



Practical Strangers: The Courtship Correspondence of Nathaniel Dawson and Elodie Todd, Sister of Mary Todd Lincoln

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Dawson and Todd's burgeoning Civil War romance ignites curiosity.

Practical Strangers is a remarkable compilation of letters from 1861 and 1862 that present a nearly complete record of Elodie Todd—the sister-in-law of Abraham Lincoln—and Nathaniel Dawson's courtship via mail, as well as of their commitment to the Confederacy during the Civil War.

Leaving for war, Dawson promises that he'll write frequently—and he does. Most missives concern his feelings; Elodie reports back about town happenings and of her divided family. He mails her flowers as mementos. She writes of concerts. They quote Shakespeare.

It's unclear what Elodie thinks of her suitor. Dawson confesses he is vain, and proves it. He details the attractiveness of women visitors, and if they admired him. When Todd mentions other unmarried men, Dawson often responds unfavorably.

Indisputable is his desire to impress. Dawson writes to ask if John, one of the many slaves he owned at the time, has he been bringing Elodie flowers as instructed? This soldier does not come across as valiantly to modern readers as he may have to Elodie.

The tone of the letters switches over the course of the book, folding in more news after battles, while Elodie's letters indicate a growing devotion to the soldier. "Practical strangers" become fiancées and confidantes.

It's natural to wonder about those who defended slavery, "what were they thinking?" These letters don't answer that for slavery specifically; they're more a record of focus placed elsewhere, of the ardor and concerns shared between two people who were both—blithely, at times—at the very tip-top of Southern society.

Their language is both conversational and lyrical, and the couple confides their private attitudes and observations, as well as their undoubting hope for an ideal future together at Dawson's plantation after the war.

This volume is edited to focus on the courtship, with the entire correspondence available online. What do the rest of letters reveal of the couple? Wanting to know more is a testament to the power of these documents—Dawson and Todd's burgeoning romance ignites curiosity.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (July/August 2017)

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