

Mary Todd Lincoln

History has been unkind to Mary Todd Lincoln; indeed, a modern writer has called her "the most tragic woman character in American history, the most maligned and pilloried." For the benefit of those who like to trace important matters to their origins in minute events, one might say that it was all Billy Herndon's fault. At a ball held in Springfield in 1840, Abraham Lincoln's law partner-to-be waltzed with the vivacious Miss Mary Todd of Kentucky, who was visiting relatives and enjoying the social season of the new Illinois state capital. Wishing to compliment her grace, Herndon told her she danced "with the agility of a serpent." Mary evidently found the metaphor somewhat less than charming; she took an instant dislike to the young man, an animosity which became mutual and more intense upon closer association.

Years later, when Herndon published his *Life of Lincoln*, long the most influential work on the President, he painted a most uncomplimentary picture of Mrs. Lincoln, attempting to account for Lincoln's spells of despondency as the consequence of an unhappy marriage. He also gave the world a highly romanticized and almost completely conjectural version of Lincoln's relationship with Ann Rutledge.

In fact, William Herndon's biography and his lecture series on Lincoln only gave a more authoritative basis for an already existing body of public opinion. In Illinois, Mary Todd Lincoln was the object of mirth and derision among many of her husband's associates; in the White House, she was accused of everything from marital infidelity to high treason; throughout Lincoln's career and long after his death, she was vilified by the press. Why was all this anger and scorn directed at the woman who, at twenty, had been described as a "merry, companionable girl with a smile for everybody," as "sympathetic, cordial, sensible, intelligent, and brimming with that bonhomie so fascinating in the women of ... [the] South. . . . a bright, wholesome, attractive woman"?

MARY TODD was born in Lexington, Kentucky in 1818, of a prominent and affluent family. When she was 7 her mother died; though her father soon remarried, Mary's maternal grandparents never gave Robert Todd's second wife their approval. Perhaps it was for this reason that Mary grew up feeling she owed no obedience to her stepmother. In any case, she never learned self-control, and her attitude was always as a friend described it in 1861: she "wanted what she wanted when she wanted it and no substitute!"

At 14 Mary was sent to a boarding school, which, she later wrote, served as her true early home. A quick and eager student, Mary became fluent in French and adept at quoting classical poetry. Her verbal felicity is well illustrated by a passage from a letter written near Christmas, 1840: "The icy hand of winter has set its seal upon the waters, the winds of Heaven visit the spot but roughly, the same stars shine down, yet not with the same liquid, mellow light as in the olden time." A classmate recalled that she was "the life of the school" and "always had the highest marks and took the biggest prizes."

FROM the beginning her changeable emotions were never far from the surface; a cousin compared her temperament to an April day, "sunning all over with laughter one moment, the next crying as if her heart would break." Already friends noticed her outspokenness; another cousin remembered that "without designing to wound she now & then



indulged in sarcastic, witty remarks that cut . . . but there was no malice in it—She was impulsive & made no attempt to conceal her feeling, indeed it would have been an impossibility had she desired to do so for her face was an index to every passing emotion."

That face was not beautiful, but Mary Todd had large, direct blue eyes, shining brown hair, and a lovely complexion which, combined with her natural vivacity, produced

a brightness not easily forgotten. Only the firm, narrow line of her mouth betrayed the stormier side of her nature. Her plumpness was accentuated by lack of height; indeed, Lincoln liked to introduce himself and Mary to guests as "the long and the short of it." That she presented an appealing picture in her youth is verified by her brother-in-law, who remarked that "Mary could make a bishop forget his prayers."

