BOOK REVIEWS

Abraham and Mary Lincoln
KENNETH J. WINKLE
Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011
Pp. 160, $19.95 (hbk), ISBN 978 0 8093 3049 2

Lincoln and the Election of 1860
MICHAEL S. GREEN
Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011
Pp. 152, $19.95 (hbk), ISBN 978 0 8093 3035 5

Abraham Lincoln and Horace Greeley
GREGORY A. BORCHARD
Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011
Pp. 168, $19.95 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-8093-3045-4

Lincoln and the Civil War
MICHAEL BURLINGAME
Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011
Pp. 176, $19.95 (hbk), ISBN 978 0 8093 3053 9

These four books are part of Southern Illinois University Press’s “Concise Lincoln Library” series, which is intended to produce “short, focused books, each concentrating on a different area of Lincoln’s life and career.” Of course, writing about Abraham Lincoln poses special problems, for so much has already been written and said about the sixteenth president that it is difficult, although not impossible, to find new perspectives and facts to present to readers. This series is meant to inform the general reader about different aspects of Lincoln’s life without burdening them with excessive historiographical references and numerous citations to sources. Each of the four books here reviewed is well written and engaging, while still providing interesting and informative analysis of events and Lincoln’s role in them.

In his examination of the marriage of Abraham and Mary Lincoln, Kenneth J. Winkle begins by examining their backgrounds and economic situations as minors. Mary Todd was a member of one of the first families of Lexington, Kentucky, where education and culture were carefully cultivated. Receiving a well-rounded education, she learned proper etiquette, spoke French fluently, and acquired other skills considered essential to a young woman of the local aristocracy. In contrast, Lincoln’s circumstances were humble as he was raised on the frontier with little opportunity for education or refinement. Working on his father’s farm in Kentucky and later in Indiana, from an early age he learned to use an axe and to accomplish other tasks...
necessary to subsist in the wilderness. While Mary’s advantages were numerous, her relationship with her stepmother, especially important to a young girl, was never intimate, stemming from the family’s resentment concerning the brief interlude between her mother’s death and her father’s remarriage. Lincoln, on the other hand, found in his stepmother a kind, wise, and benevolent woman, who loved him as her own and encouraged him to improve and educate himself. Winkle notes that despite growing up in a slaveholding family, Mary’s father who favored the gradual abolition of slavery, instructed her that human bondage was wrong. Thus, Mary shared her husband’s opposition to the institution and later supported him in his efforts to prevent its extension.

One especially interesting aspect of Winkle’s book is his exploration into nineteenth-century courtship behavior. Although as a suitor he was somewhat awkward, Lincoln got along well with Mary, who enjoyed talking and found in Lincoln a ready listener. At this time, while the match must be acceptable to the woman’s family, the ultimate decision to marry was the couple’s, and it was thought important for them to be compatible emotionally. No longer was marriage first and foremost a strategic bargain between families. After initially breaking off their engagement, Lincoln and Mary were wedded. Their first years of marriage apparently were happy, although Mary was known occasionally to erupt into angry fits of temper. These incidents were perhaps sometimes provoked by Lincoln’s refusal to conform to her notions about proper behavior in society, or in reaction to his remote and uncommunicative ways.

Mary was raised to revere Henry Clay and the Whig Party, originally established in opposition to Andrew Jackson and the Democrats, and was a knowledgeable and astute political observer. Ambitious for her husband’s political advancement, she maintained a respectable home and social life and offered advice to Lincoln, who apparently discovered in her a perceptive and useful adviser. Nevertheless, during the presidency, while sometimes a political asset, Mary’s behavior, especially her profligate spending habits and abrasive personality, were probably a net deficit to Lincoln. Some criticisms of Mary were unfair, especially those questioning her loyalty to the Union because of her immediate family’s support of the Confederacy. Winkle demonstrates the absurdity of these accusations and presents a fair and critical account of the Lincolns’ relationship.

In Lincoln and the Election of 1860, Michael Green offers an account of Lincoln’s election. While a good deal of mythology still surrounds his political motivations and career, it is clear that he was ambitious and quick to seize opportunities to gain office. These characteristics, of course, did not distinguish Lincoln from other politicians. What made him different was his likeability and formidable talents as a thinker, writer, and speaker. These talents explain why throughout his adult life he attracted mentors and supporters. It was his extraordinary ability in the management of others, however, which enabled him to rise so high in Republican circles, first at the state and later at the national level.

