sex was involved and that the president was cheating on his wife. But for complex reasons involving homophobia, many historians consider this bedsharing an innocent incident of "spooning," or else Lincoln's desire for non-tactile companionship, or perhaps even the president's need for warmth during Washington's chilly fall nights. Undoubtedly the determination of homosexual practice is held to a higher evidentiary standard among historians than is heterosexuality. In any case the president was not embarrassed and told another officer that "the Captain and I are getting quite thick."²

We will never know if Lincoln's male relationships were genitally chaste. There were, of course, innocent spiritual same-sex affiliations among young men and women of the nineteenth century, just as there were sexual relations. The fact that no one paid much attention at the time to Lincoln's presidential bed-sharing or any other of Lincoln's possibly homosexual encounters tells us nothing. The fact is nineteenth-century Americans simply did not give as much attention to sex as we do today. Sex did not define an existence, as it does today particularly in the case of male and female homosexuals. The essential historical chasm between the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries is that during Lincoln's lifetime, homosexuality, as an identity or the naming of a sexual category, did not exist. Lincoln was dead when in 1868 the word homosexuality was first coined in Austria and later popularized by German sexologists to describe the erotic practices of men with other men. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that Americans "discovered" homosexuality, became cognizant of what was dubbed "perversion," and tried to stamp it out.

In Lincoln's time if he was participating in anal intercourse, he was technically committing, in the nineteenth-century's euphemism, "a crime against nature" or "the sin that cannot be named." On the

other hand, oral-genital sex was not prohibited in state laws until much later in the century. Legally, if he had anal sex, he was engaging in sodomy—even if the acts were consensual. Along with bestiality and buggery—sex with animals by men and women—sodomy had been a capital crime during the colonial period of American history, and the penalty was inflicted in at least ten instances, mainly in the seventeenth century. After the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson urged castration for the guilty rather than hanging, and Virginia and most other states revised their sodomy statutes, providing lesser penalties. By the 1840s in Midwestern states, penalties ranged from ten years to life in prison. There was only one approved behavior in Lincoln's sexual times: marital coition for procreation, but not even too much of that. Sex was never approved for recreation. Yet as Graham Robb has pointed out about both Europe and the United States in his recent book *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century*, "Nineteenth century homosexuals lived under a cloud, but it seldom rained." Only in cities where men visited male brothels was there any conspicuous display of homosexuality at a time when most Americans were neither cognizant nor suspicious of it. In terms of prosecutions bestiality was as much an issue as sex between men. Of course in religious terms Lincoln was a sinner, the label sodomite coming from the name of the sinful city of Sodom in the Old Testament Book of Genesis. But as Tripp argues, Lincoln's sexual orientation encouraged him early in his life to challenge the biblical strictures against homosexuality and eventually organized religion.

Americans of Lincoln's time were much more concerned with masturbation. Lincoln lived in a period when "self-pollution" or the "solitary vice" was the sexual taboo on everyone's mind. In nineteenth-century prescriptive manuals, doctors and public opinion held it to be the cause of insanity and associated physical diseases. As a sexual practice, and usually a solitary one at that, masturbation challenged parental controls; certainly it threatened the prevailing notions of a given amount of semen to be usefully expended only in the creation of children. In such a society homosexuality might be hidden in plain sight. It was rarely discussed. It was rarely suspected.

In subsequent chapters Tripp turns to Lincoln's youth, introducing a critical concept borrowed from Kinsey. Lincoln, if we can believe

a neighbor who testified to Lincoln's sudden growth spurt, underwent puberty at an early age—possibly at nine. This is four years before the average of other males, although the transporting of such actuarial data to the early nineteenth century may be problematic. In Kinsey's survey data early-puberty males had higher sex rates over time (referring to the number of their orgasms) than late bloomers. They were also more likely to engage in homosexual behavior. Too young to be inoculated against sex by anxious parents and too unsophisticated to turn to girls, masturbation and contact with other males (and in the nineteenth century with a surprising number and variety of animals) provided their sexual outlets. In Tripp's taxonomy of sexuality, a pleasurable homosexual experience early in life could forever eroticize maleness over femaleness.

Lincoln's sexual precociousness and hypersexuality help to explain his notable smuttiness. Throughout his life he told dirty jokes; often they had anal punch lines. Donn Piatt, an Ohio journalist and politician, once said that Lincoln told the dirtiest stories that ever fell from human lips. Asked to publish them, Lincoln himself pronounced them too dirty; they would stink as an outhouse, he said. But his friend Leonard Swett always insisted it was the wit, not the vulgarity of the story, which Lincoln appreciated.

Certainly, as Tripp argues in subsequent chapters in *The Intimate World*, twenty-year old Abraham Lincoln knew about homosexuality. In his obscene and sometimes bowdlerized poem "First Chronicles of Reuben," Lincoln referred to a man marrying another man ("But Billy has married a boy"). Subsequently the two produce a "jelly baby," that is, in the vernacular, a pregnancy imagined from homosexual intercourse. Arrived in New Salem in 1831, Lincoln soon shared a bed (and learned grammar) with Billy Greene who earlier had admired his thighs, part of a sexual practice among men called "femoral intercourse." In *The Intimate World* Tripp provides examples of less well-developed homosexual contacts with A. Y. Ellis and later Henry Whitney who once said that Lincoln seemed always to be courting him. According to Whitney, Lincoln also said that sexual contact was "a harp of a thousand strings."

Most surprising and innovative in Tripp's catalogue of Lincoln's male interests are the president's strongly erotic feelings for the handsome, heterosexual, twenty-four year old Colonel Elmer