

LINCOLN LORE

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IN DEFENSE OF MRS. LINCOLN

It is a strange paradox indeed, which presents Abraham Lincoln as America's most honored citizen and his wife as a despised woman, but such is the case. An author writing about Washington society says, "It is the misfortune of Mrs. Lincoln to be the only woman personally assailed who ever presided in the White House."

A widely circulated magazine recently published a digest of a book which discredits Mrs. Lincoln to such an extent that much controversy over her behavior has been encouraged.

It is to be regretted that there has not been a more sympathetic study of Mrs. Lincoln's real character as it is evident now that she has been greatly wronged. Dr. W. A. Evans, by far our best authority on Mrs. Lincoln's mental condition, concludes that after the death of her son Willie in 1862, Mrs. Lincoln "should not be held accountable for some of her actions" and after the assassination of her husband in 1865 "she was irresponsible for her behavior."

These facts, however, are given little or no consideration by those who continue to abuse Mrs. Lincoln, nor do they take the pains to confirm the vast amount of purely traditional data which has found a place in the legendary stories about her. It is with these fables that we are especially concerned in this issue of Lincoln Lore. The defense of a woman mentally broken, as she was in the White House days, is not necessary. It must not be expected, however, that on a single page one can refute successfully the volumes of exaggerated and totally untrue statements which have been written about her.

Did Mary consider Stephen A. Douglas her beau-ideal?

If Lincoln and Douglas had not been political rivals, the names of Mary Todd and Stephen A. Douglas would never have been associated. There is no evidence whatever, that Douglas meant any more to Miss Todd than a dozen other young men who could be named. In her extensive correspondence of the Springfield days, she mentions his name but once and then in a casual way. George Fort Milton, Douglas biographer, admits there is no basis of fact for the purely legendary romance of Douglas and Miss Todd.

Is it likely that Lincoln ignored Mary for days during their courtship?

It has been alleged that Lincoln would let days drift by without seeing

Mary because she made him so uncomfortable by her criticisms, but a sister-in-law gives us this picture of Mary during the days of Lincoln's courtship:

"Mary Todd had naturally a fine mind and cultivated tastes. She was a great reader and possessed a remarkable retentive memory. Her brilliant conversation often embellished with apt quotations made her society much sought after by all the young people of the town."

Was Mary Todd left alone at the marriage altar by Abraham Lincoln?

The story that Abraham Lincoln failed to show up on January 1, 1841, and left Mary at the altar "bedecked with bridal veil" is a piece of pure fiction. Dependable students of Lincoln agree with Paul Angle who says "no such episode as Lamon and Herndon describe could have occurred on that day." Mrs. Frances Wallace, sister of Mrs. Lincoln, affirms that "there never was but one wedding arranged between Mary and Mr. Lincoln and that was the time they were married."

Was Lincoln's marriage to Mary Todd a tragedy?

One author says that "the great tragedy of Lincoln's life was not his assassination but his marriage." The many and the important contributions which the cultured and brilliant young lady from Lexington, Kentucky, made to the poor and awkward backwoodsman of rural Illinois can hardly be exaggerated. Edward Everett, upon his return to Boston from the Gettysburg dedication, in referring to a dinner in the home of David Wells where many distinguished persons were present, made this statement: "In gentlemanly appearance, manners and conversation, the President was the peer of any man at the table. 'Such social graces as Lincoln acquired and his correct behavior in polite society may be credited to the influence of his wife.'"

Can Lincoln's political ambition be traced to Mary Todd?

A Lincoln biographer claims that "Mary no sooner married Lincoln than she had him running for Congress." It is foolish to attribute Lincoln's interest in politics to Mary Todd. Five years before he ever saw her he had entered the political arena and no one doubts that Lincoln had his eyes on a Congressional seat before Mary even came to Springfield. She may have encouraged him in his political ambitions but he did not need to be persuaded to run for Congress.

Is it true that Mrs. Lincoln was so disagreeable that Mr. Lincoln never invited his companions to his home?

Mr. I. N. Arnold, a close friend of Lincoln's, says: "I recall the dinner parties given by Mrs. Lincoln in her modest and simple home. There was always on the part of both host and hostess a cordial and hearty welcome which put every guest at ease." Browning in his diary speaks of evenings spent with the Lincoln's, and Mrs. Lincoln herself writes in 1856 these lines to her sister: "I am recovering from the slight fatigue of a very handsome entertainment—at least our friends flatter us by saying so." Yet in the face of all this one author has written: Lincoln "never invited even his most intimate companions to dine with him."

Did Mary make her husband's domestic life so miserable that he would sometimes stay over night at a neighbor's rather than go home?

A close student of the Lincoln's home life in Illinois states: "Mrs. Lincoln lived quietly in her home, economizing, doing without luxuries, bearing and rearing children, attending to domestic duties, paying some attention to politics but otherwise letting the world go by."

Can the accusation be proven that Mrs. Lincoln never made a real home for Mr. Lincoln?

There were four boys born to Mrs. Lincoln. There was never a time when from one to three of Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln's children were not at home. Mrs. Wallace said her sister (Mrs. Lincoln) "was a fine seamstress and made all her children's clothes, most of her own, and many of her husband's." One authority has put it this way: "The greatest influences of Mrs. Lincoln's life were wifehood and motherhood—home."

Did Mary Lincoln have a quick temper and a sharp tongue?

Most certainly she did, and no one has ever denied it. One of her relatives said "she was quick at repartee and when the occasion seemed to require it was sarcastic and severe." Possibly she threw coffee at Lincoln and drove him out of the home with a broom and probably he deserved it. It seems strange that the lawyer who would play pranks on his associates on the circuit, would suddenly lose all of his humor when he arrived home where three rollicking boys were waiting for him.