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JEAN BAKER'S *MARY TODD LINCOLN*

by Sarah McNair Vosmeier

Jean Baker's new biography of Mary Todd Lincoln, grounded in local history and gender history as well as the obvious documents of Lincolniana that apply to Mary Todd Lincoln, is a delight to read. (One example of Baker's skill in writing is her description of Mary's debt problem after Lincoln's death: "Like cockroaches come out at dark, the merchants and jewelers who had so casually extended credit in the past now emerged, demanding payment," p. 258.)

Baker's skillful writing is enhanced by the feel she has for the places Mary lived. For example, Baker tells us that as a girl in Lexington, Mary Todd walked past the public whipping post for slaves every day on her way to school (p. 68), and as a new bride living in Springfield's Globe Tavern, Mary Todd Lincoln endured the incessant noise of late night guests to the tavern and of a blacksmith constantly pounding next door, (pp. 99-100). Similarly, in January of 1855 when Abraham Lincoln was running for the United States Senate, Baker describes how Mary and her sisters watched the voting from the gallery of the state legislature.

> . . . with high expectations, Mary Lincoln, Elizabeth Edwards, and their visiting half sister from Lexington, doe-eyed Emilie Todd, climbed the stairs to the gallery that overlooked the semi-circular legislative chamber. Most likely the three women arrived early, for only those in the front rows of the balcony could see the entire room, and only then by craning their necks over the railing, (p. 149).

With small details like these, Baker gives us a rich picture of Mary Todd Lincoln's life.

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. Mary Todd Lincoln and her family: Tad, Lincoln, Willie (in painting), and Robert.

For periods when Mary's life was not well documented, Baker skillfully weaves recent scholarship on gender history into her biography to help us understand the cultural backdrop against which any nineteenth century woman lived. Only three letters survive to document the three years Mary spent in Springfield before her marriage, but Baker transforms those three letters into almost twenty pages of fascinating reading about young men and women in the nineteenth century. For example, when Baker describes Mary's relationships with Mercy Levering she makes a graceful transition from quoting one of Mary's letters to an exposition of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," (in *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture*, Autumn, 1975, pp. 1-29). Mary wrote in 1841

> "I would my Dearest you now were with us, be assured your name is most frequently mentioned in our circle. Words of mine are not necessary to assure you of the loss I have sustained in your society."

It was the language of love, but it was not addressed to Abraham Lincoln or, in fact, to any male suitor. Instead, the object of Mary Todd's attachment was her female friend Mercy Levering — "My dearest Merce, the sunlight of my heart." . . . Like many American women of her time, Mary Todd had formed a strong bond of intimacy and romantic, though not necessarily sexual or erotic, affection with her female friend. The intensity and the openness with which she avowed her feelings for "Dearest" Merce were not unusual or latently homosexual, or prohibitory of male relationships. Nor should these feelings be dismissed as the mawkish sentimentality of Victorians. Rather, Merce and Mary inhabited a female world of intimacy and love which ran parallel to that of courtship and marriage. . . . Even after marriage Merce and Mary hoped to remain "bound by kindred ties" . . .

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 2. Baker describes this photograph as follows: "Her face has a pale, tired look, no doubt the result of too heavy an application of cosmetic paste. . . . The dress is surely sufficient unto itself, but she has added to the vertical and horizontal stripes a large cameo pin, rosettes on the skirt, white ruffles at the wrists, and a lace shawl. The effect is a cluttered softness and sensuality that later became her trademark. Other matrons posed in solid-colored dresses with a minimum of decoration. . . . But Mary Lincoln's dress is full of reinforcements, with its accoutrements serving, perhaps, as armor."

In a society as sexually segregated as this, save for her relatives Mary did not know well the young men she wrote about. On the other hand, no conventions kept her from spending her idle hours with Merce. While lonely young Abraham Lincoln talked politics with an all-male audience in Joshua Speed's store and managed only one conversation in three weeks with a woman, Mary inhabited an equally one-gender society, (pp. 80-81).

