

The Madness of Mary Lincoln

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Review

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Emerson, Jason *The Madness of Mary Lincoln*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$29.95 hardcover ISBN 809327716

The Tormented First Lady

The story behind *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* is, perhaps, as intriguing as the historical work itself. In March 2005, Jason Emerson was working on his upcoming biography on Robert Lincoln, when the discovery of two letters penned by Robert's attorney, Frederic N. Towers, led him on a search for the legal papers relating to the insanity trial of Mary Todd Lincoln. These papers were known to have existed but had never been found, and many a frustrated Lincoln historian had come to the conclusion that Robert Lincoln—who had “previously admitted attempting to destroy all of his mother's correspondence from the insanity period”—had disposed of them himself (2).

Jason Emerson remained undeterred by this probability. What turned up months later in the Towers family home was an old steamer trunk containing the business, legal, and family papers of Robert Lincoln, including twenty-five letters relating to Mary Todd Lincoln's insanity episode. After some deliberation, the children of Frederic Towers agreed to allow Emerson to use the material to reexamine the complex story surrounding Mary Lincoln's insanity trial.

Drawing upon these newly discovered letters, together with other correspondence, medical papers, legal documents and newspaper accounts, Emerson argues that the vivacious and charming, yet volatile and emotional Mary Lincoln did not suffer from one highly publicized “insanity episode,” but rather exhibited manifestations of bipolar disorder in early life. Prone to fits of temper, Mary's highly strung nature was in some ways ameliorated by her husband, who acted as “the buffer between her and the rest of society” (11). Still, her behavior was erratic at best, and outbursts of jealousy, anger, and

nervousness were only exacerbated by the Lincoln family's removal to the White House. Unable to win over Washington society, the First Lady embarked on lavish spending sprees, extravagant domestic refurbishments, and ostentatious parties in an attempt to demonstrate her worth. Her activities earned her only the scorn of the northern press and its people. The death of Willie Lincoln in 1862 pushed an already overwrought Mary to the brink. Inconsolable over the loss of her son, Emerson argues that Mary Lincoln's emotional state deteriorated, finally giving way with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865.

Using the recently discovered correspondence and legal material, Emerson carefully pieces together a new interpretation of this turbulent episode in Lincoln history. Robert Lincoln looms large in the story, as Emerson seeks to rescue him from the vindictive, mercenary role in the saga that played itself out in the courts and the press in the 1870s. A Harvard law graduate, prevented from joining the Union army until early 1865 because his mother strictly forbade it, Emerson argues that Robert Lincoln was "the quintessential Victorian-era gentleman, who believed in and felicitously followed the manly tenets of duty and honor" (21). Robert's sense of duty underpinned his increasingly difficult relationship with his mother. By the late 1860s, a grief-stricken Mary Lincoln embarked on hefty bouts of spending, followed by paranoid episodes where she obsessed about her lack of material wealth. Further, bad press seemed to dog her. Mary's famous Old Clothes Scandal of 1867—where she convinced herself she was destitute and sought to offload a bevy of White House gowns and jewelry in New York under a pseudonym—was followed by her very public and unpopular campaign to obtain a pension from the United States Government. While Robert attempted to protect his mother from negative press and hurtful allegations, he was all too aware of Mary's deteriorating physical and emotional state.

Things went from bad to worse with Tad Lincoln's sudden death from pleurisy in 1871. Unable to bear yet another loss, Mary allowed grief to overwhelm her, turning to Spiritualism as her only form of comfort. Deeply distrustful of the Spiritualist movement, Robert watched helplessly as his mother suffered from anxiety, excessive spending, hallucinations and obsessive episodes where she was convinced that she, or Robert, were going to die. At his wit's end, Robert sought the advice of several leading Illinois doctors and family friends, who concluded that hospitalization was Mary Lincoln's only hope for recovery. Emerson argues that Robert instigated his mother's committal in May 1875 not out of malice—as many historians have argued—but in a desperate attempt to protect Mary from herself. In so doing, he contends, Robert also fulfilled his

duty of care to his family and upheld his reputation as a gentleman amongst his peers.

Mary Todd Lincoln was committed to Bellevue Place Sanitarium in Batavia, Illinois, in May 1875. She initially responded positively to the prescription of “rest, diet, baths, fresh air, occupation, diversion [and] change of scene” (71) offered by Dr. Richard J. Patterson and his staff at the facility. A brief visit by a reporter from the *Chicago Post and Mail*, however, stirred up Mary’s discontent, and fuelled her desire to return to her life in Chicago. Using the newly discovered correspondence—primary between Mary Lincoln and her close friends, Myra and James Bradwell—Emerson argues that “it was Mary herself,” not Myra Bradwell, “who created and directed her plot for freedom (77). Frequent appeals to her powerful friends, including the Bradwells, Chicago attorney John Franklin Farnsworth, and newspaper editor Wilber F. Storey, provided Mary with the legal prowess and media sympathy to secure her freedom. Once Mary had the ball rolling, there was little Robert could do to stop her. With the press espousing her recovery, and public sympathy at an all time high, Mary left Bellevue in September 1875, and secured her rights to control her property in June 1876.

The bond between Mary and Robert, however, was irrevocably harmed. In 1876 Mary boarded a steamer bound for Europe, declaring that it was necessary to “place an ocean” (122) between herself and her son. Reconciliation between the pair would not occur for several years thereafter. Emerson concludes that while historians have often placed themselves as “defenders of Mary” or “defenders of Robert”, a greater understanding of the insanity period reveals the individual and social undercurrents that shaped the episode and its aftermath. “We cannot blame Mary for her irrationalities,” Emerson notes, “nor can we blame Robert for dealing with his mother in a way he deemed most necessary and proper” (155).

The Madness of Mary Lincoln is a well written and intriguing work. Emerson’s appendices are a wonderful addition to his study, containing transcriptions of the twenty-five previously unpublished Mary Todd Lincoln letters, the legal documents pertaining to the sale and destruction of the correspondence, and a short essay on the psychiatric illness of Mary Lincoln by Dr. James S. Brust. In all, Jason Emerson should be congratulated for both his detective work and his historical analysis which have culminated in a groundbreaking study on the life of this complex and troubled woman.

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