Review

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If you type “Abraham Lincoln” into the Google Book search engine, you receive more than six million results. Even the more limited field of Google Scholar nets 240,000. Pity the poor Lincoln scholar, then, who tries to come up with something new enough or interesting enough to add to the mountain of Lincolniana. And pity the poor student of Lincoln, confronted with such a mountain as well. Where to begin?

Southern Illinois University Press has, thankfully, taken on the task of offering a manageable approach to this vast field for scholars and students alike with its Concise Lincoln Library. Edited by Richard W. Etulain, Sara Vaughn Gabbard, and Sylvia Frank Rodrigue, twenty-one volumes (in print or forthcoming, projected through 2016) are offered on various aspects of Lincoln’s life. These short works (30,000 to 50,000 words) are designed to give readers a basic grasp of the topic and its interpretations in current scholarship. The writing is designed to be accessible, not dry (much like Lincoln himself), and to appeal, as the advertisement for the series states, “to both the novice and the Lincoln scholar.” The works are not footnoted, but they do offer essays on the sources used and modest bibliographies to direct readers to leading scholarship on the books’ topics.

Winkle’s *Abraham and Mary Lincoln* examines the relationship between the two and their marriage. Winkle, Sorensen Professor of American History at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and author of *The Young Eagle: The Rise of Abraham Lincoln*, confronts a marriage of opposites that perplexed Lincoln’s contemporaries and modern scholars alike. A marriage can never be completely understood by outsiders, and sometimes not even by the parties within it, and Winkle must navigate minefields of interpretation that portray Mary Lincoln as everything from a “hellcat,” as William Herndon claimed, to a hysterical shopping addict, a bi-polar depressive, and perhaps even a lunatic, as her short stay in an asylum rendered her. As far as her husband goes, Winkle must evaluate interpretations that argue that Abraham’s undying
melancholic obsession with his first love, Anne Rutledge, prevented him from ever loving his wife Mary, that her violent temper and shopping sprees drove him away from her, that her depression that followed the death of her children drove him away from her, or, more recently, that Abraham was homosexual and could not love her.

Acknowledging much of this range of interpretations of a complex relationship, Winkle creates a balanced, thoughtful portrayal of the Lincoln marriage. Mary was a tempestuous extrovert brought up in the elite class who married a poor, melancholic introvert. Opposites attracted, clearly, but the two were so dissimilar that their marriage and its survival confounded outsiders. Ambition drove them both, but so did affection and the ties wrought by their shared lives, shared children, and shared tragedies. The Lincoln’s marriage survived many trials, including the loss of two of their four boys, the stress of political campaigning and long absences, as well as the profound disruption caused first by Lincoln’s winning the presidency of the country and then by his untiring efforts to keep a civil war from destroying it. Their shared experiences provided a solid base for their marital partnership, claims Winkle, and partners they surely were. Mary supported Abraham in his work as an up-and-coming politician and president; Abraham supported Mary through the unwarranted accusations of treason against her because of her Southern family members and through the terrible grief she suffered after losing two children. Their marriage, says Winkle, reflected the phrase engraved on their wedding bands, “Love is eternal.” Winkle argues convincingly that the two had a solid marriage that they understood, even if outsiders were unsure of its nature and suitability.

There is little that is new in this work, but that is neither a complaint nor an evaluation because that is not the point of the books in this series. They are, as advertised, a way to introduce scholars and students alike to particular aspects of Lincoln scholarship. What makes Winkle’s book particularly useful in this series—and really all by itself as well—is its incorporation of so many fields of scholarship within this biography of the Lincoln marriage. This characteristic shows up early on, as Winkle traces the lineage of both Abraham and Mary. He begins, for example, not with their births but by explaining the nature of migration in this country and its effects on a family’s economic mobility; then he contrasts the subsistence-farming Lincoln family and their migration to richer lands west, with the higher status Todd family, whose patterns of migration yielded wealth, education, and elite urban living. The failure of Lincoln’s first romance with Ann Rutledge provides the opportunity to discuss not only theories of Lincoln’s predilection for
depression and its effect on the future husband and president, but the demographics of marriage on the frontier, where there were so many men than women. Winkle incorporates work on gender roles within and outside of marriage, tracing the effect of Mary’s education on her expectations of her husband-to-be and the life she thought they should lead. He examines the development of companionate marriage in the first half of the nineteenth century as it applied to the Lincolns, as well as the rising use of birth control, evident in the spacing of the family’s children. Winkle weaves into his study larger issues such as industrialization and the market revolution, architectural history as exhibited in the Lincolns’ Springfield home, changes in social activities with the rise of increasingly gendered spaces, child-rearing theories and how they influenced the Lincolns’ parenting, and the articulation of “middle class” standards and how they affected the Lincolns.

The task of incorporating such wide-ranging studies and their impact on understanding the lives of two individuals and their family is a difficult one, and it occasionally results in transitory awkwardness, but Winkler adds a depth of analysis that most short books on Lincoln—or indeed many such short accessible biographies—do not often provide. By engaging with these fields of inquiry, he has done a real service for biographers by showing how to incorporate megadata studies to provide context within a biography. Such an accomplishment adds considerably to a familiar story. It also enables the classroom teacher to use biography—that most appealing form of history—in a way that incorporates the often-arcane studies that constitute much of today’s historical research, thereby allowing students to understand the way in which the subject’s life illustrates the era in which he (and she) lived.

The press and Professor Winkler are to be commended: the press for the idea of this concise library, which is an excellent way to offer a usable history of an important topic; and Professor Winkler for his readable and highly informative narrative of the marriage of Abraham and Mary Lincoln. The goal set by the series has been met here in fine style.