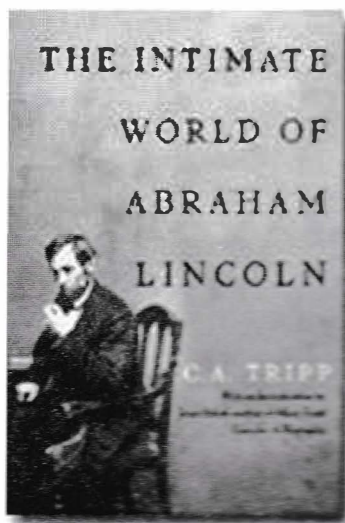


The Intimate World Of Abraham Lincoln

Reviewed by Louis A. Berman, Ph.D.

The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln (Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, 2005) is a book by onetime Alfred Kinsey colleague, sex researcher and therapist C.A. Tripp, who passed away in May 2003. In his review of the book, published in *The Weekly Standard*, Jan. 17, 2005, Philip Nobile does not speak well of the dead.

The reviewer, who teaches history at a private preparatory school in New York, labels the book “a hoax and a fraud: a historical hoax, because the inaccurate parts are all shaded toward a predetermined conclusion, and a literary fraud, because significant portions of the accurate parts are plagiarized—from me, as it happens.” (page 32)



Nobile’s eight-page condemnation of Tripp’s book is based upon experience that goes far beyond a critical reading of the book. Nobile was Tripp’s intended coauthor. Their stormy five-year partnership came to “a bitter end” in 2000. “We quarreled constantly over evidence: I said the Gay Lincoln Theory was intriguing but impossible to prove; he said it was stone-cold fact.” The partnership ended, writes Nobile, because Tripp was “more advocate than historian,” exaggerated what supported his thesis, and ignored what cast doubt upon it.

Nobile summarizes the factual basis for gossip and whisperings about Lincoln’s sexuality, which the Tripp book expands upon: “[A] hokey poem [Lincoln] wrote in his youth about a boy marrying a boy, a four-year sleeping arrangement with adored friend Joshua Speed, a marriage sometimes said to be reluctant and less than amorous, a lifelong preference for male company, a docu-

mented claim that he shared a bed in the summer White House with his soldier-bodyguard in 1862 and a number of other suggestive items.” (page 31)

“Other suggestive items” of what sort? For example, Tripp finds it significant that Lincoln liked to tell raunchy jokes and stories, and reportedly even told one about a black man’s erection. Lincoln scholar David Donald looked over Tripp’s manuscript (probably at the request of Tripp’s prospective publisher), and in a four-page 1996 letter counseled Tripp: “The person who tells a joke about ‘fags’ or ‘gays’ or ‘butch’ women may reveal a lack of taste but that does not necessarily indicate homosexual leanings.” (page 37) Prof. Donald wrote of Tripp’s manuscript, “Throughout you seem to be neglecting

the fundamental rule—the historian has to rely on facts. I don’t mean to discourage you from doing further work—but I do think it ought to be more systematic and more empirical.” (page 32).

Here is a sample of the kind of “evidence” Tripp offers to support his conjecture that Lincoln was homosexual. Abe Lincoln is known to have shared a bed with Joshua Speed for four years. Reportedly the bed was so small that one couldn’t turn over without disturbing the other. Lincoln was young and poor at that time, and the arrangement probably was not unusual. The room above Berry’s grocery store was most likely not heated, which made the sleeping arrangement quite practical during cold weather. (True, they exchanged friendly letters for a number of years afterwards.) During the Civil War, it was not uncommon for soldiers to sleep in pairs to keep each other warm. Times have changed, but in young Lincoln’s day, it was probably not uncommon for

two men, friends or strangers, to share the same bed.

Nowadays, it is not unusual for a flight to be delayed by a snow storm, and for the airline to find overnight hotel accommodations for every passenger. Once, a severe hotel shortage forced an airline to arbitrarily pair off some male passengers and ask them to share their hotel bed with each other. One man who had to share his bed with a stranger, recalled having spent a most uncomfortable night, as both he and his bedmate settled on opposite edges of their bed, careful not to touch one another.

Here is another example of the kind of “evidence” Tripp presents, to support his view of Lincoln’s sexual life: Lincoln’s New Salem friend Billy Greene once visited the President at the White House, and Lincoln introduced him to his Secretary of State, William Seward, as the man who taught him grammar—a little joke, since Greene’s speech habits did not show a mastery of English grammar. (Lincoln later reminded Greene that he had indeed helped Lincoln by quizzing him from a grammar book.) Greene reacted to Lincoln’s unexpected praise with embarrassment, and remained silent throughout the visit.