Men and women were segregated not only physically, but also culturally so that society had different expectations for men's behavior and women's behavior. Baker describes how Mary accepted society's definition of a "true woman," but constantly found herself acting outside of that definition. As a girl Mary had been successful in school, but she did not consider herself to be a belle, and academics were only incidental to a true women's career. As Baker put it, "a Kentucky girl who did well in school was as irrelevantly successful as a boy who knew how to make a good burgoo," (p. 40). Thus, as a young girl, Mary was successful in areas that were traditionally unfeminine, and less successful in the traditional areas of femininity.

In addition to being well educated, Mary was also unusually active in politics — although she was more interested in personalities and speeches than well-thought-out positions on specific issues. Baker explains,

> By no means was her marriage the American counterpart to that of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill. . . . Instead, at times to Lincoln's liking and on occasion to his exasperation, she used her peculiar enthusiasm for politics to get a distracted man's attention. Such a strategy had worked with her father, and with her husband it yielded more lasting results than, as she also did, throwing books and once a log at him, (p. 134).

When Lincoln became president, Mary was swept into the public sphere. On the one hand, she deplored the publicity, agreeing with the canons of womanhood which decreed that a lady's name should appear in the papers only after her death. On the other hand, the favorable stories in the papers bolstered her ego and gave her the recognition that she craved. Unfortunately, not all the reporters were favorable in their evaluations, and some attacked her for being ambitious or unwomanly. Again Baker explains,

> Resolutely committed to standing beside her husband in the spotlight, . . . [but] detesting public women herself, Mary Lincoln could not discount these criticisms of her worldliness as merely the narrow-minded attitudes of her male-directed society. Instead, she denied her strong need for public attention, thereby creating an internal conflict between her conventional ideas about female reticence and her psychological need for acknowledgment, (p. 180).

Clearly Baker's knowledge about the lives of ordinary women in the nineteenth century has helped her understand Mary's distinctive personality. At times reading *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* is like talking to Mary Todd Lincoln's best friend (someone who understands Mary's faults but either forgives her for them or tries to explain her improper behavior); and at times, especially in the spring of 1875, Mary's behavior needed a lot of understanding and explanation.

By 1875 Mary had lived through the deaths of her husband, and three of her sons (Eddie, Willie, and Tad). Living alone in Florida, and under the influence of spiritualism, Mary had a premonition that her only surviving son (Robert) was dying. She immediately sent telegrams to both Robert and his law partner and rushed back to Chicago to be on hand at his death bed. As it turned out, Robert was perfectly healthy, but more than a little concerned about his mother's mental state. In fact, he hired detectives to watch over her while she was in Chicago, and store clerks observed her strange behavior: buying dozens of curtains for a non-existent house, or buying ten pairs of gloves at one time. In May, Mary was peremptorily summoned

to court where Robert had arranged for her to be declared insane and committed to an asylum. Mary was not asked to take the stand, and she was remarkably quiet throughout the trial.

Like any loyal friend, Baker presents the defence Mary might have made if she had been asked to defend herself.