WHEN Mary Todd met Abraham Lincoln in 1839, he was 30, an established lawyer, and a member of the Illinois state legislature. Mary was 21, blooming and spirited. As Lincoln began to pay "particular court" to Mary, Springfield took note of their differences: his rough background, her patrician family; his tall, lean form, her short, rounded figure; his reticence, her lively chatter; his self-control and her emotionalism. Still, Mary's quick wit, culture, and shrewdness were qualities that any intelligent and ambitious man could admire, and her social grace and conversational ability no doubt had special appeal for the more taciturn Lincoln. For her part, Mary valued Lincoln's sensitivity, and she recognized his potential; she told her older sister that she "would rather marry a good man—a man of mind—with a hope and bright prospects ahead for position —fame &: power than to marry all the houses—gold ... in the world." Within a year the couple was engaged.

Then, on "that fatal first of January" [1841], as Lincoln phrased it, the engagement was broken. The whole affair is hidden under a blanket of conflicting rumors: various attempts to uncover the true causes have only produced a series of unlikely motivations and improbable entanglements. The only certainties are that Lincoln broke the engagement voluntarily, and that the situation threw him into a fit of melancholy.

IN terminating an earlier understanding with a young woman, Lincoln had declared himself "deficient in the little links that make for woman's happiness. . . . Whatever woman may cast her lot with mine," he continued, "should any ever do so, it is my intention to do all in

my power to make her happy and contented; and there is nothing I can imagine that would make me more unhappy than to fail in the effort." Perhaps a conviction that he would fail with Mary, as well, dictated his break with her. In any case, the two remained apart for fifteen months, though they continued to watch from afar each other's movements in Springfield society. The couple was reunited unexpectedly at the party of a mutual friend and, amidst a swirl of rumors, they resumed their courtship. Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln were married November 4, 1842.

Though he sincerely believed it himself, William Herndon's later contention that Mary married Lincoln in order to repay him for jilting her by making his life miserable is as untrue as it is unlikely. Her letters demonstrate that she loved Lincoln deeply. If her own ambition was directed toward power while his was toward its noble uses, Mary nevertheless was a helpful guide. If she disparaged his friends and berated him for his shortcomings, it was because she was so fiercely proud of his abilities and determined that he should use them to the full.

YET this strong-willed, outspoken woman did present herself to Lincoln as a child to be humored, cajoled, and pacified at least as frequently as she served as a domineering but solicitous wife. Indeed, so long as one considers only the way Mary Todd Lincoln behaved, to give a flattering account is impossible; she provided the public with ample cause to dislike her.

