Review Essay

Lincoln Scholarship and the Return of Intimacy

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Since 1865 a distinguished collection of insightful and sensitive writers has tried to recapture the essence of America’s strangest, most beguiling president. That, in spite of their efforts, there remains something profoundly elusive about Abraham Lincoln, cannot be put down to a lack of evidence, for, considering the nature of his early life, there is a relatively rich record on which to draw. Rather, the analytical problem lies in the character of the man himself. Lincoln’s friends and contemporaries were also unable to pin him down, in part because he combined such sharply contrasting qualities: humor and solemnity, confidence and insecurity, hope and despair. His compassion for soldiers sentenced to death for desertion or cowardice was combined with his self-imposed isolation from his family. The president who broke down in tears in front of a press reporter and a senator after hearing that the dashing young Elmer Ellsworth had been shot by a rebel sympathiser in May 1861, was also the man who refused to go to his own father’s funeral. He was a loner—his friend David Davis once described Lincoln as “the most reticent—Secretive man I Ever Saw—or Expect to see.” Yet he was also the life of a party. To the poet-biographer Carl Sandburg, Lincoln’s contrasting qualities made him “steel and velvet . . . hard as rock and soft as drifting fog.”

1. For an account of Lincoln’s meeting with Senator Henry Wilson and a New York Herald reporter on 24 May 1861, see Shenk, 176.


3. Quoted in Shenk, 159.
Lincoln’s iconic status in American culture rests not just on what he did, or even what he said, but on what he seemed to be. For much of the first century after his death, the deification of Lincoln as a quasi-mythical savior of the Union was intertwined in popular culture with a hyper-realist celebration of Lincoln the man, whose homeliness and humor, as well as his determination to succeed, embodied “American values.” Sandburg’s immensely popular multi-volume biography grounded Lincoln’s greatness in his character and life experience. Aaron Copeland’s *Lincoln Portrait*, first performed in 1942 and conceived as a stirring ode to American freedom, similarly made Lincoln’s very ordinariness the source of his greatness.

Sandburg, who barely disguised his disdain for the scholarly apparatus of footnotes and exhaustively checked quotations, had relied heavily for his portrait of Lincoln’s antebellum life on the one-man oral history project conducted after 1865 by Lincoln’s indefatigable law partner William Herndon. Tracking down everyone he could who had known Lincoln as a boy or during his time in New Salem and Springfield, Herndon made notes of interviews and solicited letters recalling Lincoln’s early life. Herndon was determined to write an account of Lincoln “just as he lived, breathed.” It was on this mass of material, as well as on his own long friendship with the martyred president, that Herndon based a series of lectures and essays, and, eventually, his biography, co-authored with the journalist Jesse W. Weik. The president’s greatness, Herndon believed, would be enhanced rather than obscured if


the public understood his weaknesses, his unorthodox religious beliefs, his unhappy marriage, his lost loves, and his dark nights of the soul. A staple part of Lincoln lore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was the story of Lincoln’s love for Ann Rutledge and his near-suicidal despair after her untimely death, which had first been aired by Herndon. Sandburg—with his description of Rutledge as a “quiet soft bud of a woman”—had dwelt tenderly on every imagined detail.⁸

In 1945 the first two volumes of James G. Randall’s Lincoln the President were published, inaugurating a new era of professional Lincoln scholarship that sought to rescue the sixteenth president from the clutches of the poets and romantics. Herndon and his collection of the reminiscences of New Salem old-timers seemed to this new generation of professional historians to embody everything that they disliked and distrusted about amateur history. To Randall, reports of Lincoln’s suicidal tendencies as a young man were mere gossip. As Joshua Wolf Shenk reminds us, for a generation after 1945, the troubled and elusive Lincoln of Herndon’s record, especially the story of his love for Rutledge, was categorically rejected by Lincoln scholars. Much was gained of course, by the professionalization of Lincoln studies and the focus on politics and ideology. But the elusiveness of Lincoln’s character was flattened out in the process. By rejecting Herndon’s sources, historians cut themselves off from a rich seam of material. Randall’s student, David Herbert Donald, wrote a biography of Herndon that implicitly helped discredit him as a historian by portraying him as an alcoholic and fantasist.⁹ Benjamin Thomas’s 1952 Lincoln biography even claimed that the romance with Ann Rutledge was a “legend for which no shred of contemporary evidence has been found.”¹⁰ Lincoln’s inner life was left to psychologists, who, influenced by the Freudian conviction that the peculiarities of the human mind could be diagnosed and explained, produced psychobiographies, most of which were widely dismissed by professional historians as hopelessly speculative.¹¹

