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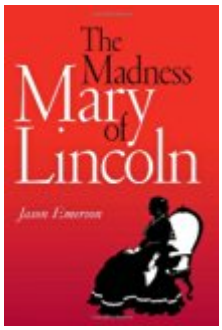
Jason Emerson. *The Madness of Mary Lincoln.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007. xiii + 255 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8093-2771-3.



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Upon Mary Todd Lincoln's death in July 1882, the editor of the *Springfield Monitor* (Illinois) began the former First Lady's obituary with a simple but powerful statement: "Mary Lincoln was no ordinary woman." She was "princely in her nature" and worthy of the position she held in the White House, but the editor was quick to note the perceived effect of Abraham Lincoln's assassination on her eccentricities. Since that fateful day, "her history has been well known to this country."[1]

While a general history of her activities may have been known to her contemporaries, the scarcity of materials related to her later life has vexed historians for years, especially in regard to what former National Park Service ranger Jason Emerson refers to as her "Institutionalization Episode" (p. 63). In the first published compilation of Mary's letters by Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner in 1972, the author of the introduction, Fawn M. Brodie, bemoaned that "there has never been a good clinical study of Mary Lincoln" because the only record of her insanity trial was the court report. She predicted, though, that the letters found in the Turners' edited volume "will surely stimulate a new and more subtle book-length study."[2] Indeed, she was correct. Historians Mark Neely Jr. and R. Gerald McMurty answered the call in 1986 with a study of Mary's insanity trial. It was a timely work based on recently discovered manuscripts found in Robert Todd Lincoln's file room in his Manchester, Vermont, home.[3] In 1987, Mary Jean Baker also used these papers to analyze Mary's condition in her biography of the First Lady.

In spite of these important books, Lincoln scholars continued to bitterly debate the source of her incarceration since the former First Lady's voice remained largely unheard as a result of her eldest son's meticulous quest to destroy or hide his family's private papers. Due to the historical vacuum, historians wondered if her admittance to the asylum was the product of a caring son or if Mary was the victim of her son's male chauvinistic behavior. These debates have plagued Lincoln scholars until 2005 when Emerson tracked down manuscripts owned by the family of Robert's lawyer, Frederic N. Towers. His son, Frederic C. Towers, had recently found them in a steamer

trunk in his basement. This landmark discovery shed new light on Mary's insanity, incarceration, her release, and her son's seemingly dishonest intentions. The unpublished letters of Mary and legal documents pertaining to the acquisition of these letters appear in appendices at the end of the monograph.

The Madness of Mary Lincoln begins with an important evaluation of Mary's personality as a young woman, her relationship with Abraham Lincoln, and the tragedy she faced as a mother and wife. Emerson argues that Mary, as a child and young woman, exhibited the characteristics of a dual personality because of her erratic changes in emotion. He cites several of Mary's contemporaries who commented on her behavior, including her cousin Elizabeth Edwards, Lincoln's presidential secretary William O. Stoddard, and William H. Herndon. One, however, might question the use of Herndon's opinions given his and Mary's mutual hatred of each other. By focusing on these early episodes in Mary's life, Emerson revives the argument first posed by Mary's first biographer, W. A. Evans, in 1928 that Mary's "emotionalism ... shaped her personality ... and formed the background for her later hysteria and self-indulgence following the deaths of her husband and children" (p. 10). Emerson also contends that the marriage of Abraham and Mary was not an easy one, but Abraham played a critical role in their relationship as a "restraining influence" (p. 11). Not only did Abraham tolerate her behavior, but his moderating personality tempered her childlike actions when she became too volatile. Emerson maintains that when coupled with her "emotionalism," her son Willie's death and her husband's assassination acted as catalysts for her rapidly degrading mental state.

With the death of the sixteenth president, Robert became the head of the Lincoln family, and in this role, he took primary responsibility for his mother's physical and mental well-being. He did so, Emerson argues, because he was not only devoted to his family, but he was also the "quintessential Victorian-era gentleman" (p. 21). "Duty" and "honor" formed Robert's worldview, which also informed his notions of privacy and commanded his actions as the head of the family (p. 21). It is of little surprise, then, that Robert became increasingly protective of his family and acutely aware of the seriousness of his mother's mental health. In 1867, Robert started to notice that his mother was spending exorbitant sums of money on clothing. Not only was Mary spending money, but she also tried to sell her clothing under a pseudonym to her husband's old political friends because she believed she was poor. The "Old Clothes Scandal of 1867" became a fiasco for Robert and caused him to suspect that she was "'mentally irresponsible'" (p. 28). By 1875, after several incidents, Robert was firmly convinced that his mother's mind had finally broken. He subsequently consulted physicians and such close family friends as U.S. Supreme Court Justice David Davis and lawyer Leonard Swett on the appropriate course for his mother. They concluded she was insane and that she needed medical care in an institution. Under Illinois law, however, this could only be done through a trial.