Having gained newfound national fame through his debate performances against Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln spoke at numerous venues in different states in support of Republican candidates and policies. Green notes that Lincoln correctly perceived
an opportunity to gain the Republican presidential nomination, although initially a remote one, and worked to enhance his fame and reputation before the 1860 Republican National Convention. Fortunately for him, Lincoln’s associates proved to be able political operatives themselves, especially in their efforts to attract delegates to his candidacy at the convention in Chicago. In this context, Green provides useful biographical sketches of Lincoln’s rivals for the nomination, indicating their strengths and weaknesses, helping the reader to understand why more and more delegates abandoned their first choice for Lincoln. Because they could not agree on a candidate, the Democrats divided and dissipated their electoral strength leading to Lincoln’s election.

The next book to consider in this series is Gregory A. Borchard’s parallel narrative of the lives of Abraham Lincoln and Horace Greeley. To write a biography of both men in a concise account is difficult indeed, especially because their lives rarely intersected. While they often labored for the same political causes, there is little evidence that they were anything more than acquaintances and sometime political allies. Another difficulty is that Greeley’s contributions and significance to the era were greatly overshadowed by Lincoln’s.

Greeley’s great success as a newspaper publisher provided him with a forum to promote Whig policies and oppose slavery. He was not successful as a politician, however, for he often advocated utopian ideas and other impractical policies, and was erratic, crusading for one cause, then another. During the Civil War, Greeley, a deeply humane person, was greatly disturbed by the carnage and soon wished to abandon the war effort. During the summer of 1863, he publicly urged Lincoln to abolish slavery, leading the president to issue his famous rebuttal stating that his purpose in prosecuting the war was to preserve the Union. If he abolished slavery, it would be only in the service of winning the war. Because of his erratic ways, Greeley proved himself to be an unreliable ally, vacillating between urging the war’s vigorous prosecution and seeking its end through negotiation. Lincoln found Greeley’s positions often unworkable and his criticisms of the administration’s war policies troublesome. Eventually, to demonstrate to the public and Greeley himself the impracticability of his agitation for peace negotiations, Lincoln appointed the publisher to serve as a peace commissioner with authority to meet with Confederate representatives. Greeley’s efforts were unsuccessful.

As Borchard documents, evidence of Greeley’s poor political judgment cannot be better illustrated than noting his alternate flirtations with the candidacies for president in 1864 of John C. Fremont and George B. McClellan. Both men were imprudent – politically and militarily – and their commands proved disastrous to the Union’s war effort. Eventually, Greeley supported Lincoln’s candidacy, but only after the tide of the war and campaign had turned in the president’s favor.

In *Lincoln and the Civil War*, Michael Burlingame presents an account of Lincoln’s leadership and management of the war. In the weeks leading to his inauguration, he sought to uphold the principles of the Republican campaign platform and to demonstrate to Southerners that secession and preparations for war were unnecessary. Burlingame provides an excellent summary of the many problems Lincoln encountered in expanding the army and finding effective and energetic
military commanders. In particular, General George B. McClellan, who proved to be a talented organizer and trainer of troops, but an abysmal military strategist and tactician, only moved to confront the Confederate military after Lincoln had repeatedly prodded him to action. Moreover, McClellan was prone to wild overestimations of the enemy’s strength, and timid in the face of great opportunities to win decisive victories before Richmond and at Antietam. Burlingame is correct in his assessment of McClellan’s personal and professional flaws, a man alternately given to paranoid fears and grandiose fantasies. Fortunately, Lincoln eventually found in Ulysses S. Grant an overall commander of the Union armies both capable and energetic enough to grind down the Confederate war machine and save the Union.

In his narrative, Burlingame also traced the controversies surrounding the emancipation of slaves, their enlistment into the military, and the possibility of free blacks gaining the right to vote. Always careful not to advance too far ahead of public opinion, Lincoln privately cajoled and pushed opinion and policy makers to move his way. In Louisiana, for instance, in a private letter Lincoln suggested to newly elected Governor Michael Hahn that in the upcoming state constitutional convention he might encourage the delegates to grant the right to vote to at least some free blacks. Moreover, Lincoln sought to shape a conciliatory policy for states restored to the Union. Their reconstruction, he hoped, would not be harsh, and would result in a smooth and brief transition restoring them to full membership in the Union. Lincoln’s conciliatory policy eventually led to conflict with Radical Republicans in Congress, most notably Benjamin Wade and Henry Winter Davis. These congressmen, in answer to Lincoln’s reconstruction plans, cosponsored a bill through which the rebelling states’ restoration as full members of the Union would be contingent upon a majority of their citizens fully accepting the supremacy of the federal government and Constitution of the United States. Throughout his book, Burlingame demonstrates the great difficulties Lincoln encountered and how close the Confederates came to achieving independence.

Over the next few years, Southern Illinois University Press intends to publish more books on a number of interesting topics as part of the Concise Lincoln Library series. Top scholars have been recruited to write these, insuring that the quality of the scholarship will remain high and their accounts accessible. These books should be valuable not only to the general reader, but also as college textbooks to introduce students to the career of Abraham Lincoln and the events which shaped his career and generation.