⁸. Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years, 1:140.
¹¹. Lincoln was a favorite subject for psychobiographers throughout the twentieth century. Most dwelt at length on his childhood, about which there is very little evidence, and his New Salem years, including the reports of his depression following Ann Rutledge’s death. See for example, Nathaniel Stevenson, Lincoln: An Account of His Personal Life, Especially of Its Springs of Action as Revealed and Deepened by the Ordeal of War (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1922); L. Pierce Clark, Lincoln: A Psycho-Biography (New York: Scribner, 1933); Edward J. Kempf, Abraham Lincoln’s Philosophy of
Now the tide has turned again. A renewed interest in psychology in the broader culture, the rise of cultural history, and the new respectability of oral history, have all encouraged scholars to turn once again to the study of Lincoln’s personality. The turning point was the publication in 1994 of Michael Burlingame’s *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, which broke new ground in its sensitive reading of Lincoln’s character and relationships.  

Even the Ann Rutledge story has been rehabilitated. This human turn in Lincoln studies would not have been possible without the rehabilitation of Herndon’s oral history. The publication for the first time in 1999 of the Herndon material, carefully edited and annotated by Rodney O. Davis and Douglas L. Wilson, not only made it far more accessible than ever before but also gave it a scholarly imprimatur. Wilson also published *Honor’s Voice*, which, drawing largely on Herndon’s material, presented a richly textured portrait of the struggles of Lincoln’s early life.

The two books under consideration here exemplify this shift in the currents of Lincoln scholarship. Both seek to understand aspects of Lincoln’s private character, in part because it may have some bearing on our understanding of Lincoln’s public self, but mainly because he

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is such an inherently fascinating subject. Both look to Lincoln to learn lessons about humankind. Both books are also based in large part on Herndon’s informants. Joshua Wolf Shenk’s *Lincoln’s Melancholy* explores the meaning and implications of Lincoln’s well-documented depression, while C. A. Tripp’s *The Intimate Abraham Lincoln* delves into the murkier area of Lincoln’s sexuality. As examples of this new Lincoln scholarship, these two books illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of relying on Herndon’s oral history and, more generally, the pitfalls and possibilities of exploring the inner life of this most inscrutable of men.

“There are no new Lincoln stories,” wrote the journalist and Lincoln confidante Noah Brooks as long ago as 1898. “The stories are all told.” Yet, not only are some of the stories forgotten, their meaning is not always as clear as Brooks implied. One oft-repeated vignette from Lincoln’s early life occurred, apparently, on April 15, 1837. Lincoln was twenty-eight years old, a Whig state legislator and an aspiring self-taught lawyer. In debt from a failed business venture in New Salem, he had resolved on a new start in life in Springfield. After journeying into the town on a borrowed horse (Lincoln was never in want of generous friends ready to lend him a helping hand) and with all he owned in a couple of saddlebags, he appeared in the doorway of Joshua F. Speed’s general store. According to Speed’s account, recorded thirty years later in conversation with Herndon, Lincoln set his saddlebags on the counter and asked the price of “furniture for a single bedstead.” Speed made the calculations on a slate and told him it would be seventeen dollars. “It is probably cheap enough,” replied Lincoln, “but I want to say that cheap as it is I have not the money to pay. But if you will credit me until Christmas, and my experiment here as a lawyer is a success, I will pay you then. If I fail in that I will probably never be able to pay you at all.” Speed looked up from his slate and pencil and thought that he had never seen so “gloomy and melancholy a face.” By his own account, Speed “felt for him” and was moved to help: “I said to him, ‘The contraction of so small a debt, seems to affect you so deeply, I think I can suggest a plan by which you will be able to attain your end, without incurring any debt. I have a very large room, and a very large double-bed in it; which you are perfectly welcome to share with me if you choose.’ ‘Where is your room?’ asked he. ‘Upstairs’ said I, pointing to the stairs leading from the store to my room. Without saying a word, he took his saddle-bags on his arm, went up stairs, set