Based on the information Emerson gleaned from the "Lost Insanity Files," he takes this opportunity to revise the historical narrative regarding Mary's trial. Unlike previous historians who have criticized Robert for railroading his mother in her insanity trial to acquire her money, Emerson portrays Robert as a dutiful and caring son who only wanted the best for his mother. He hired a Pinkerton detective to guard her and ensure her physical well-being. Additionally, he consulted a total of six physicians to accurately gauge his mother's mental health, all of whom concluded that Mary ought to be committed to a facility for her own personal safety. Emerson also contends that an evaluation of the legal system in which Mary was tried is important to understanding the case as a whole. As early as 1823, Illinois law provided anyone accused of insanity the right to a trial by jury.

The law was changed in 1851 and allowed husbands to institutionalize their wives or children without a trial. This sexist legal system was challenged in 1860, and all accused insane were subsequently given the right to a trial by jury. Under this system, Mary's case was heard before a jury of eighteen witnesses, including Mary's son. In a rare display of emotion, Robert cried several times during his testimony and found it very hard to state that his mother was mentally ill. Physicians and others who had direct contact with Mary also testified that she was insane. Based on this testimony, the jury concluded the same and sentenced the former First Lady to institutionalization. Robert was appointed her conservator and managed her finances and property.

Emerson continues to challenge prevailing theories of Mary's "Institutionalization Episode" and the source of her release. Prior to her trip to Bellevue Sanitarium, Mary attempted to commit suicide by obtaining a lethal concoction of medicine, but she was continually foiled by a diligent pharmacist. Emerson maintains that Mary's suicide attempt only demonstrates that she was disturbed, not that she sought to escape the perceived bonds placed on her life by her son. He also disagrees with Baker that her suicide attempt was a "false story planted" by Robert in the newspapers to justify his actions (p. 70). Emerson supports his claim by citing five separate newspapers that carried the story. Emerson also argues that Mary's tenure at Bellevue was not as harsh as the contemporary press or other biographers have portrayed. She had a private suite on the second floor with a bathroom. Her door was locked at night, and her windows had a wire mesh in place to prevent her from committing suicide. Her son visited his mother every week. Mary seemed quite happy from the accounts provided by Robert and the Bellevue Sanitarium staff, but she increasingly longed for contact with the outside world, specifically with Myra Bradwell, one of her Chicago friends. It has been believed by historians that Bradwell planned Mary's release from Bellevue, and based on information found in the lost letters of Mary, she secretly was the architect of her release, which occurred in September 1875. On June 15, 1876, Mary's property was restored to her, and she left for Europe once again.

The concluding chapters of ***The Madness of Mary Lincoln*** analyze Mary's life while she was in Europe from 1876 to her death in 1882. These chapters are informative and intriguing as they outline Mary's activities that have remained unknown to historians because of the dearth of materials. Additionally, Emerson also includes a very good chapter outlining the odyssey of papers related to Mary's trial and institutionalization. These papers appear in an appendix at the end of the monograph.

Not only does Emerson clarify many facets of the trial and the institutionalization of Mary, but he also rescues Robert from historical victimization and obscurity in the Lincoln literature. Emerson successfully captures Robert's character and worldview, and even though Robert's actions may appear cold to the modern observer, his familial devotion to his mother was unfailing; his estrangement from his mother caused him much anguish. In a letter that Emerson does not cite, on July 30, 1882, Robert wrote Lucretia Garfield, wife of martyred President James A. Garfield, "I have great satisfaction that a year ago I broke down the personal barrier which her disturbed mind had caused her to raise between us. At last in the end the estrangement had ceased."[4] Clearly, Robert treasured the last year that he shared with his mother.

Emerson's intrepid study of this critical period in Mary's life will be a lasting contribution to the scholarship on the Lincoln family. It will surely stimulate new studies on her life and the Lincoln family, and as scholars, we must be thankful for the discovery of these letters.

Notes

[1]. "Mary Lincoln," *Springfield Monitor*, reprinted in the *Alton Daily Telegraph*, July 24, 1882.

[2]. Fawn M. Brodie, foreword to *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters*, edited by Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), xv.

[3]. For a history of how these papers were acquired, see Robert Todd Lincoln Beckwith (the last Lincoln descendant), foreword to *The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln* by Mark Neely Jr. and R. Gerald McMurty (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993).

[4]. Robert Todd Lincoln to Lucretia Garfield, July 30, 1882, Box 57, Lucretia Garfield Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.