

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jennifer Fleischner. *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship between a First Lady and a Former Slave.* New York: Broadway Books, 2003. 372 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7679-0258-8; \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7679-0259-5.

Reviewed by Matthew Pinsker (Endowed Chair in American Civil War History, Dickinson College)
Published on H-DC (May, 2004)

Jennifer Fleischner has produced an elegant and engaging biography of a friendship forged in wartime Washington between Mary Lincoln and her seamstress/confidante Elizabeth Keckly. Their story is a fascinating one that Fleischner tells in rich, engrossing detail. Although the book's sympathies clearly lie with Keckly, the former slave, this penetrating portrait of Mary Lincoln will stand with some of the very best scholarship on the controversial First Lady.

Organized in alternating biographical chapters, the book follows each woman from birth to death, drawing some provocative parallels while focusing heavily on their years of intimacy. If there is any fundamental flaw in this project, it is that this intimate period was actually quite limited—only about six years—and so the dual biography sometimes strikes an artificial note. Moreover, their most explosive moment—Keckly's decision in 1868 to publish a revealing and unauthorized memoir of their relationship—was mostly undocumented. Fleischner handles the situation tersely, in just a few pages, and offers no great insight into the emotional drama of the betrayal.^[1] Adding to a reader's sense of creeping disappointment, Fleischner disposes of the final fourteen years of Lincoln's widowhood and the remaining thirty-nine years of Keckly's life in a rather flat seven-page epilogue. Still, the author is working here as a historian and the limitations of her evidence should not detract too much from the sparkling achievement of her investigation and her considerable literary skills.

"I wanted to restore Elizabeth Keckly to her place in history," Fleischner writes earnestly at the beginning (p. 5). Born the same year as Mary Todd, Elizabeth or Lizzy was the product of a slave-master relationship consummated while the plantation mistress was preparing to bear her tenth child. Lizzy's mother was one of the "privileged" slaves of the Burwell fam-

ily of Virginia, serving as nurse and seamstress for an unhappy clan that faced considerable debts and moved frequently. Lizzy herself was sent, at the age of fourteen, to live with the family's oldest son and his new wife, a smaller but still troubled household that eventually settled in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Here Lizzy spent several isolated and difficult years, where she faced terrible beatings and was repeatedly raped by a white male acquaintance of the family who towered over her at the "monstrous" antebellum height of six foot eight inches (p. 86).

The abusive relationship yielded a son for the young slave woman, who called herself Lizzy Hobbs, a decision that proudly invoked the memory of her mother's enslaved husband while avoiding her master's (and real father's) surname. Fleischner sympathetically and persuasively tells this disturbing coming-of-age story. Her "restoration" of Keckly's early life is truly a model for the writing of slave biography. No doubt her subject's memoir helps, but Fleischner still reaches well beyond that important work.

Eventually, Lizzy returned to Virginia and reunited with her mother and the rest of the Burwell family. In the mid-1840s, she lived in Petersburg, Virginia, a town with a sizable free black population. Then she moved with her owners to St. Louis where Lizzy was hired out as a dressmaker to various families around the city. In these years before the war, she married a fugitive slave named James Keckly who was passing himself as a free man. Lizzy Keckly, as she was then known, worked diligently toward purchasing freedom for herself and her son George. In 1855, with the help of loans from friendly benefactors, she managed to accomplish her goal at the cost of \$1,200. As the war approached, she finally prepared to leave St. Louis and the memories of slavery behind. Her husband, a drunkard, was not part of those plans.

Thus Keckly arrived in Washington, D.C., in 1860 as a free woman, freed from both slavery and a bad marriage. With her skills as a seamstress and glowing references from St. Louis, she soon gained work from some of the capital's most prominent figures, including Varina Davis, whose husband was a senator from Mississippi. Keckly rejected an offer to follow the Davises out of Washington during the secession winter and instead soon found herself employed by the nation's new First Lady, Mary Lincoln, in the spring of 1861.

The first few months of the war appeared to be a heady time for the former slave as she rushed to prepare several new dresses for the president's demanding wife. But then word came back that Keckly's son George had been killed in battle in Missouri. Blacks were not yet allowed to serve in combat, but he had been light-skinned enough to pass as a white man. When Mary Lincoln's middle son Willie died from disease the following spring, the bond between the two women seemed to grow much stronger. According to Fleischner, the war's second year marked a turning point in their relationship. The intensity of the carnage in 1862, their shared personal grief, and Mary Lincoln's isolation from her family and old friends pushed them toward real friendship. By the autumn of that year, Mary Lincoln insisted on bringing Lizzy Keckly with her on long excursions to New York and Boston as she left her husband behind to deal with the crises of the war.

In Fleischner's view, the distance between the First Couple was part of a dominant pattern in their relationship. "Lincoln's extensive absences at once liberated and provoked Mary," she writes of the Lincoln marriage in the 1840s (p. 157). These regular absences (for politics and law) provoked Mary Lincoln, according to the author, because as a child she had been devastated by the death of her mother and by her subsequent estrangement from her father's second wife. Young Mary Todd had been effectively shipped out of her beloved father's new household, first to a boarding school just outside of her hometown in Lexington, Kentucky, and then to her sister's residence in Springfield, Illinois. It was there, of course, where she met her future husband, a coarse but promising state legislator and attorney. They shared an interest in politics and apparently a strong physical attraction (four children in ten years, with the first-born almost exactly nine months after their wedding), but from the beginning their relationship was turbulent. For Fleischner, the fireworks were clear evidence of

Mary Lincoln's deeply rooted anxieties about separation and isolation, fears only fueled by her husband's demanding career and characteristic emotional passivity. "Lincoln," she writes, "was in a way the worst kind of husband for her" (p. 159).

Fleischner's perspective on the Lincoln marriage is not wholly original, but little scholarship on the president can be any more. Still, her nuanced rendering of Mary Lincoln's separation anxieties, especially in the context of the widowed First Lady's later attachment to Elizabeth Keckly, is powerfully done. There have been a number of important studies of Mary Lincoln and her complicated marriage, many of which disagree with each other quite sharply.[2] Fleischner herself has some occasionally sharp disagreements with Mary Lincoln's most recent scholarly biographer, Jean Harvey Baker, but ultimately she hews toward a middle ground in her sophisticated portrayal of a troubled woman often overwhelmed by her fears.

The irony is that Elizabeth Keckly, a former slave, found some liberation as she moved steadily away from her origins, while Mary Todd Lincoln, the daughter of a prominent southern white family, was increasingly enslaved by her childhood anxieties. Both women sought comfort in each other but neither could seem to muster the commitment to ride out the storms of their friendship. Each died essentially alone and forgotten, though Fleischner reminds the reader in a poignant closing line that while Mary Lincoln was buried with her husband, Elizabeth Keckly's cemetery has since been paved over by developers and her remains are now sadly unmarked. She never remarried or had more children. A biography cannot restore a gravestone, but this appealing book finally succeeds in defining the legacy of a fascinating woman and her revealing friendship with the nation's most prominent political spouse.

Notes

[1]. Elizabeth Keckley [sic], *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, with an introduction by James Olney (orig. pub. 1868; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Please note that one of Fleischner's smaller but more provocative discoveries is that despite the original title page of *Behind the Scenes*, Keckly appears to have spelled her surname without the second "e."

[2]. Three of the most important recent reinterpretations of Mary Lincoln and her marriage are:

Jean Harvey Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and *raphy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987); Michael David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* and Schuster, 1995).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Matthew Pinsker. Review of Fleischner, Jennifer, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship between a First Lady and a Former Slave*. H-DC, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9368>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.