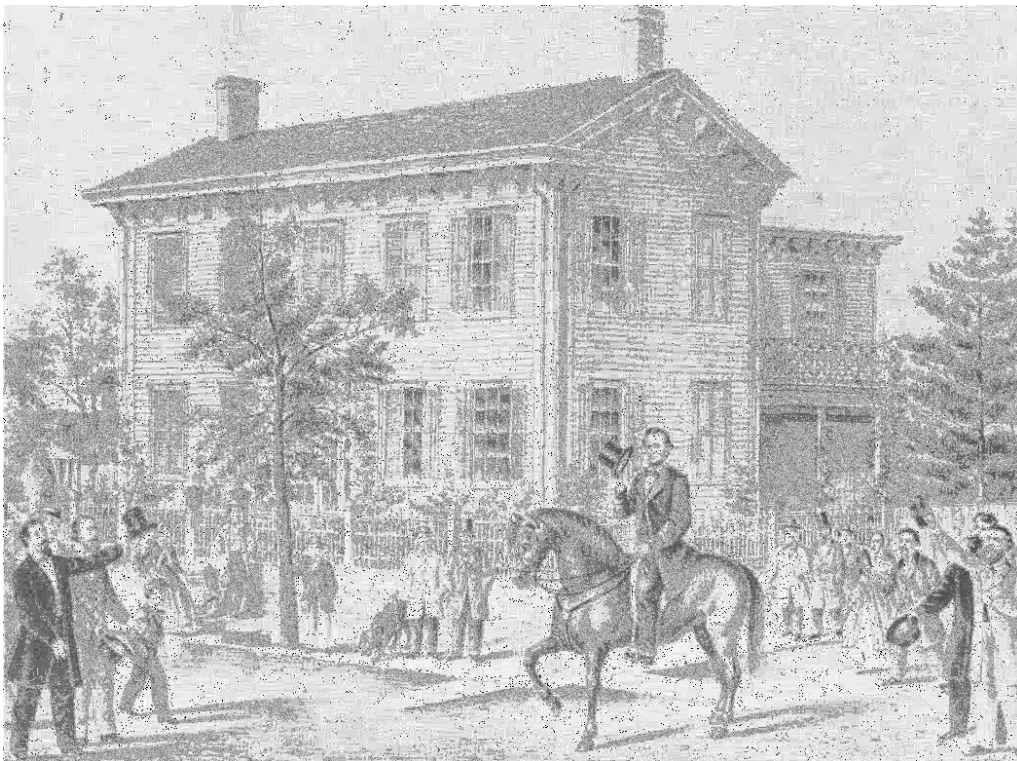
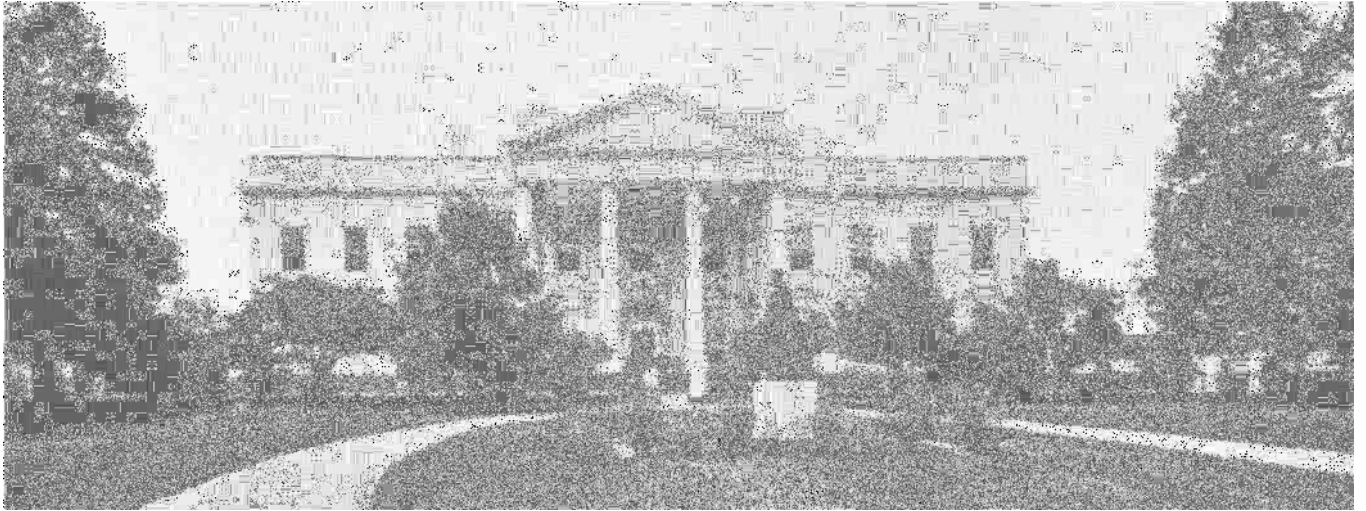
But Mary Lincoln probably cannot be held responsible for her most maddening traits, because they were either directly attributable to or heightened by a mental illness not understood in her own day. An autopsy performed at her death revealed that Mrs. Lincoln had been suffering from a brain tumor; all her life she had been subject to severe headaches. To what degree her shrewishness and fits of hysteria and irrationality were caused by physical disease it is, of course, impossible to determine today. But

the tumor and her emotional immaturity combined to produce a very difficult, and finally tragic, woman.

Lincoln himself privately attributed some of Mary's exploits to "partial insanity"; during one of her outbursts he directed his wife's gaze toward a mental institution beyond the White House and voiced his fear that if she did not learn to exercise self-control she might have to become a patient there. He evidently learned to view Mary's many complaints as symptoms of her disease, and so to bear them with sadness rather than resentment. Yet it must not be thought that she was a lunatic; on the contrary, she was perfectly rational in most matters, which unfortunately only made coping with her outbursts more difficult for those close to her.

