

A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Putting Mary Lincoln on Trial Mary Lincoln's Insanity Case: A Documentary History

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Feature Essay

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Emerson, Jason *A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Putting Mary Lincoln On Trial Mary Lincoln's Insanity Case: A Documentary History*. University of Illinois Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-252-03707-8

Was Mary Lincoln a psycho spend-thrift who made Abraham Lincoln's life a living hell or was she a strong-willed, bereaved woman from the death of three of her four sons and the assassination of her beloved husband? Over the past 138 years, Mary Lincoln's "insanity" has been studied closely and written about extensively. Her case has been examined from feminist, legal, and medical angles. It has been scrutinized from speculations on Robert Lincoln's motives in 1875 for having his mother legally committed as insane to the Bellevue Place Sanitarium in Batavia, IL. Another view emerged with Jason Emerson's recently published *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* (Southern Illinois University Press) while this volume scrupulously provides source material to enable readers to form their own opinions.

From the time she was committed against her will in May 1875 until her freedom four months later on August 24, Mary lived in a single room prisonlike structure. When she was released, the *Chicago Times* declared "Her physicians pronounce her as sane" (126). She had been given an hour's advance notice before her trial on May 19, 1875. The testimony of hotel staff, shop clerks, and four doctors who had never examined her, was admitted into evidence. A jury declared her insane and her son Robert was made her guardian, responsible for her estate—including her substantial financial assets.

Or was Robert driven by darker motives? What caused Robert to have his mother humiliated and committed? He claimed genuine concern for her well-being, alarmed at her bizarre behavior and statements. She had told him that someone was trying to poison her and that a spirit was removing bones from her face, while he asserted that his mother "has been irresponsible for the past ten years" (x). Mary claimed he was interested in her wealth and possessions as she

was heir to a third of her husband's estate while Robert's own financial needs far exceeded his earning power. Moreover, biographer Jean Baker believes Robert feared that his mother's strange behavior might ruin his political career.

Mary's rescue from the Bellevue asylum was accomplished by the legal team of James and Myra Bradwell. It's a drama within the family drama between mother and son. Myra's clandestine visits to Mary at Bellevue provoked more press coverage and a second trial in which Mary was declared "restored to reason," and fully capable of managing her own assets (183). Mary left the United States after her release from the asylum and moved to Europe for four years.

Jason Emerson is a Lincoln family specialist with excellent detective skills. Other historians have been equally fascinated with the Lincoln family history (e.g., see *The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln* edited by Mark E. Neely, Jr. and R. Gerald McMurtry about the 1875 jury trial declaring Mary Lincoln insane as well as the role of her eldest son Robert, and the author's excellent *Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln*, Southern Illinois University Press).

After her husband's assassination, convention dictated that Mary Lincoln should live quietly, but social norms seldom ruled her life. Her reputation was undermined from her obsession to buy many of the same items and not use them. After Robert filed a petition to have her declared insane and committed, he then became the star witness at her hearing. Mary was declared insane and ordered to the sanitarium.

This documentary evidence contains startling details of Mary's story before, during and after her trial leading to her eventual release from the sanitarium, as well as the damaging effects of Robert's breach with his mother. Drawing on primary sources, Jason Emerson presents a detailed portrait of a woman who remained her own person. The more than 100 letters, many newspaper articles—including editorials, and legal documents, become almost bewildering. Emerson includes daily patient progress reports from the sanitarium where Mary Lincoln was confined. He also provides reminiscences, interviews and diary entries from people who knew her or were involved in the case, including one of the jurors in the 1875 trial. The author is correct when he says, "This collection is a documentary history of Mary Lincoln's mental illness and insanity case, and is a compilation of every possible primary source on the subject..." (xiii).

Mary Lincoln emerges as a special woman with problems. For Jason Emerson's own opinions and interpretations, readers should look to his *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* (Southern Illinois University Press). This volume gives readers easy access to the documents supporting his opinions. Many may be surprised to learn that Emerson's interpretations differ from Mary's most recent sympathetic biographers—Jean H. Baker (*Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography*) and Catherine Clinton (*Mrs. Lincoln: A Life*)—who both believe that Mary was forced into an asylum “by evil doctors and a heartless son” (xv).

While some of these documents have appeared before, e.g., in Emerson's *The Madness of Mary Lincoln*, and Mark E. Neely, Jr. and R. Gerald McMurtry's *The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln*, this collection is more extensive and allows readers the opportunity to make more informed judgments.

Today, Mary Todd Lincoln remains more of an enigma than a reality, even as new evidence emerged in the form of a trove of letters long thought to have been destroyed (see *The Dark Days of Abraham Lincoln's Widow as Revealed by Her Own Letters*, Southern Illinois University Press, also by Jason Emerson). Nevertheless, her strength and intelligence cannot be discounted.

Mary left the United States after her release from the asylum. Based in Pau, France, she lived and traveled in Europe for four years.

Always ranking near the bottom of the first-lady polls, even below Frances Harding, it seems Mary Lincoln deserves better. She had great passion and a good mind, troubled as they may have been at times. As for Robert, it may be sad justice that he also was institutionalized for depression in 1922. Dysfunctional families and the relationships between mothers and sons have always been a part of human history and they continue to be to this day. Leo Tolstoi said it best, “. . .every unhappy family is unhappy in its own fashion.” (*Anna Karenina*, Part I, ch. 1).

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