Why did Billy Greene show embarrassment, and chose to remain silent? Fear that Seward would notice how ungrammatical was Greene’s speech? Very probably, but Tripp offers the reader this marvelous *psychological* analysis “. . . [Why] was Greene so embarrassed? One cannot know for sure, but a *reasonable guess might be that those long ago grammar sessions, many of them in bed, ended with sexual contact.* To have these private events suddenly recalled within the formal surroundings of the White House . . . [by] a long-ago bed partner could have been a real jolt.” (Tripp, page 52, italics added)

Without a doubt, Tripp’s most serious argument about Lincoln’s sexuality stems from the author’s belief that Lincoln reached puberty at age nine. At the age of 10 he was described by his Kentucky neighbors as a “long, tall, dangling, awkward, droll-looking boy” . . . “Abe’s growth spurt [was] obvious enough by then to have been well under way for several months, with his first ejaculatory capacity . . . [dating back to] age nine.” (Tripp, page 31)

Thanks to Kinsey, writes Tripp, it has been well-established that an early puberty “is an extremely sensitive barometer of far-reaching sexual and, indeed, psychological consequences.” (ibid) On page 35, Tripp offers a graph summarizing Kinsey’s finding that “there is fully twice as much homosexual experience among early-maturing as among late-maturing males—with those who mature at in-between ages showing a homosexual incidence remarkably proportional to the earliness of their puberty.” (Tripp, page 34)

How did Kinsey interpret this remarkable finding? Tripp quotes from page 309 of “The Kinsey Report” to explain why homosexual activity is more likely to occur in early-maturing boys:

[T]he boy who becomes adolescent at 10 or 11 has not had as many years to build up inhibitions against sexual activity as the boy who does not mature until 15 or later . . . the

younger boy plunges into sexual activity with less restraint and with more enthusiasm than the boy who starts at a later date.

Unfortunately, on page 309 of the Kinsey book, it is revealed that the author was writing about something else: about the correlation between “age of adolescence and frequency of sexual activity (italics added).” Perhaps Tripp thought this quote fit his own thinking about why early-maturing boys are more likely to engage in “homosexual” activity.

This common-sense interpretation (taken out of context) is appealing enough, but maybe there’s an even more common-sense interpretation: At ages 9, 10, or 11 a boy may already be sexually developed, but in his own eyes, and in the eyes of society, he is still a kid and allowed to do all kinds of fooling around, like engaging in same-sex play. (By Kinsey’s definition, this is homosexuality, but is it? This question deserves a full discussion, which I offer in an essay, “Homosexuality, ‘Homosexuality’ . . .” that appears elsewhere in this issue.) At age 15, a lad is not simply more inhibited, as Kinsey’s argument goes. A 15-year-old lad stands closer to manhood. He wants to be recognized as more than a child, and he behaves accordingly. (The very word behavior implies self-control, as in “behave yourself.”)

Kinsey admits (page 315) that while differences between early-maturing and late-maturing boys in “homosexual activities” are great during early adolescent years, “during subsequent age periods, the differences in incidence are not so great.” Kinsey in Chapter 9 on “Age of Adolescence and Sexual Outlet” concludes with the admission (page 326) that “there is, of course, much individual variation on all of these matters . . .” In other words, population studies contribute to our knowledge of populations in general, but do not tell us much about a specific individual. Lincoln was, of course, an unusual person in so many observable ways. More importantly, he was a person who lived at another time in history.

Nobile asks why there is not more documentation of Lincoln’s fondness for men, if indeed, that was so apparent. Why, for example, did Lincoln’s law partner and biographer William Herndon write nothing along this line? Replied Tripp: Herndon was too heterosexual to notice. Today, Lincoln is revered, but in his own day he was a most controversial figure, loved by some and hated by others. He was mercilessly ridiculed in thousands of words and in hundreds of political cartoons. Yet nothing has turned up in newspaper articles of his day, or in cartoons, that touches upon the question of his sexual attractions.

According to Nobile, Tripp’s book is a rehash of a “flamboyantly rendered . . . chapter” in Walt Whitman’s *Civil War Boy Lovers*, written by Charles Shively, Professor of American studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Nobile tried to persuade Tripp to credit Shively as the source of so much of “Tripp’s findings,” but Tripp argued that Shively had a reputation for being “too gay lib,” and this would not help their book get recognized as a historical work.

Every graduate student of history learns the word presentism, a

word that still does not appear in most dictionaries. Presentism, students are warned, is a fallacy, an error that would-be "historians" make when they innocently judge persons of another historical era by the standards of their own time. If Abraham Lincoln shared a bed with Joshua Speed, and later with Captain Charles Derickson, does that indicate that Lincoln was homosexual? If Thomas Jefferson owned slaves and was sexually intimate with one of them, does that make him a hypocrite and an abuser of black women? President Franklin D. Roosevelt had no blacks among his top advisers, and George W. Bush had two. Does that fact make FDR a bigot, and W a closet liberal?

In a book in which one can find many errors, a critical shortcoming of *The Intimate Life of Abraham Lincoln* is that it is based on the error of presentism. Tripp's book adds nothing to what is known about Abraham Lincoln, but the book serves as a splendid example of how a gay psychologist and a major publisher (Simon & Schuster by name) can be seduced by the error of presentism.

Nobile's review goes into much detail over his disagreements with his former co-author, and with Nobile's conflicts with Tripp's publisher over the claim that Chapter 1 of the book was in fact the work of Nobile and belonged to him. Editors, lawyers, and friends of Tripp tangled over the legal and moral issues involved.

Author and AIDS activist Larry Kramer telephoned Nobile, he writes (p. 36), with the threat and plea: "If you don't stop making a stink about Tripp's book, I'm going to expose you as an enormous homophobe. . . For the sake of humanity, please, gays need a role model."

The reviewer, NARTH member Louis A. Berman, is professor of psychology, retired, at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and author of The Puzzle: Exploring the Evolutionary Puzzle of Male Homosexuality (Godot Press, 2003).