them down on the floor, came down again, and with a face beaming with pleasure and smiles exclaimed ‘Well Speed I’m moved.’”

What are we to make of this story? It has been used by countless Lincoln biographers over the years to illustrate their subject’s humble origins, his honest dislike of debt, and, because the figure who appeared in Speed’s doorway seems such a lonely but also a warm and likable man, to give a sense of Lincoln’s personality. To Shenk, it is interesting because it illustrates the sympathy that Lincoln’s overt sensitivity, sadness, and anxiety prompted in other people. C. A. Tripp, on the other hand, sees a quite different dynamic at work between the two men. It is “clear enough,” writes Tripp, that “within moments of Lincoln arriving on that borrowed horse Joshua Speed evidently targeted him as a desirable bed partner.” He thinks the story as told by Speed and recorded by Herndon whiffs of a respectable married man covering up his homosexual past. Surely, what really happened, Tripp speculates, is that Speed invited Lincoln up to his room, but fearing that might sound suspicious, recast himself in a more passive role. “To anyone alert to homosexual propositions,” writes Tripp with characteristic confidence, “it is perhaps obvious from the outset that this is very much what was involved here, as Speed quickly moved the situation from a sale on credit to a generous invitation for Lincoln to move into his room and bed” (127). Speed “was clearly an expert” at this kind of “rapid sexual conquest,” writes Tripp. As for Lincoln, since he had, in Tripp’s opinion, at least two homosexual relationships behind him, he “was alert enough to know the score as he flew into Speed’s web” (128).

Tripp, who died before his book was published, was a sex researcher who cut his teeth on the Kinsey Report. Those hoping that this long-awaited book would reveal some startling new evidence that would clinch the case for Lincoln’s homosexuality will be disappointed. Tripp’s point is not that generations of Lincoln scholars have overlooked some crucial evidence, but that they have been so blinded by “heterosexual bias” that they have failed to spot what was staring them in the face. Re-reading the Herndon oral testimony and other similar sources with the trained eye of one “alert to homosexual propositions,” Tripp is convinced that Lincoln was “predominantly homosexual.” (He awards Lincoln a score of 5 on Kinsey’s widely discredited index of sexuality, where 1 is entirely heterosexual and 6 is entirely homosexual.)

The Speed case is especially compelling, Tripp argues, because it

16. Herndon’s Informants, 590.
is part of a pattern. For example, six years before he walked into that Springfield general store and began what Tripp thinks was “the major event in Lincoln’s private life: an intense and ongoing homosexual relationship with Speed,” he met Billy Greene in New Salem. The evidence for what Tripp is convinced was a homosexual relationship between Lincoln and Greene is based entirely on Greene’s later recollection to Herndon of his first sight of Lincoln: “He had on a pair of mixed blue jean pant—a hickory shirt and a Common Chip hat. He was at that time well and firmly built: his thighs were as perfect as a human being Could be.” Tripp leaps on this. The mention of “thighs,” he explains, “strongly suggests a sexual practice later named ‘femoral intercourse’ (penis between tightly clasped femora, Latin for thighs)” (47).

