

Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between A First Lady and a Former Slave

Floris Barnett Cash

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Review

Cash, Floris Barnett

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Fleischner, Jennifer *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between A First Lady and a Former Slave*. Broadway Books, \$26.00 ISBN 767902580

A tale of two women

The study of an unlikely friendship

In **Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly**, Jennifer Fleischner offers an interpretation of a remarkable female friendship that spanned the Civil War, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and the early years of the Reconstruction period. Fleischner expertly links the social and political and the public and private while examining the relationship between Mary Todd Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckly.

The volume, well researched and densely argued, presents an important but little-known chapter in the social history of the United States. Jennifer Fleischner reveals the legacy of slavery in the lives of two women, one a president's widow and the other a woman of African descent. She re-creates the life experiences and friendship of First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln and her seamstress and modiste, Elizabeth Keckly. Mary Todd Lincoln, the daughter of a wealthy southern slaveholder, married Abraham Lincoln, a driven, self-educated son of a poor farmer. Elizabeth Hobbs Keckly, the illegitimate daughter of her Virginia master and his slave, bought her freedom and moved to Washington, D.C. where she became the dressmaker and confidante to the President's aristocratic wife.

Jennifer Fleischner's engrossing book depicts Mary Lincoln and Lizzie Keckly in 1867 as a curious couple sitting on a bench in New York City's Union Square Park discussing money. Mary was dressed in mourning clothes and although Lizzie was free, her demeanor was that of a silent, watchful, and patient slave. Yet, Elizabeth Keckly was no faithful mammy, the idealized yet stereotyped maternal center of the antebellum household. No doubt, Elizabeth's

self-sufficient and self-made persona inspired Mary's affection, respect, and trust. The women had practically exchanged identities, the former slave was now a successful Washington businesswoman and her friend was a traumatized, debt-ridden widow. Forced to step down from the pedestal after her husband's death, Mary Lincoln was living with her youngest son in a genteel hotel in Chicago. Despite the circumstances, the fact that the women were devising a commercial transaction without the knowledge of male relatives was a bold move.

In her valuable study, Fleischner portrays Mary Lincoln as a smart, ambitious wife who aided her husband's rise in politics. Mary saw herself not only as her husband's equal partner and chief adviser but she believed she was unfairly scandalized as a person who meddled in official business and committed financial improprieties.

Mary Lincoln opened her heart to her companion, Lizzy Keckly, in numerous letters. Simultaneously, Keckly was writing a memoir, *Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years A Slave and Four Years in the White House* containing over 40 letters written by Mary Lincoln to Elizabeth Keckly. The book caused a huge furor because of its inside look at the Lincolns' marriage. Some contemporaries of Keckly accused her of violating the trust between the two women. Elizabeth Keckly asserted that she wrote the book to defend the reputations of both Mary Lincoln and herself.

With the narrative of her life, Elizabeth Keckly joined Harriet Jacobs, author of an historical narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Frederick Douglass who penned *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. The question of authorship, whether these books were really written by the African Americans who claimed to have written them, did not escape Jacobs, Douglass, or Keckly. In 1935, a journalist declared that Elizabeth Keckly had not written the book and that there was no such person as Elizabeth Keckly. Fortunately, as Fleischner relates, several persons who had known Keckly were alive and able to verify her existence.

Jennifer Fleischner's study of this intimate aspect of Civil War history emphasizes the intersection of black and white in United States history, underscoring the fact that Black history is American history. While Fleischner gives voice to Elizabeth Keckly and provides a fuller perspective of Mary Lincoln, a discussion of cross racial female relationships and of women

re-positioning themselves beyond the boundaries of race and class would have added depth and another dimension to her work. Nevertheless, the book is persuasive and readers will appreciate its many valuable insights.

Floris Barnett Cash is an Associate Professor in the Department of Africana Studies at the State University of New York in Stony Brook.