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Finding Homosexual Threads in Lincoln's Legend

By DINITIA SMITH

Was Abraham Lincoln a gay American?

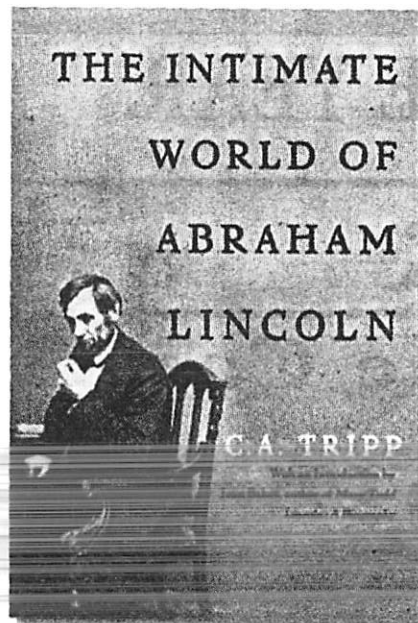
The subject of the 16th president's sexuality has been debated among scholars for years. They cite his troubled marriage to Mary Todd and his youthful friendship with Joshua Speed, who shared his bed for four years. Now, in a new book, C. A. Tripp also asserts that Lincoln had a homosexual relationship with the captain of his bodyguards, David V. Derickson, who shared his bed whenever Mary Todd was away.

In "The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln," to be published next month by Free Press, Mr. Tripp, a psychologist, influential gay writer and former sex researcher for Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, tries to resolve the issue of Lincoln's sexuality once and for all. The author, who died in 2003, two weeks after finishing the book, subjected almost every word ever written by and about Lincoln to minute analysis. His conclusion is that America's greatest president, the beacon of the Republican Party, was a gay man.

But his book has not stopped the debate. During the 10 years of his research, Mr. Tripp shared his findings with other scholars. Many, including the Harvard professor emeritus David Herbert Donald, who is considered the definitive biographer of Lincoln, disagreed with him. Last year, in his book "We Are Lincoln Men," Mr. Donald mentioned Mr. Tripp's research and disputed his findings.

Mr. Tripp was the author of "The Homosexual Matrix," a 1975 book that disputed the Freudian notion of homosexuality as a personality disorder. In this new book, he says that early biographers of Lincoln, including Carl Sandburg, sensed Lincoln's homosexuality. In the preface to the original multi-volume edition of his acclaimed 1926 biography, Sandburg wrote: "Month by month in stacks and bundles of fact and legend, I found invisible companionships that surprised me. Perhaps a few of these presences lurk and murmur in this book."

Sandburg also wrote that Lincoln and Joshua Speed had "streaks of lavender, spots soft as May violets." Mr. Tripp said that references to Lincoln's possible homosexuality were



cut in the 1954 abridged version of the biography. Mr. Tripp maintains that other writers, including Ida Tarbell and Margaret Leech, also found evidence of Lincoln's homosexuality but shied away from defining it as such or omitted crucial details.

Mr. Tripp cites Lincoln's extreme

privacy and accounts by those who knew him well. "He was not very fond of girls, as he seemed to me," his stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, told Lincoln's law partner William Herndon. In addition, Lincoln was terrified of marriage to Mary Todd and once broke off their relationship. They eventually had four children.

But in "We Are Lincoln Men" Mr. Donald wrote that no one at the time ever suggested that he and Speed were sexual partners. Herndon, who sometimes slept in the room with them, never mentioned a sexual relationship. In frontier times, Mr. Donald wrote, space was tight and men shared beds. And the correspondence between Lincoln and Speed was not that of lovers, he maintained. Moreover, Lincoln alluded openly to their relationship, saying, "I slept with Joshua for four years." If they were lovers, Mr. Donald wrote, Lincoln wouldn't have spoken so freely.

Mr. Tripp charts Lincoln's relationships with other men, including Billy Greene, with whom Lincoln supposedly shared a bed in New Salem, Ill. Herndon said Greene told him that Lincoln's thighs "were as

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perfect as a human being could be." Lincoln's fellow lawyer Henry C. Whitney observed once that Lincoln "wooded me to close intimacy and familiarity." Then there is Lincoln's youthful humorous ballad from 1829, "First Chronicles of Reuben," in which he refers to a man named Biley marry-ing another man named Naty: "but Biley has married a boy/ the girls he had tried on every Side/ but none could he get to agree/ all was in vain he went home again/ and sens that he is married to naty."