As Jean H. Baker delicately puts it in her introduction, Tripp’s “notion of factual verification defied the cannons of the discipline of history” (xiv). Tripp is convinced that Lincoln was gay, but all he can demonstrate is that Lincoln was more comfortable in male company and often shared beds with men, on which basis most nineteenth-century American men could also be called homosexual. The result is a curious, contradictory, rambling book, even if it is written in an engaging, informal style. Tripp comes across as an amiable, knowledgeable enthusiast, and it is a great shame that he was unable to make a better case. So glaring are the weaknesses of his argument and so over-hyped his conclusions that this book has the rare distinction of having been rebutted by the reigning high priest of Lincoln scholarship, David Herbert Donald, two years before it was published. In “We Are Lincoln Men,” Donald explored Lincoln’s male friendships, including those that Tripp considered essentially sexual.17 As well as dismissing any possibility of Lincoln’s relationship with Speed having a sexual dimension, Donald also rebutted the story that Tripp clearly believed was his strongest card.

On November 16, 1862, Virginia Woodbury Fox, a Washington socialite and wife of Assistant Navy Secretary Gustavus V. Fox, recorded some juicy gossip in her diary. Her friend Leticia McKean had informed her that “there is a Bucktail soldier here devoted to the President, drives with him, and when Mrs L. is not home, sleeps with him. ’What stuff!’” As Matthew Pinsker has demonstrated, the soldier in question was Captain Derickson of the 150th Pennsylvania volunteers (known as the Bucktail regiment), which was assigned to guard the president. Lincoln, who spent considerable time living at the Soldiers’ Home just outside Washington, became very fond of the Pennsylvania soldiers,

17. Donald, “We Are Lincoln Men”.
and other accounts also recall his particular friendship with Captain Derickson. To David Donald, Fox’s exclamation should be read in a dismissive way (as in “What stuff and nonsense!”), whereas Tripp reads it as an endorsement (as in “Wow! What amazing stuff!”). On this narrow issue of the likely meaning of “what stuff!” Tripp’s interpretation is at least as plausible as Donald’s. But even if Fox was mildly scandalized by the gossip she had heard, that would not mean that she had made the same assumptions as Tripp. Is it not more likely that she was titillated by the impropriety, in her view, of a president striking up a friendship with a mere captain? Tripp has added an extra little titbit from a regimental history written in 1895 by Thomas Chamberlain, who was Derickson’s commanding officer, which inadvertently reinforces this impression. “Captain Derickson in particular,” Chamberlain wrote, “advanced so far in the President’s confidence and esteem that, in Lincoln’s absence, he frequently spent the night at his cottage [the Soldiers’ Home], sleeping in the same bed with him, and—it is said—making use of his Excellency’s night-shirts!” (3). For Tripp, that they probably shared a bed on occasion is enough to prove that they had “mutually and repeatedly satisfying” sex (20). In spite of his often ingenious reading of the sources, Tripp’s own evidence makes it abundantly clear that no one in the nineteenth century made any such assumptions.

And to be fair to Tripp, this book, unlike the sensational “revelations” of the playwright Larry Kramer, is much more than mere propaganda. Stripping away some of the bluster, Tripp’s core point, that Lincoln’s sexuality was complicated and interesting, is plausible enough. At the other extreme, Donald, is overly defensive in his dismissal of any reading of Lincoln other than that he was vigorously and exclusively heterosexual. If Tripp is sometimes too eager to see a sexual dimension even in such an apparently unlikely place as a letter from Derickson about the president’s political prospects in the 1864 election, Donald’s “We Are Lincoln Men” does not do justice to the intensity and complexity of the feelings revealed, for example, in Lincoln’s intimate letters to Speed. In so many ways Lincoln was the embodiment of Victorian rectitude. Yet he had a well-documented other side that mirrored the schematic Christian division between mind and body and the Victorian distinction between the pure and the profane. As Henry Whitney

19. Larry Kramer erroneously claimed to have new evidence of Lincoln’s homosexuality. See Shenk, 34.
agreed, Lincoln had a “great ideality and also a view of grossness which displaced the ideality.” As Jonathan Ned Katz has colorfully put it, Lincoln’s mind was a “house divided, split into distinct domains: whorehouse and pure heath, lust house and love house.” In this Lincoln was hardly alone. At the very least, Tripp is surely right that if historians don’t even consider the possibility that Lincoln had homosexual relationships, they are certain not to find any.