> First Mary Lincoln would have called her friends of the spiritualist persuasion, her counselors in magic, to explain the difference between what the doctors called delusions and what dark-parlor habitués knew as visions. . . . [Mediums] kept her in touch with her dead sons and husband. The children, especially Willie, visited in brief emanations, while Lincoln hovered constantly and protectively. . . . In Florida this past winter her husband had cautioned her about Robert's health. . . . Perhaps she had exaggerated her fears in those telegrams from Jacksonville, but Robert was all she had left. Anyone who had grieved knew the morbid anxiety that accompanied death's anniversaries. . . .
>
> Robert, Mary Lincoln would have continued, had always resented her spiritualism, though the loyal friends from her séances remained when everyone else deserted. . . . Unlike his father, who invited mediums to the White House, Robert was too unimaginative to understand the spirit world. . . . Robert had always tried to make her into the conventional woman she was not. . . .
>
> Though he bore her father's and husband's name, Robert was neither Todd nor Lincoln. Recently he had displayed his greediness when he complained that the mediums would make off with her registered bonds. . . . In fact, the only reason she was on trial now was that her son's spies had observed her friends leaving her hotel room with something she had willingly bestowed on them — the silver service set that he coveted. . . .
>
> As for the small-time merchants, how dare they judge her behavior? Hadn't Robert tipped them two weeks' wages to testify against her? . . . Was spending money a mental illness? It was no one's business (and certainly not Robert's) how she spent her money and time. . . . Why did Robert worry that she would spend the Lincoln inheritance on curtains when since her husband's death he had been her greatest expense? . . . he continually asked for interest-free loans for the real estate ventures that his father would have despised. . . . If he could squander money on real estate, why could she not buy curtains? . . . As for the doctors who so casually pronounced her fit for an asylum, they had never examined her. They were Robert's friends and would say what he directed. . . . Admittedly she was nervous and miserable, but a broken heart was not a ruined mind. . . . In Florida the enormity of these abandonments had interrupted her sleep, and a helpful pharmacist in Jacksonville had suggested the new Squibb hypnotic chloral hydrate. Perhaps she had taken too much. Certainly the sedative clouded her mind temporarily, especially when she mixed it with a laudanum compound of opium, saffron, cinnamon, and wine that her son's doctor had earlier recommended, (pp. 322-324).

In conclusion, Baker uses her grounding in gender history to sum up Mary's hypothetical defence. Baker has Mary's hypothetical lawyer direct

> the jury, after [Mary's] testimony, to consider the defendant more disturbing than disturbed. For years this woman had trampled the canons of womandhood. Even when her husband had been alive, she had spent too much money traveled too far, and interfered too much in political matters at a time when wives and especially widows were expected to be frugal, invisible homebodies. . . . Whatever Mary Lincoln's peculiarities, her lawyer might have continued, there were no indications of madness. (p. 325).

Baker's perspective gives us insight into some of the reasons for Mary's behavior and for Robert's reaction; however in some cases she overstates her case. (For example, on page 340 she explains that "True madness, [Robert] had been told, took years to cure and in his mother's case might be permanent. He hoped it was so.") Robert was a very private man who was as reticent about personal matters as his father had been. Thus, although Robert Lincoln and David Davis are cast as the heavies in Baker's narrative, the documentary evidence is open to other interpretations. (For example, see Neely and McMurtry. *The Insanity File: The case of Mary Todd Lincoln* [Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986].)

Although Robert was like his father in some ways, Baker's description of Robert's being less imaginative and less understanding about Spiritualism than his father rings true. Also as Baker suggests, Robert's feelings toward his mother were influenced by contemporary ideas about women. Clearly he thought that his mother should be placed under a man's supervision and protection; he explained to his aunt that Mary should be "placed under care and under some control." He also explained that no one "could succeed in it unless backed by the authority of the law, as is Dr. Patterson [the head of the asylum

SPIRIT-RAPPING MADE EASY;

OR,

HOW TO COME OUT AS A MEDIUM.

BY ONE WHO IS IN THE SECRET.

FIGURE 10.

You will probably be asked if the spirits will rap when your feet are in full view; of course you will answer in the affirmative, though knowing well they will not, unless you can get some one to hammer in an adjoining room. In this case you should take away the hammer when you leave, especially if it does not belong to the house, and should not leave it to tell your secret, as it did in the case I refer to.

You should also avoid the experiment of making an old piano-forte, with open lattice-work, play when closed, in the presence of similar wary people, or they will surely walk up to it and tap on the wires through the very same holes, producing similar results.

The foregoing suggestions are an exact transcript of the deceptions practiced by two well-known London Mediums in the presence of the writer, whose name, together with those of the gentlemen who were present at the exposure, the editor is empowered to publish should he think proper.

