

LINCOLN LORE

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IRVING STONE'S MARY LINCOLN

Irving Stone's new book entitled *Love is Eternal* is called a biographical novel. It might be more correctly designated as a novel biography of Mary Todd because of its new personal revelations of her. Here is an instance where "truth is stranger than fiction", and although the book may be classified as fiction because of its dialogue terminology, it will be more highly appraised for its historical contributions.

Back in June 1952 replying to a letter from Mr. Stone, the editor of *Lincoln Lore* commented, "For many years I have contended that the actual romance of the poor boy and banker's daughter has more factual human interest than all the combined facets of the Lincoln-Rutledge myth." Irving Stone has supported this conclusion in his epochal novel in which the reader's interest is sustained to the very end. The Irving Stone production, because of the fame of its author and its excellent literary character, will greatly widen the popular interest in Lincolniana. Everyone who reads the book will ask how long will it be before the Lincoln-Todd romance may be produced on the legitimate stage or in a three dimensional wide screen movie.

Interest in the Lincoln-Todd romance was awakened twenty-six years ago when Katherine Helm, niece of Mary Todd, brought out her intimate story entitled *Mary, Wife of Lincoln*. The following year William H. Townsend's book on *Lincoln and his Wife's Home Town* accentuated an interest in Mary's early years. Dr. Charles Stoltz published a brochure in 1931 in which he appealed for a better understanding of Mrs. Lincoln. The following year the first objective biography of Mary Lincoln appeared, written by Dr. W. A. Evans, and also in 1932 Carl Sandburg and Paul Angle collaborated in a book featured by a compilation of Mary Lincoln's letters. Ten years ago the director of the Lincoln National Life Foundation read a paper before the Filson Club in Louisville, which was later published, on the subject *The Woman in Lincoln's Life with Special Emphasis on her Cultural Attainments*. The climax of these objective approaches to a study of Mary Todd was realized last year in a book by Ruth Painter Randall entitled *Mary Lincoln, Biography of a Marriage*.

The author chose as the title of his book part of an inscription engraved on the interior surface of the wedding ring with which the marriage vows were sealed: "From Abraham to Mary, Love is Eternal." The story starts with Mary's early years at Lexington, Kentucky with its university atmosphere. When Mary was 18 years of age, her own mother having passed away some years before, she was influenced to make her home with her sister at Springfield, the capital of Illinois. Here she met Abraham Lincoln. Except for a short time in 1847 when Mary went to Washington, D. C. as the wife of the lone Whig Congressman from Illinois, Springfield offers the setting for the story until the Lincolns took up their residence in Washington in 1861.

The tempo of the story is greatly accelerated when the White House is reached and especially after the death of the Lincoln's brilliant 12 year old son, William. This is as it should be, as the late Dr. W. A. Evans who made a special study of Mrs. Lincoln's mental disorders concludes that she "should not be held accountable for some of her actions" after the death of her son in 1862. One does not usually enjoy writing or reading about a person who is mentally ill.

William Herndon called the Ann Rutledge tradition "the finest story in Lincoln's life" and in a letter to Ward H. Lamon on March 6, 1870 wrote "when that Ann Rutledge lecture shall be exploded, the substantial facts of it, then Lincoln's name and memory will explode with it." Well, the Lincoln-Rutledge myth has exploded and it has been repudiated everywhere, but interest in Abraham Lincoln still continues. Authors as late as Albert J. Beveridge continued to use the Herndon version of the Lincoln-Rutledge tradition. Figuratively speaking, Stern's book clears the shelves of all the Ann Rutledge folklore which has cluttered up every collection of Lincolniana.

The Lincoln family does not fare quite so well at the hands of Mr. Stone as the Todds, and this is especially true of Abraham's parents, Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln. When the preponderance of an author's source material is primarily authentic and care is taken to correctly interpret the facts, the reader is thrown off guard when traditions lacking documentary support are introduced. In the same letter of March 6, 1870 in which Herndon made the statement about the authenticity of his Ann Rutledge lecture, he also advised Lamon that Lincoln said his mother was illegitimate and also inferred that he himself was the offspring of an illicit relation.

No well informed student today will question for a moment that Abraham Lincoln, with a sister two years older and a brother two years younger named Thomas, was the oldest son and second child of Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln. Stone's portrayal of Lincoln's home in which there was no love between parents and little respect on the part of Abraham for his father is not fair to any of the members of the household. It is the old "stagnant putrid pool" theory of Herndon, long since discarded by Lincoln students. Stone puts in the mouth of another Lincoln law partner, John T. Stuart, these words: "Lincoln started a hundred miles under the bottom." The author calls attention to that fact that there were no Lincoln relatives at the first inauguration. His father, mother, sister and brother were dead. The closest relatives he had among his own people were uncles and aunts whom he had not seen for years. It is true he did have a step-mother, but she was 72 years old and in no physical condition to make a long trip to Washington.

Abraham Lincoln himself comes in for an episode for which there is no historical sanction. Stone uses the long since discarded story introduced by Herndon that Lincoln ran away from his first wedding appointment with Mary Todd. One may feel assured if Lincoln left Mary at the altar once, he would never have had another chance to humiliate her. Mary's sister Frances who lived in Springfield at the time said: "There never was but one wedding arranged between Mary and Mr. Lincoln and that was the time they were married."

The very few deviations from a historical background are certainly permissible in a biographical novel, and Irving Stone will receive the thanks of every student of American history for his readable and reliable portrait of Mary Todd. If recognition were to be given for the outstanding all time biographical novel in the field of Lincoln literature, *Love is Eternal* most certainly would be the blue ribbon selection.