The problem with Tripp’s book is not that it is implausible to wonder whether Lincoln’s close male friendships had a sexual dimension, but that the evidence does not bare the weight of Tripp’s convictions. Tripp fails to make a sustained effort to reconstruct the place of sex, and specifically sex between men, in mid-nineteenth-century culture. Lincoln’s friendship with Speed is a classic case in point. No one disputes that Lincoln “loved this man [Speed] more than anyone dead or living,” not excluding Mary Todd. But as Joshua Wolf Shenk writes, “We don’t know what Lincoln and Speed did in their bed together. But if, say, they snuggled or held hands, they wouldn’t have had to decide on this basis about being different from other men” (35–6). Tripp falls headlong into the fallacy of imposing anachronistic sexual categories on a world that we only partially understand. He knows he shouldn’t do it—at moments he writes well about the problems of understanding erotic love between men before the “invention” of homosexuality—but he can’t help himself.

Historians have only recently begun to systematically reconstruct past attitudes to sex, which of course is not necessarily the same as understanding sexual behavior. The evidence we have from Lincoln’s era obscures the existence of homosexual relationships. When it is alluded to at all, as in laws against sodomy (which was in any case only indirectly connected to homosexuality), it is to condemn it. Only at the very end of the nineteenth century did a broad new definition of “gross indecency” become a catch-all for sexual relations between men, replacing the narrower definition of sodomy. Only after that date was oral-genital contact defined as sex. One view of the history of human sexuality is that, whatever the words people used to describe such things, sexual identities are essential and irreducible, and therefore basically unchanged through time. The alternative view, given a powerful intellectual stimulus by Michel Foucault’s *Histoire de la sexualité*

(1976–1984), is that sexuality—certainly anything that we can describe as a sexual identity—is always constrained by discourse. Lincoln, in other words, lived and died before the “great sexual divide” imposed by the categories of homosexual and heterosexual. In his time, folks may have talked about sex between men—and indeed, as Tripp is keen to demonstrate, some of Lincoln’s smuttier jokes may have dealt with such subjects—but that did not mean that men or women could conceive of themselves as homosexual.

Love relations between men in the nineteenth century were widespread and approved of. But the sexual dimension of such relationships was taboo. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has put it, “the twentieth century tendency is to view human love and sexuality within a dichotomised universe of deviance and normality, genital and platonic love. But this is alien to the emotions and attitudes of the nineteenth century.” If the Lincoln-Speed story tells us anything, it is that bed-sharing between men did not connote sexual relations to nineteenth-century Americans, as it so palpably does today. William Herndon, hired by Speed as a clerk in his store and later Lincoln’s law partner and biographer, also shared the upstairs room for a time, as did Charles Hurst, another store clerk. Neither of them gave any hint of sexual impropriety between the two intimate bedfellows. Jonathan Katz’s Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality (2001) includes an account of Edward McCosker, a New York City policeman, who lost his job in 1846 after he was accused of touching a man’s private parts. Not even the indefatigable C. A. Tripp has dug up any hint of a similar scandal connected with Lincoln. Would Lincoln have escaped rumors and innuendo, not to say scandal, if he had engaged in as many same-sex relationships as Tripp claims? The McCosker story is also illuminating because it offers still more evidence that bed sharing between men did not necessarily have any sexual connotations. In the policeman’s defense, a colleague, Francis Donnelly, stated that he “had been in the habit of sleeping with said McCosker for the last three months, and that said McCosker never to deponent’s knowledge acted indecent or indelicate.”

