House of Abraham: Lincoln and the Todds, a Family Divided by War

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Review

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Lincoln's Family Life

In his first book, *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), Stephen Berry included a segment on a Confederate soldier who married one of Mary Todd Lincoln's many sisters, Elodie Todd Dawson. The draft version of that book contained a footnote, in which Berry suggested that someone should write about the wartime experiences of the Todd family and their most famous in-law. His editor, Susan Ferber, challenged him to remove the footnote and do the book himself.

The result is something quite special. Berry has a keen antenna for interpersonal relationships and group dynamics. The Todds were a sprawling outsized Kentucky family. The patriarch, Robert Todd, fathered fourteen children who survived to adulthood, six by his first wife, who died bearing the last, and eight by her successor. Each child jostled for attention, their home a hive. Depending on their emotional needs of the moment, they hugged or throttled each other. They had sharp tongues and quick tempers (12). The boys tried to swagger and dominate. The girls mistook raiment for refinement (21). Suddenly we see why we can never warm up to Mary, who spent lavishly on dresses and jewelry, often looking ridiculous for the effort (100).

Before the war the Todd offspring scattered in various directions. Several of the older girls gravitated to Springfield, the newly-designated capital of Illinois, where eligible bachelors beckoned. The younger Todds spread across the southwest. The intensifying sectional crisis fueled rivalries within the still-close clan. The southern Todds regretted that one of their own was married to a prominent Black Republican. Of course nobody expected a war. However fractious their relationships with each other, the Todds were heirs to Henry Clay's political ideals—conciliation and compromise.
The outbreak of war in April 1861 changed all that. The Todds were our nation in miniature—a maddened family in a house divided (xv). Three of Mary's hotheaded brothers immediately enlisted into the Confederate army, and another soon followed. Most disheartening to the Lincolns, Ben Hardin Helm decided to do the same, even though his brother-in-law tempted him with an appointed post that would have protected him from combat. Helm was the husband of Little Sister, Emilie Todd Helm, for whom both Mary and Abraham felt a parental attachment.

The largest part of this deftly written book explores the consequences of the fateful decisions made in 1861. Sam Todd fell at Shiloh in April 1862, his last words uttered with a sort of *joie de guerre*, a manly insouciance that implied that even being shot through the bowels was a part of life's rich pageant (115). Aleck Todd succumbed to friendly fire in August 1862. Worst, at Chickamauga in September 1863, Helm led a charge of Kentucky's Orphan Brigade into a perfect tornado of bullets (145).

Helm's death jolted the grief-stricken Lincoln like no other. I feel as David of old did when he was told of the death of Absalom, Lincoln confided to a friend. Would to God I had died for thee, oh Absalom, my son, my son (147). Berry sees in this lament a key clue to the president's evolving interpretation of the Civil War:

Like David's Isrl, Lincoln's America was born to founding fathers and chosen by God to cradle the best hope of earth. The country had sinned, however, and, threatened with self-destruction, it needed to be chastened to be reborn. Here then is a source of Lincoln's remarkable insight into the war—originating in the Bible and given personal resonance by his brother-in-law's death (148).

Lincoln arranged for Helm's widow and her children to cross Union lines and visit the White House. At just this juncture, when attempting to comfort Little Sister, he took the train to Gettysburg to dedicate the new cemetery, where he stated so memorably that soldiers on both sides had died to secure their common country's future. His second inaugural would make explicit that slavery was the sin for which the blood sacrifice had to be paid. Thus, Berry asserts, Abraham Lincoln is the ultimate Founding Father. The house Washington, Jefferson, and Adams had built had been too flawed to stand. Lincoln framed a
new house at Gettysburg, the house we live in, the House of Abraham (149).

Many Todds appear in these pages. Few enlist the sympathies of the reader. But for Lincoln all were family. Long estranged from his own blood relatives, Lincoln suffered . . . with the South (179), attempted to explain the purpose of the suffering, and became at the end the final casualty of that cruel conflict.

Stephen Berry has unearthed a wealth of primary sources and has employed them to answer fresh and original questions. He disdains the narrow monographic grooves that isolate too many other historians from a wider audience. House of Abraham announces the arrival of a superb new talent.


This review honors the memory of Stephen G. Kurtz (1926-2008).