Mr. Tripp tries to debunk the popular opinion among scholars that Lincoln's lifelong depressions were caused by the death of his first love, Ann Rutledge. He writes that at the time she was supposedly involved with Lincoln, she was engaged to John McNamar and that her name appears nowhere in Lincoln's letters. Mr. Donald also takes issue with the conclusion that Lincoln had a sexual relationship with Derickson, his bodyguard at his presidential retreat, the Soldiers' Home, outside Washington. Mr. Tripp writes that their closeness stirred comment in Washington, and cites a diary entry from Nov. 16, 1862, by Virginia Wood-bury Fox, wife of Gustavus Fox, assistant secretary of the Navy. She recounted a friend's report: "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! But Mr. Donald writes



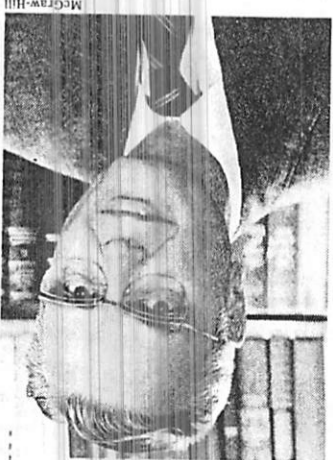
Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Ky. Joshua Speed, with whom Lincoln shared a bed for four years.

that "What stuff!" meant she was dismissing the rumor.

Mr. Tripp cites a second description of the relationship in an 1895 history of Derickson's regiment, the 150th Pennsylvania Volunteers, by Thomas Chamberlain, Derickson's commanding officer: "Captain Derickson, in particular, advanced so far in the president's confidence and esteem that, in Mrs. Lincoln's absence, he frequently spent the night at his cottage, sleeping in the same bed with him and — it is said — making use of his Excellency's night-shirts!" When Derickson was to be transferred, Lincoln pulled strings to keep him. But Mr. Donald wrote that if their relationship was romantic, they would not have separated so casually when Derickson finally left Washington in 1863.

Despite Mr. Donald's criticism, Mr. Tripp has won support from other scholars. Jean H. Baker, a former student of Mr. Donald's and the author of "Mary Todd Lincoln: a Biography" (W. W. Norton, 1987), wrote the introduction to the book. She said that Lincoln's homosexuality would explain his tempestuous relationship with Mary Todd, and "some of her agonies and anxieties over their relationship."

"Some of the tempers emerged because Lincoln was so detached," Ms. Baker said in a telephone interview. "But I previously thought he was detached because he was thinking great things about his court cases, his debates with Douglas. Now I see there is another explanation." "The length of time when these men continued to sleep in the same bed and didn't have to be sort of an impropriety," Ms. Baker said.



McGraw-Hill C. A. Tripp, the author of a new book about Lincoln's private life.

The question of Lincoln's sexuality is complicated by the fact that the word homosexual did not find its way into print in English until 1892 and that "gayness" is very much a modern concept.

Ms. Baker said the focus of 19th-century moral opprobrium was masturbation, not homosexuality. "Masturbation was considered more dangerous," she said. "For homosexuals, there was a cloud over them, but it seldom rained." People, she noted, "were accustomed to these friendships between men."

In researching Lincoln, Mr. Tripp created a vast database of cross-indexed material, now available at the Lincoln Library in Springfield, Ill. He began the book working with the writer Philip Noble, but they fell out. Mr. Noble has charged that Mr. Tripp plagiarized material written by him and fabricated evidence of Lincoln's homosexuality.

"Tripp's book is a fraud," Mr. Noble said in an interview. He declined to say what was fraudulent, however, because he said he was writing his own article about it.

After Mr. Noble made his charges, Free Press delayed publication. "We made some slight changes," said Adam Reiberg, a spokesman for the publishing house, "and we are satisfied that we are publishing a book that reflects Mr. Tripp's ideas and is supported by his research and belief." The manuscript was edited by Mr. Tripp's friend Lewis Gannett.

Larry Kramer, the author and AIDS activist, said that Mr. Tripp's book "will change history."

"It's a revolutionary book because the most important president in the history of the United States was gay," he said. "Now maybe they'll leave us alone, all those people in the party he founded."

Michael B. Chesson, a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Boston and another former student of Mr. Donald's, wrote an afterword to Mr. Tripp's book supporting his thesis. The book is "enormously important to understanding the whole person," he said in an interview. He likened the criticism to early objections to Fawn Brodie's 1974 biography of Thomas Jefferson in which she claimed that Jefferson had children with his slave Sally Hemmings: "Finding the truth is a sacred principle that at least one child together, later genetic studies suggested that they had at least one child together."

Still, if Lincoln was gay, how did it affect his presidency? Ms. Baker said that his outsider status would explain his independence and his ability to take anti-establishment positions like the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation. As a homosexual, she said, "he would be on the margins of tradition." "He is willing to be independent, to do what is right," she said. "It is invested in his soul, in his psyche and in his behavior."