One of the reasons why male friendships in the Victorian era, such as that between Lincoln and Speed, can strike the modern reader as surprisingly tender and intimate is that relations between the sexes

were so tightly regulated. The young Lincoln’s apparent discomfort around girls is well documented in Herndon’s sources. Lincoln’s cousin Dennis Hanks recalled that Lincoln “didn’t love the company of girls.” His stepmother remembered that he was “not very fond of girls as he seemed to me.” A neighbor thought that he “didn’t like girls much—too frivolous &c.” To Tripp, the fact that Lincoln was not a frontier Lothario corroborates the theory that he was sexually interested in boys. The alternative possibility is that the presence of girls and young women simply made Lincoln self-conscious. Speed had certainly had sex with prostitutes, and it is reasonable to suppose that Lincoln may have done so as well, but neither, as unmarried men, had experienced sex with that culturally alien creature, a “good” woman. Marriage was truly a step into the unknown.

Of course there was more to Lincoln and Speed’s friendship than their shared anxiety about the prospect of marriage. They were both sensitive men whose friendship appears to have been founded on their mutual support through their shared experience of depression. Lincoln’s surviving letters to his friend are largely concerned with emotional issues. “Should excessive pleasure still be accompanied with a painful counterpart at times,” he counseled in one missive, “still let me urge you, as I have ere done, to remember in the dep[th] and even the agony of despondency, that verry shortly you are to feel well again.” In 1841 Lincoln and Speed’s bachelor life together in Speed’s bed above the shop came to an end when Speed sold his store and prepared to move back to Kentucky to run the family farm and get married. This was the time when Lincoln appeared to suffer a nervous breakdown, the moment when he wrote to his law partner, John Stuart, telling him, “I am now the most miserable man living.

29. Ibid., 108.
30. Ibid., 131.
If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth.” 32 Lincoln biographies of the post-Randall era often are somewhat vague when they reach this episode, the conventional approach being to downplay it as a discreet event with a straightforward cause: Lincoln’s break-up with Mary Todd. One of the many achievements of Shenk’s book is to place the emotional trauma that Lincoln evidently suffered in the winter of 1840–41 as part of a much larger story of his lifelong struggle with melancholy. Difficulties in his relationship with Mary were evidently part of the problem that crushed him in early 1841, but Shenk convincingly shows that Lincoln’s famous reference in a letter to Speed about “that fatal first of Jany. ’41,” is more likely to have referred to something that affected Lincoln and Speed together rather than specifically to the date of Lincoln’s break-up with Mary Todd. 33

Compared to the evidence for his sexual behavior, the case that Lincoln battled with depression is in plain view. Herndon said “his melancholy dripped from him as he walked.” 34 David Davis thought his fondness for jokes was his attempt to “whistle off sadness.” 35 His melancholy was one of the things that, in the era when Sandburg dominated the popular image of Lincoln, was part of the public’s common knowledge. But curiously, until now, no one has systematically traced the contours of Lincoln’s depressions from the available evidence, nor questioned what it tells us about him as a man and a political leader. Indeed, the preoccupation with the question of whether Ann Rutledge was the one woman Lincoln really loved may well have obscured a concentration on the causes and consequences of the severe depressive episode that he appeared to suffer at the time of her death—a breakdown which seems to have striking similarities with the one he suffered six years later in 1841. As Shenk shows, the evidence of the love affair with Ann Rutledge turns out to be inferences drawn from the well-established fact of his depression—a depression so bad that his friends formed what amounted to a suicide watch.

Lincoln’s Melancholy is one of the most elegantly written Lincoln books in a long time. It may well prove to be one of the most important as well. Shenk is not the first scholar to comment on Lincoln’s depression, but this is by far the most extensive and sophisticated treatment to date. Shenk’s goal is to “see what we can learn about Lincoln by

