Review Essay

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In *House of Abraham: Lincoln and the Todds, a Family Divided by War*, Stephen Berry offers a masterful and long overdue study of the Todd family: its interactions between members, its polarization during the Civil War and, most importantly, its influence on the life of Abraham Lincoln. This is not just another Lincoln book; it is a work completely unique in the contemporary Lincoln bibliography.

Lincoln, Berry argues, was, in fact, a Todd more than a Lincoln (a statement often used later in regard to his oldest son, Robert). Lincoln’s entire adult life had been “awash in a sea of Todds.”1 He married a Todd, dated a different Todd, loafed with Todds, confided in Todds, benefited from Todds, and benefited Todds in return. Indeed, Lincoln’s entire life was permeated so much by his wife’s family, argues Berry, that Lincoln had a deeper relationship with his wife’s family than with his own. The result, as Berry shows, is that one cannot truly understand Abraham Lincoln’s personal, professional, and political lives without understanding his relationship to the Todd family.

Berry, an assistant professor of history at the University of Georgia and author of *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South*, makes an impressive splash with his first jump into the waters of Lincoln scholarship. There is no biography of the Todds, and the histories that do exist are in no way comprehensive and date from the beginning of the twentieth century: Katherine Helm’s *The True Story of Mary, Wife of Lincoln* (1928), William H. Townsend’s *Lincoln and His Wife’s Hometown* (1929), and W. A. Evans’s *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln* (1932).

*House of Abraham* is not a complete biography of the Todd family, nor is it intended to be. The historical record on the family being so thin, Berry focuses on the few Todds about whom most is known and with whom Lincoln was closest. He begins with Mary Todd Lincoln’s grandfather and ends with Lincoln’s assassination. The pre-presi-


*Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2009*  
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dential stories are well known, and Berry recounts them faithfully: Lincoln’s legal partnership with John Todd Stuart; Lincoln’s visit to the Todd home in Lexington; his legal work for Robert Smith Todd and then for the entire family; and his relationship with various Todd women—especially, of course, Mary.

In examining the early Todd history and family dynamics, Berry offers greater light on the personality of Mary Todd Lincoln, a woman who for too long has been either lionized or vilified but rarely understood. In *House of Abraham*, we see the Todd clan’s collective and ubiquitous negative qualities of pride, vanity, selfishness, cruelty, quick temper, vindictiveness, and even insanity—characteristics well known and criticized in Mary Lincoln. The long family history, however, shows that Mary was not an aberration as a Todd or as a woman, but rather a member of a large, tumultuous family (and a family with a long history of mental illness). Lincoln, as a longtime Todd family acquaintance, knew very well what he was getting himself into with his marriage to Mary.

Berry makes few mistakes or misstatements in this work, but he errs in his claims that Lincoln never really loved Mary and that Mary’s *ambition* loved her husband more than her *heart* did. That canard was started by William Herndon and has since been continually and often blindly repeated.² Writers like to repeat this tale because it makes Lincoln seem even more a martyr, living with a horrible wife in a loveless marriage while also growing into his ultimate greatness and guiding a nation. But historical evidence—when considered within its appropriate historical context—simply does not sustain the claim. Lincoln’s sense of honor—rather than prompting him to marry a woman he did not love—would not have allowed him to do so. His statement on the way to the ceremony that he was on his way “to hell” was a typical agnostically aimed Lincoln joke rather than a lamentation, and the inscription on Mary’s wedding ring—“Love is Eternal”—was not a curse but a blessing.³ Likewise, to accuse Mary of marrying Abraham for social advancement rather than love is unfair. At the time of their courtship, Stephen Douglas had a far more promising future as possible president than did Lincoln, but it was the sheer number of things


Abraham and Mary had in common that drew them together, such as poetry, politics, and unhappy childhoods. For all the reminiscences stating Lincoln’s unhappiness with his wife, one can find just as many testimonials to their love.4

House of Abraham, however, is not an examination of the Lincoln marriage. Berry devotes minimal time to it, and his misunderstanding of their union is nominal to the overall work. But his examination of the Todd family certainly illuminates Mary Lincoln as an individual more so than do most biographies of her. Berry’s work likewise offers a glimpse into the long misunderstood personality of the Lincolns’ oldest son, Robert Todd (named after Mary’s father Robert Smith Todd), who was close to the Todd family throughout his entire life. William Herndon claimed that Robert was more Todd than Lincoln, and while his accusation has been often repeated, the statement is a specious one. In fact, Robert was more like his father than his mother in his gregariousness, sense of humor, ethics and morals, and intellect, and especially in his commitment to assisting an extended family that did not always treat him well in return. Like his father, Robert spent his life helping aunts, uncles, and cousins with loans of money, letters of introduction, professional references, and even federal jobs. And, like Abraham, Robert was closest to “Little Sister,” Emilie Helm.

The most compelling of House of Abraham’s contributions, however, is its examination of Lincoln and the Todds during the Civil War years. The Todds were literally fighting brother against brother. With eight members on one side and six on the other, the Todds were, as Berry writes, “Stretched between the federal White House and the Confederate trenches . . . a national catastrophe.”5 Events such as Emilie Todd Helm’s visit to the White House in 1863 are well known, but Berry offers up the more obscure: the despicable Confederate careers of David and George Todd—one a surgeon and one a prison superintendent—and both sadistic in their treatment of Union prisoners; the treachery of Martha Todd White and Ninian (and thereby Elizabeth)

4. For example, Lincoln is reported to have said during the White House years, “My wife is as handsome as when she was a girl, and I, a poor nobody then, fell in love with her; and what is more, I have never fallen out.” General Daniel Sickles, who knew the Lincolns on a personal level during the Civil War, declared that he had “never seen a more devoted couple.” Abolitionist Jane Grey Swisshelm noted their devotion in the way that Mary “completely merged herself in her husband.” C.E.L., “A Kindly Word for Abraham Lincoln’s Widow,” The Christian Register 101, no. 36 (September 7, 1872): 1; Katherine Helm, True Story of Mary, Wife of Lincoln (1928; reprint, Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books), 195; Jane Grey Swisshelm, “Tribute to the Dead from Mrs. Jane Grey Swisshelm,” Chicago Daily Tribune, July 20, 1882, 7.

5. Berry, ix.
Edwards, whose outright treason caused brother-in-law Lincoln much embarrassment and headache; and the familial plights of the Todd women—Betsey, Elodie, Margaret, and Kitty—who stayed home and watched and wondered, wed, and worried. Berry shows the reader that to understand the Todds is to understand the strife of the nation during the war; to understand Lincoln’s relationship with his wife’s family is to better understand Lincoln the man.

House of Abraham is not only a good read but also a solidly researched and well-documented work of history. Berry’s primary and secondary sources are credible and impressive. He clearly did much research in preparing this work, tracking down elusive members of a family whose historical footprints are rather scarce. He offers up a valuable resource in this book, not just in the prose but also in the statistics. The book begins with a list and short biography of all members of the Robert Smith Todd family and ends with an epilogue detailing the lives of the surviving Todd clan members after Lincoln’s assassination. The one resource the book does lack, unfortunately, is a bibliography, an addition that would offer eager readers the opportunity to dig deeper into the particulars of the Todd history found in articles and memoirs that Berry was unable to present within the scope of his book.

Minor criticisms aside, House of Abraham is a startlingly original book with a firm grasp on its subject matter. Entertaining and illuminating, Berry’s work will be considered a major contribution to Lincoln studies for years to come.