

The Mary Lincoln Enigma: Historians on America's Most Controversial First Lady

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Review

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Trying to Make Sense of a Misunderstood Figure

Written without fear or research, books about Abraham Lincoln's marriage have grossly misrepresented the subject. The worst offenders are Mary Lincoln's biographers, who resemble defense attorneys rather than impartial historians. They whitewash Mrs. Lincoln as they concoct what the late John Y. Simon called "the legend of Lincoln's happy marriage."

Overwhelming evidence shows that in fact Lincoln's marriage was, as his law partner William Herndon put it, "a domestic hell on earth," a "burning, scorching hell," "as terrible as death and as gloomy as the grave." After practicing law with Lincoln for well over a decade, Herndon exclaimed: "Poor Lincoln! He is domestically a desolate man – has been for years to my own knowledge" because of his marriage to "a very curious – excentric – wicked woman." Herndon had ample reason to call Mary Todd Lincoln "a she wolf," a "tigress," and "the female wildcat of the age."

Herndon's opinion was shared by many who knew Lincoln well, among them Carl Schurz, who stated flatly that the marriage "was the greatest tragedy of Mr. Lincoln's existence." A political ally of Lincoln in Illinois characterized Mary Lincoln as "a hellion—a she devil" who "vexed – & harrowed the soul out of that good man" and "drove him from home &c; – often & often."

Lincoln's two personal secretaries in the White House, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, referred to the First Lady as "the Hell Cat" and "her Satanic majesty," while the presidential physician, Dr. Robert K. Stone, called her "a perfect devil." Benjamin Brown French, who as the Commissioner of Public Buildings

had frequent contact with Mary Lincoln during the Civil War, likened her to a hyena, characterized her as a "bundle of vanity and folly," and wrote unflattering verses about her regal ways.

In the White House, Lincoln often spoke to his friend Orville H. Browning "about his domestic troubles." As Browning reported, the president "several times told me that he was constantly under great apprehension lest his wife should do something which would bring him into disgrace." And she did just that.

Few contributors to *The Mary Lincoln Enigma: Historians on America's Most Controversial First Lady* acknowledge these basic truths. A conspicuous exception is co-editor Michael Burkheimer, whose essay, "The Reports of the Lincolns' Political Partnership Have Been Greatly Exaggerated," effectively debunks the work of Mariolators like Ruth Painter Randall, Catherine Clinton, Jean Baker, Daniel Mark Epstein, David Grubin, and Linda Levitt Turner. Their assertions about the Lincolns' political collaboration, he insists, are not supported by the evidence. A similar lack of evidence undermines pieces in this volume by Brian Dirck, Richard Lawrence Miller, Kenneth J. Winkle, Catherine Clinton, and Frank J. Williams, all of whom belong to the category identified by Burkheimer as "apologists for Mary Lincoln."

Readers seeking the truth about the Lincoln marriage should skip those chapters but may profitably consult others by Stephen Berry, Wayne C. Temple, Douglas L. Wilson, Jason Emerson, and James S. Brust. Berry, a gifted wordsmith and the author of an excellent study of the Todd family (*House of Abraham: Lincoln and the Todds, A Family Divided by War*), describes Mrs. Lincoln as "a diva of grief" and a "financial bulimic" and concludes that she "was a lot like her siblings" in "valuing display," and "demanding recognition at the point of a knife, or a tongue." He is especially insightful in describing the way that the city of Lexington shaped the Todd family.

Douglas L. Wilson, one of today's premier Lincoln scholars and two-time winner of the Lincoln Prize (for *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* and *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*) challenges the widely shared belief that "Herndon hated Mary Lincoln" and that he framed "out of malice, a false and unfavorable picture of her." David Herbert Donald put forward this view in his 1948 biography of Herndon, based on the dissertation he wrote under the direction of James G. Randall.