32. Ibid., 1:229.
33. Ibid., 1:282; Shenk, 43–65. Shenk argues that Lincoln may well have ended the engagement to Mary Todd in the fall of 1840.
34. Quoted in Shenk, 4.
35. Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 350.
looking at him through the lens of his melancholy, and to see what we can learn about melancholy by looking at it in the light of Lincoln’s experience” (7). Beyond a fairly confident diagnosis of what he believes is Lincoln’s bipolar disorder in early life, Shenk frankly discusses the limits of the sources available, while using his understanding of modern psychoanalysis to shed light on Lincoln’s own analysis of his problems and the strategies he used to overcome them. Shenk has used many of the same sources as Tripp. But if the Lincoln stories are the same, in Shenk’s hands they are woven into a powerful and cogent story of a sensitive man’s struggles with his own inner demons, of his appeals to the better angels of his own nature. In Shenk’s hands, the striking contradictions of Lincoln’s character are explained convincingly. The speed with which his “dim pessimism could give way to supreme confidence” was characteristic of melancholy, which gave a person “access to the deep channels of the soul—the waters of sadness, the bedrock of constancy, the gold of mirth” (37).

Just as it is important not to impose on the nineteenth-century sexual identities created in a different era, it is vital, in discussing Lincoln’s mental illness, not to import prejudices from the twenty-first century. Shenk understands this completely, and the result is a historically sensitive and jargon-free work that stands out methodologically from the psychobiographies of the past. As well as ex-communicating Herndon’s work for its absence of proper historical method, the Randall-era professional historians instinctively defended Lincoln against any notion that he might be mentally “ill.” But in his own time, people perceived Lincoln’s well-known melancholy in a very different light: as a source of great potential as well as danger, not as an illness but as a “fearful gift.” They found it “alluring,” associated it with energy, insight, perseverance, and faithfulness. As Shenk has written, “to be grave and sensitive—to feel acutely the agony and sweat of the human spirit—was admired, even glorified” (30–1). Romantic poets were the heroes of Lincoln’s age. Rather than a weakness, a thoughtful, reflective sadness expressed in the right way in the right context could be a sign of depth and manliness. Civil War soldiers not only routinely cuddled up together (“spooning” they called it), they also sang sentimental songs with titles like “Weeping sad and lonely,” and no one questioned their manhood for doing so. Unlike depression today, the term “melancholy” was much more likely to be used to describe men rather than women in the nineteenth century.

A number of aspects of Lincoln’s life and career come into sharper focus when seen through the lens of Lincoln’s melancholy. It throws light, for example, on Lincoln’s withdrawal from politics after his term
in congress in 1849. Shenk sees his ambition (famously described by Herndon as a “little engine that knows no rest”) in terms of his strenuous efforts throughout his life to alleviate his feelings of helplessness with purposeful action. His humor was also a form of therapy—his “medicine,” as he described it himself. “What is striking about Lincoln’s therapies,” writes Shenk, “is that they did not dampen, but rather heightened, the essential tension of his life. Had he chosen to take high doses of opium, he might have found relief from his pain, but at the expense of a great loss of energy. Had he devoted himself to a guru or medical practitioner [as many of his contemporaries did]—spending months each year taking the water cure or attaching himself to a talented mesmerist—he may have found comfort in someone else’s prescription for him, at the cost of a vision that he’d already come to understand—that is, his desire to do something meaningful for which he would be remembered” (125).

Shenk’s approach manages to bind together Lincoln’s private and public lives in a pleasing unity that few biographers have managed. To Shenk, Lincoln’s understanding of the challenge of slavery in the 1850s resonated with his personal journey. If the basis of his opposition to the spread of slavery was founded in the idea that it was “a continued struggle to realize an ideal knowing that it could never be perfectly attained,” this was merely the same “ethic he used to govern himself” (127). Similarly, Shenk suggests that Lincoln’s gloomy temperament was ideally suited to the challenges that faced the nation after secession. “The most trying thing in all of this war is that the people are too sanguine; they expect too much at once,” Lincoln was reported as saying in 1864.36 The same could never be said of the President, and Shenk thinks that could have been a secret source of strength: “Looking on the dark side, in some scenarios, is valuable. In the midst of a disaster, the man who loudly proclaims the coming trouble will surely be more valuable than the man who sits dreamily admiring the daisies.” In this light, Lincoln’s oft-quoted letter during the winter of 1860–61, in which he warned that “the tug has to come, & better now, than any time hereafter,” seems grounded in his personal experience.37 “Having felt the tug come many times, Lincoln knew that putting it off would do no good,” Shenk writes (170).