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 3. *Harper's Weekly*, November 3, 1860: Exposés like this made believers in spiritualism seem crazy.

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 4. Robert Todd Lincoln in 1877.

where Mary was committed] — He is a most excellent and kindhearted man & as she knows his authority, he has absolutely no trouble with her," (Neely and McMurtry, *The Insanity File* p. 61). Robert also thought that Mary should conform to traditional standards of female behavior, and was embarrassed when she made a spectacle of herself. He wanted to make sure that his mother was restrained so that she would not "make herself talked of by everybody," (Neely and McMurtry, p. 61).

Despite his attitude towards his mother, Robert was probably not as cold and insensitive as Mary and Baker described him to be. In particular, several sources suggest that Robert was not greedy and covetous of his mother's money, as Mary insisted and Baker implies. For example, in 1867 Robert had the opportunity to get an advance on his father's estate, which had not yet been distributed. Instead of keeping the money, he sent it to David Davis, the executor of the Lincoln estate, and explained that he did not need the money because he had just been admitted to the bar and did not need any additional income, (Willard L. King's *Lincoln's Manager: David Davis* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960], p. 242). Obviously this incident occurred eight years before Mary's commitment, but it shows that Robert was not an inherently greedy man.

Furthermore, Robert wrote another letter to Davis in 1875 in which he explicitly stated that he did not expect to gain anything from his mother's estate. He explained to Davis (in his typically convoluted style) that he was not concerned about his mother's money in terms of his own inheritance; rather, he wanted to restrict his mother's spending to protect *her* from eventual poverty.

> I did not desire to limit her expenditures beyond the point where she would have neither capital or income to live upon. . . . I had no interest after her death understanding (as I did, and must say still do) that she has by will otherwise disposed of her property, (Robert Lincoln to David Davis, November 16, 1875).

Although Robert could not legally make his mother completely independent until his term as her conservator was over, he suggested several ways that he could legally transfer her money to her (and also give her more freedom than a traditional conservatorship would allow). He explained the proposition to Davis in his letter.

> 1. I to remove all restraints upon travel and residence
> 2. To pay to her to be expended by herself without scrutiny of any kind her whole income in monthly instalments — at the present rate of gold and including a payment from me to her of $125 per month which will end Apl. 1881 [probably payments for the house he bought from her]. This monthly income will be about $700.
> 3. To have a competent person make an estimate on the annuity principle of what monthly sum can be paid her during her life so as to leave nothing at her death and if Judge Wallace will consent, to pay each sum to her monthly.
> 4. In addition to 1 & 2 or to 1 & 3 to deliver when as being necessary for her comfort all of her personal effects which consist of clothing and Jewelry.
>
> The trouble with No. 3 is that her pension is to be regarded and personally I consider its payment for many years as uncertain, (RTL to DD, November 16, 1875).

With these proposals Robert went out of his way to show that he was not interested in his mother's money. This is especially clear in proposal 3, in which he suggested that her entire estate be paid out to her so that there would be nothing left for him to inherit when she died. Obviously there were problems with this proposal: there was no way to know how long she might live, and the "competent person" might misjudge her length of life. Because Robert feared that Mary would spend all the money she controlled and because he did not think she could depend on her pension from Congress, he was afraid that this proposal would leave his mother penniless in later life. Still, he made the proposal and, earlier in the same letter, he made the comment about her will, to show that he was more concerned with her well-being than with her money.

Jean Baker's grounding in gender history and local history makes her interpretation distinctive, but it also gives the reader special insights into Mary Todd Lincoln's life. By giving the reader meaningful details about the places Mary Todd Lincoln lives, Baker creates a rich picture of Mary's life, and by weaving into her narrative recent scholarship on women's relationships and expectations, Baker helps the reader understand the cultural backdrop against which Mary and other nineteenth century women lived. In all cases, Baker's skillful writing make her book a delight to read. In sum, Baker's insights and skillful writing style make *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* well worth reading, both for the scholar and the Lincoln buff.