THE sharpness of Mary's tongue was honed by frequent use, and Springfield friends remembered that Lincoln would simply leave the house to give her temper a chance to subside. He tried to calm her at times, calling her "Mother" and making gentle and reasonable remarks. Usually it was to no avail, and he would pick up one of the children and walk around Springfield until he felt the storm had abated. Lincoln could be sarcastic and harsh enough to political opponents, but he could not easily bring himself to quarrel with any woman, let alone his wife. He was, then, only deeply ashamed of himself when, one Sunday, having stood Mary's nagging all morning, he suddenly thundered at her, "You make the house intolerable, damn you, get out of it!"

There were other, more public occasions of friction. Mrs. Lincoln was unreasonably jealous, especially while her husband was President. She was no doubt motivated in part by a desire to protect him from office-seekers and spies, who counted on Lincoln's unwillingness to offend a woman. Most objects of her wrath, however, fell into neither category. She hovered around Lincoln at White House functions, and once, in a towering rage, she stormed at



an astonished young lady, "Do you know that I never allow the President to see any woman alone?"

Another source of public disapproval was Mary Lincoln's absolute inability to behave rationally in financial matters. She bought bonnets, ribbons, dress goods, and articles of furniture in astounding quantities and with no reference to need. She incurred huge bills, which she tried desperately to settle behind her husband's back. While the nation justly accused her of private extravagance, Mary also could satisfy no one on the matter of public celebrations. If she gave the

entertainments she so loved, she was accused of poor taste in view of the agonies of the war, it she refrained from giving parties and balls, people complained that she had no right to impose a Spartan regimen on the already gloomy public scene

MRS LINCOLN'S own view of her position did nothing to minimize the resentment of Presidential critics She liked to refer to those who frequented the White House as the "Court," and she did expect exaggerated attention to be paid to her position Moreover, she meddled in politics Lincoln himself referred to her, only half-jokingly, as "Mrs. President," and General McClellan called her the Lady President " Mary prided herself on her intuition, and on an ability, which she believed Lincoln lacked, to judge people accurately "My husband placed great confidence in my knowledge of human nature," she once said "He had not much knowledge of men " Lincoln for his part felt Mary was overly careful, saying, "Mother, you are too suspicious I give you credit for sagacity, but you are disposed to magnify trifles. " Nevertheless, she fussed constantly over appointments, plans, and personalities, suggesting changes in the Cabinet and interfering in military matters Mary enjoyed power, but she also believed that she was protecting her "gullible husband Though Lincoln had, by her own admission, the final word in all important national and domestic matters, nonetheless her nagging must have been at times exasperating

MARY LINCOLN'S fits of temper, her irrationality in money matters, her imperious manner with those she disliked, and her impolitic meddling all provided the Democrats and the radicals within Lincoln's own party with ammunition for their attacks on the Administration. A deliberately planned smear campaign was directed at the First Lady, designed to harm her husband through her. In August 1861 the Chicago Daily Tribune ran an article entitled "HOLD ENOUGH!" which stated, ". . . if Mrs. Lincoln were a prizefighter, a foreign danseuse, or a condemned convict on the way to execution, she could not be treated more indecently than she is by a portion of the New York press. . . . No lady of the White House has ever been so maltreated by the public

press." Mary Lincoln had three half-brothers fighting under the Confederate Flag; she was accused of treason by the opposition newspapers throughout her life. Despite her unwavering loyalty to the Union—she called the Southerners "degraded rebels" and wondered how people could suppose she could "sympathize with a people at war with me and mine"—she was accused of being a key figure in the Confederacy's Washington spy ring. Mrs. Lincoln's secretary at one point grew so indignant over the absurd rumors circulating that he wrote a satirical account of spies swimming the Potomac, prowling around the White House like ghosts, and climbing to Mrs. Lincoln's upstairs window, through which she handed out secret military plans. Ridiculous, yes; but the public during the tension-filled war years could be convinced of anything and yet was ready to doubt everything. Mary Todd Lincoln never escaped from this shadow of suspicion.