In conjunction with Professor Randall and Randall's wife (nee Ruth Painter), Donald set Lincoln scholarship back half a century by discrediting Herndon's biography of Lincoln as well as the invaluable archive of interviews, letters, and statements that Herndon compiled after Lincoln's death. Donald and the Randalls misled others into thinking that the Herndon collection was a toxic nuclear waste dump rather than the gold mine that it truly is. This combined effort was in the service of Mrs. Randall, who sought to prove that Lincoln loved only one woman (Mary Todd) and that his marriage to her was happy. She dismissed the story of Lincoln's romance with Ann Rutledge as a myth, despite the testimony of two dozen former residents of New Salem. Impugning that testimony, she by extension cast doubt on the entire corpus of Herndon's research materials. She persuaded her husband to publish her arguments under his own name, which gave them far greater weight than they would have enjoyed if their true authorship had been known.

Few people know more about Lincoln than another of James G. Randall's graduate students, Wayne Temple, chief deputy director of the Illinois State Archives. His account of Mary Lincoln's travels before 1865 is a model of careful, richly detailed scholarship. In passing, Temple alludes to some of Mrs. Lincoln's corrupt actions as First Lady, including her pinching the salary of the White House stewardess, Mrs. John Watt, and her padding of expense accounts at the suggestion of the stewardess's husband, who served as the gardener at the Executive Mansion. The subject of Mrs. Lincoln's unethical conduct deserves far more coverage than it receives in this volume.

Temple also alludes to another aspect of Mrs. Lincoln that is glossed over: her temper, which constituted a form of madness. Temple rightly calls her outburst at the wife of a general during her visit to City Point, Virginia, in March 1865 a "despicable tirade." In Springfield, she was notorious for her temper tantrums. As a neighbor of the Lincolns' recalled, "Mrs. Lincoln often gave L[incoln] Hell in general . . . Ferocity – describes Mrs. L's conduct to L." Another neighbor reported that she "was gifted with an unusually high temper" that "invariably got the better of her." A carpenter who worked on the Lincolns' house recalled that she "was rather quick-tempered" and "used to fret and scold about a great deal." A woman who lived in Springfield in the 1850s remembered that Mary Lincoln had "attacks of what we called in those days, hysteria."

The madness of Mary Lincoln is carefully explored in James S. Brust's essay, "A Psychiatrist Looks at Mary Lincoln." Quite plausibly, Dr. Brust concludes Mary Lincoln probably suffered from bipolar disorder. This diagnosis, he avers, should make her a more sympathetic character, for it was a disease that she likely inherited. In addition, she suffered from a "major depressive disorder with psychotic features."

Dr. Brust convincingly dismisses Jean Baker's contention that Robert Todd Lincoln had his mother committed to an insane asylum in 1875 unnecessarily. At that point in her life, she was clearly suffering psychotic episodes and had to be protected from herself. Robert's decision, Dr. Brust maintains, was justifiable, humane, and responsible, even if the trial which led to her committal was a travesty of due process by modern standards.

Jason Emerson, author of the first full-length scholarly biography of Robert Todd Lincoln, agrees. His well-grounded essay on the relationship between mother and son shows Robert in a far more favorable light than traditional accounts provide. According to Emerson, Robert "spent his entire adult life trying to protect his mother from the selfish motives of untrustworthy people. He warned her about questionable business investments, shady Spiritualism mediums, and general unsavory companions."

This volume also contains essays on Mrs. Lincoln's taste in clothes (by Donna McCreary), her treatment in novels (by Richard W. Etulain), and her iconography (by Harold Holzer). Surprisingly, there is no contribution from Jennifer Fleischner, author of the excellent study, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave*.

Mary Lincoln is more to be pitied than censured. She did not ask to inherit bipolar disorder, nor to have her mother die when she was only six years old, nor to have her father abandon her emotionally, nor to be raised by an unsympathetic stepmother, nor to see three of her four children die before reaching adulthood, nor to have her husband murdered by her side. The Almighty ladles out a fair amount of misery on all human plates, but her portion was especially heaping. That said, it must be acknowledged that she behaved very badly and helped make her husband truly "a man of sorrows."

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