Shenk’s interpretation of the way Lincoln sought to confront his demons head on, while remaining humble in the face of the larger forces

that constrained the dreams and actions of humans, offers a way of reconciling an interesting tension that has emerged in recent Lincoln scholarship. Donald’s *Lincoln* (1995) argued that Lincoln’s apparently frank confession that “I have not controlled events, events have controlled me” was the key to his essentially passive character. Having rejected the strict Calvinism of his parents, Lincoln nevertheless retained a strong sense of fate, or what he called a “doctrine of necessity.” Other scholars have disputed this view, noting the ways in which Lincoln consciously and strenuously sought to shape events, whatever he may have claimed to the contrary.\(^{38}\) Lincoln’s humility was indeed bound up with the sense that some sort of divine force was at work. But to Shenk, Lincoln’s determination came from his conviction that, however limited his powers to influence events, he had a job to do and could make a difference. “In his strange mix of deference to divine authority and wilful exercise of his own meager power,” Shenk writes, “Lincoln achieved a transcendent wisdom, the delicate fruit of a lifetime of pain” (192). This critical idea that Lincoln dealt with his depression not by denying it but by exploiting the tension within him for creative purposes, makes sense in the light of what we know of Lincoln’s idiosyncratic religious views, an intriguing aspect of Lincoln’s character that has received considerable attention from scholars.\(^{39}\) Perhaps Lincoln’s personal battles had given him the experience and determination to deal with uncertainty and feelings of powerlessness, which meant that he had less need to claim God’s favor than other men.

If the essence of Abraham Lincoln the man will never be captured in the pages of any one book, no future work after *Lincoln’s Melancholy* will be able to ignore the centrality of his private struggle with depression. What Shenk does that Tripp singularly fails to do is to explain why his angle on Lincoln matters. In the final section of his book, Tripp discusses the relevance of homosexuality to Lincoln as a political leader. The case is basically that Lincoln’s sexuality forced him to give the impression of being open and honest while in fact being secretive and discerning—“walking both sides of the street” as Tripp puts it (191). Furthermore, his early experience of puberty, Tripp suggests, made him willing to break rules and gave him the


confidence to hold unorthodox religious views, just as he had continued enjoyably masturbating after he learned that it was regarded as a bad thing. From his own experience, writes Tripp, he knew that it would not “make him go blind or crazy . . . or make his penis drop off” (188). Tripp understands that Lincoln was an unusual character, a moody man whose deepest thoughts will forever remain a mystery, and he is probably right to connect these issues to Lincoln’s sexuality. Much of what Tripp says about Lincoln’s secretiveness is persuasive. The trouble is that its relationship to his sexuality, while interesting up to a point, is inevitably mere speculation. And when it comes to analyzing the connections between the private and the public Lincoln, Shenk simply does the job much better. Both authors make liberal use of Herndon’s record and similar testimony, but Shenk does so with much greater fidelity to the cultural context in which the sources were created.

Connecting the public and private Lincoln is the great quest of Lincoln scholarship. The traditional approach has been to divide Lincoln’s life into two acts. The grand, heroic tragedy of the war years was balanced by the realist, even comic, story of the self-made man on the frontier. The danger of the rehabilitation of the Herndon material, which is entirely concerned with the pre-presidential Lincoln, is that scholars will overlook the fact that Lincoln was obsessed with politics all his adult life, that they will downplay the external motives that forced Lincoln to act in favor of a preoccupation with his internal strivings. If that is the danger, Shenk has usefully laid out a path that avoids such pitfalls. He has done so in a way that makes Lincoln simultaneously a product of his time and also an intensely relevant figure, a man to whom we can relate. And that, of course, is why the Lincoln story will run and run.