TOO EMOTIONAL and undisciplined herself to be in all respects a good parent, she nevertheless lavished affection on her three sons and treated them with the same fierce solicitude she extended to her husband. When Willie died in February 1862, her grief was for awhile insupportable; her sorrow intensified her mental instability and extinguished much of the gaiety which had formerly mitigated her vixen-like qualities. She had not the emotional maturity to regain her equilibrium, and life lost much of its value: "Our home is very beautiful, the grounds around us are enchanting, the world still smiles and pays homage, yet the charm is dispelled— everything appears a mockery, . . . and we are left desolate."

Lincoln's assassination appeared to Mary as the final, unbearable blow of a world designed specifically to torture her. Unable to bear any longer the criticisms of the domestic press, she travelled in Europe with her youngest son Tad. Without Lincoln to restrain her, Mary continued her old habit of indiscriminate purchasing and devoted most of her remaining energies to an undignified campaign to persuade Congress to grant her a pension. She was under the delusion that she had no money whatsoever, and certainly her income could not long

sustain her wild expenditures. Mrs. Lincoln railed against the Government and wrote hundreds of letters, begging, storming, threatening. To the horror of family and friends, she tried to organize a public subscription to raise funds. If the Reconstruction Congress remained cruelly unsympathetic towards her, Mary's behavior did nothing to convince its members of the merits of her case.

When Tad died in 1871, Mary wrote, "And now, in this world, there is nothing left me, but the deepest anguish & desolation." She journeyed from place to place restlessly, ever more obsessed with buying things, travelling with an impossible number of trunks jammed with her purchases. As if financial harassment and private grief were not sufficient burdens, in 1866 William Herndon began his lectures on Lincoln, which added to Mrs. Lincoln's despair. Herndon was not dishonest, and he idolized Lincoln; but when he had no facts he employed his intuition, the powers of which he seems grossly to have overestimated. He attempted to show that Lincoln was not a Christian, which to the public mind made him a heathen, that he was illegitimate, and that he had never loved Mary.

The Ann Rutledge story was particularly appealing, and against its romance Mary was helpless to plead her case, even if her pride had permitted a debate. In 1873 she wrote, "What more can I say in answer to this man, who when my heart was broken with anguish, issued falsehoods, against me & mine, which were enough to make the Heavens blush." Her frustration is reflected in this parody, by a sympathetic biographer, of Edgar Lee Masters' beautiful, but unfactual, lyric:

Out of Herndon's spite and mental ramblings
The vibrations of a deathless legend,
With malice toward Mary, wife of Lincoln.

In 1875, living then in Florida, Mary Lincoln began to suffer delusions of persecution. She travelled to Chicago where, she was convinced, her eldest son Robert was dying. She was irrational, telling tales of murder attempts, and she said that an Indian was removing the bones of her face and pulling wires out of her eyes. Left alone, she persisted in her buying mania. Reluctantly, Robert decided that insanity proceedings should be instituted so that she could be protected and given proper care. The difficulty was that usually she was rational in all areas except the financial, and that her periods of hysteria only occurred under extreme, though often imaginary, stress. Mary Lincoln thus viewed her insanity trial as the final betrayal; she sat calmly through the proceedings, but the night she was declared a lunatic she tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide by swallowing a mixture of what she thought was camphor and laudanum but was actually a harmless liquid given her by a perceptive druggist. She was placed in a private sanitarium, where her periods of hysteria and hallucination abated. Shattered, but with a new purpose, Mary worked with her old determination and shrewdness through influential friends and relatives to secure her release. In June 1876 she was declared sane and set free although, as her doctor reported, she was just as she had been a year earlier, only more self-possessed. She lived for a short time with her sister Mrs. Ninian Edwards, but she soon fled once again into "exile" in Europe, for Mary could not bear her old friends' soothing bedside manner attitude: "If I should say the moon is made of green cheese," she sighed, "they would heartily and smilingly agree with me."

