

LINCOLN LORE

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THE DOMESTIC LIFE OF THE LINCOLNS

Randall, Ruth Painter. *Mary Lincoln, Biography of a Marriage*. Little, Brown and Company. Boston. 555 pages. Price \$5.75.

The scientific spirit in history has at last focused its attention on the wife of Abraham Lincoln. It is appropriate indeed that a woman, Ruth Painter Randall, in her book, *Mary Lincoln, Biography of a Marriage* should be the one to direct this objective approach. She has rescued the President's wife from the malicious defamation by William Herndon which has dominated the thinking of biographers for nearly a century. The President himself has gradually emerged from the "stagnant, putrid pool" created for him by his supposedly faithful law partner and it is now encouraging to note that Mrs. Lincoln is to be lifted out of the Herndon pool of despair to occupy her rightful place beside her husband. At last we are able to look in on the domestic life of the Lincolns with some assurance that the portrayal is a faithful presentation.

This book is indeed, as Mrs. Randall calls it, the *Biography of a Marriage*. The parents, the children, and the children's playmates and pets, relatives, man servants and maid servants, doctors, nurses, ministers and others who were welcomed into the family circle contribute to a better understanding of the home life of Abraham and Mary Lincoln. It was a fortunate approach which caused the author to give considerable space in the story to Mr. Lincoln. She quotes one of her informants as saying, "It is in the family circle the man exhibits himself as he really is." One is led to question the value of any biography of the President which has not dealt adequately with his home life. Mrs. Randall has increased the stature of Mr. Lincoln immeasurably by bringing him constantly into the narrative and his presence and behavior illuminates the story which otherwise might have been entitled, "The tragic life of Mary Todd." How so many storms of adversity could sweep over one little woman with a big heart it is difficult to comprehend and her last days are almost as tragic as the more sensational passing of her husband.

However, there were happy days for the Lincolns in Springfield and these important years are exceptionally well done by Mrs. Randall with the proper weighing of much evidence heretofore unavailable. The ability of Mary to carry on and rear her family with her lawyer husband travelling the circuit much of the time is a story which reveals the ability of a woman to adjust herself to conditions so foreign to her carefree early life. Her apprenticeship for the White House days which began in Madame Mentelle's select school for young ladies at Lexington, Kentucky, reveals her qualifications for serving as the first lady of the land.

Approaching the outstanding mental irregularity in the life of Mary Todd Lincoln, which was responsible for so much of her grief and first discernible upon leav-

ing Springfield, Mrs. Randall quotes Dr. W. A. Evans who, relying on specialists in mental diseases, made this statement about Mrs. Lincoln's poor judgment in money matters: "The peculiar direction and bent of this error were later to become a quality of her insanity." There is a thread of this irrational behavior which runs through the entire story of the White House days and on through her widowhood until her dying hour.

The editor of *Lincoln Lore* has often pondered what Abraham Lincoln would desire of modern writers above all other contributions if he were able to make his will known. Would it not be an appeal on behalf of his greatly abused and misunderstood wife, that she might be set right before the world and given her proper place in American history? Mrs. Randall to a greater extent than any other author has satisfied this yearning.

Some readers may resent the discounting by Mrs. Randall of the Ann Rutledge traditional romance. However, when they discover that the alleged courtship was but a fictitious fable partly written at least to humiliate and crush Lincoln's widow whom Herndon, the author, hated, they should be willing to forget the imaginary courtship. The poem by Edgar Lee Masters, which along with his Lincoln book is based on spurious source material, should be associated with the folklore of the period. The fictitious character of the Ann Rutledge episode should cause Lincoln students to challenge many of the other stories released by Herndon which are just as unreliable. Possibly after all the most far reaching contributions Mrs. Randall may have made in her critical analysis of the domestic life of the Lincolns is in questioning the accuracy of many other facets of the Lincoln story as presented by his law partner.

With a modern literature that places little value on a social system that is supposed to practice monogamy, it is refreshing, indeed, to read a book featuring the story of one man who loved but one woman without the slightest evidence of any annulment of the marriage vows. The feature of the book is the deep affection which bound together Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd who were so far removed during their early years in matters of education, culture and economic standing. Intellectually, morally and politically, however, they had much in common. It is also a tribute to the courage and consistency of the author, to find no deviation from the telling of a story in pure and wholesome narrative without the introduction of purely irrelevant and fictitious episodes for the mere purpose of giving the reader, a few racy lines to boost the sale of the book. The name of Ruth Painter Randall will be associated by historians with that of Ida M. Tarbell as the two outstanding women contributors to the saga of the Lincoln family.