FOR the next three years she lived abroad, and her mind seems to have been better than since the assassination. Perhaps because everything that mattered had already been taken, Mary finally felt secure.

Disease was overtaking her, however, and in December 1879 she fell,

severely damaging her spine. The injury would not heal, and her letters betray her anxiety and desire to return to America. She soon took up residence once more in the home of her sister, where she lingered for two years.

She said once to a visitor: ". . . what have I done, that I am so persecuted by the press? I am a poor, lonely woman; my husband is dead, and my two sons are dead; my health is shattered, and I am almost blind from constant weeping. I try to keep myself secluded from the world, but I cannot escape them; they will follow me, and say hard and cruel things about me. I long to leave the world and be at rest." Earlier she had written, "And the waiting is so long. . . ." This was the woman about whom a friend had written forty years earlier, "She is the very creature of excitement you know and never enjoys herself more than when in society and surrounded by a company of merry friends." On July 16, 1882 her long waiting ended. Mary Todd Lincoln was a woman whose emotional and mental instability prohibited self-control and sound judgment, the two qualities her role in history most demanded. She had the great misfortune to need, and in some measure to merit, the nation's sympathy and understanding during one of the least understanding periods of American history.

Mary Todd Lincoln

As a girlhood companion remembered her, Mary Todd was vivacious and impulsive, with an interesting personality--but "she now and then could not restrain a witty, sarcastic speech that cut deeper than she intended...." A young lawyer summed her up in 1840: "the very creature of excitement." All of these attributes marked her life, bringing her both happiness and tragedy.

Daughter of Eliza Parker and Robert Smith Todd, pioneer settlers of Kentucky, Mary lost her mother before the age of seven. Her father remarried; and Mary remembered her childhood as "desolate" although she belonged to the aristocracy of Lexington, with high-spirited social life and a sound private education.

Just 5 feet 2 inches at maturity, Mary had clear blue eyes, long lashes, light-brown hair with glints of bronze, and a lovely complexion. She danced gracefully, she loved finery, and her crisp intelligence polished the wiles of a Southern coquette.

Nearly 21, she went to Springfield, Illinois, to live with her sister Mrs. Ninian Edwards. Here she met Abraham Lincoln--in his own words, "a poor nobody then." Three years later, after a stormy courtship and broken engagement, they were married. Though opposites in background and temperament, they were united by an enduring love--by Mary's confidence in her husband's ability and his gentle consideration of her excitable ways.

Their years in Springfield brought hard work, a family of boys, and reduced circumstances to the pleasure-loving girl who had never felt responsibility before. Lincoln's single term in Congress, for 1847-1849, gave Mary and the boys a winter in Washington, but scant opportunity for social life. Finally her unwavering faith in her husband won ample justification with his election as President in 1860.

Though her position fulfilled her high social ambitions, Mrs. Lincoln's years in the White House mingled misery with triumph. An

orgy of spending stirred resentful comment. While the Civil War dragged on, Southerners scorned her as a traitor to her birth, and citizens loyal to the Union suspected her of treason. When she entertained, critics accused her of unpatriotic extravagance. When, utterly distraught, she curtailed her entertaining after her son Willie's death in 1862, they accused her of shirking her social duties.

Yet Lincoln, watching her put her guests at ease during a White House reception, could say happily: "My wife is as handsome as when she was a girl, and I...fell in love with her; and what is more, I have never fallen out."

Her husband's assassination in 1865 shattered Mary Todd Lincoln. The next 17 years held nothing but sorrow. With her son "Tad" she traveled abroad in search of health, tortured by distorted ideas of her financial situation. After Tad died in 1871, she slipped into a world of illusion where poverty and murder pursued her.

A misunderstood and tragic figure, she passed away in 1882 at her sister's home in Springfield--the same house from which she had walked as the bride of Abraham Lincoln, 40 years before.