Review

STACY PRATT MCDERMOTT


Immediately following Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency in November 1860, Mary Lincoln became a public figure. For nearly twenty-two years after that, until her death in July 1882, the public felt free to scrutinize her life, impugn her character, and question her womanhood at a time when most middle- and upper-class Victorian women could count on chivalry, respect, and a veil protecting them from the public arena. As well, for more than a century historians have judged Mary Lincoln’s life and debated the merits and meanings of that life. Certainly, her marriage to one of our most admired presidents, the dramatic historical events of her life, and her intellect and bold personality have made her a compelling historical figure to the public and to historians alike. Even today, the public is fascinated by Mary Lincoln and her life, and historians are still arguing about who she was, how she lived, and what her historical legacy has been. Thus, it is certain that a new book of essays by historians who approached Mary Lincoln’s life from a variety of perspectives will be of great interest to voracious consumers of the Lincoln story.

It is a tired cliche to declare a book of scholarly essays on one historical topic uneven. But it is also absolutely true that almost every book of scholarly essays on one historical topic is, indeed, uneven. Add to this cliché, or truism if you prefer, a historical topic that incites wildly divergent opinions, like Mary Lincoln, and you have something of a rollercoaster ride between the covers of *The Mary Lincoln Enigma: Historians on America’s Most Controversial First Lady*. Through an introduction, twelve chapters, and a brief epilogue, fourteen authors examine topics including Mary Lincoln’s love of travel, her relationship with her husband, her views on race, and Mary Lincoln iconography. Some of the chapters in the book present new perspectives (“Fashion Plate or Trendsetter,” by Donna McCreary, and “Mary Lincoln among the Novelists: Fictional Interpretations of the First Lady,” by Richard W.
Stacy Pratt McDermott

Etulain). Some offer fresh looks at familiar topics (“A Psychiatrist Looks at Mary Lincoln,” by James S. Brust, and “The Reports of the Lincolns’ Political Partnership Have Been Greatly Exaggerated,” by Michael Burkhimer). Some offer condensed versions of previously published material (“There’s Something about Mary: Mary Lincoln and Her Siblings,” by Stephen Berry, and “I Miss Bob, So Much’: Mary Lincoln’s Relationship with Her Oldest Son,” by Jason Emerson). 1

The readability of the chapters in this volume varies, and so does the quality of the historical analysis within them. However, as a whole, the book offers readers a unique opportunity to see Mary Lincoln in a variety of historical contexts, to learn about her life through the lens of different authors, and to witness firsthand the rousing historiographical debate about a woman whose life both reflected her era and defied it. A biography by a single author cannot accomplish all of those objectives. The dissonance of the voices from chapter to chapter in many ways echoes the ups and downs of Mary Lincoln’s life, and the changing cadence of the volume keeps the reader alert. Most will find something to enjoy in the effort. Three chapters that center on image, perception, and misperception (McCreary, Etulain, and Harold Holzer in “I Look Too Stern’: Mary Lincoln and Her Image in the Graphic Arts”) are, perhaps, the most refreshing contributions. Given the importance that Mary Lincoln placed on her own public image, it is altogether fitting that three contributors to this volume tackle this topic. McCreary’s essay does a particularly good job of evaluating the social and political constructs of Mary Lincoln’s persona. Berry’s essay and “Life at Eighth and Jackson,” by William Miller, situate Mary Lincoln within a physical context that illustrates the significance of place in the human historical experience. Given the continued fascination with her mental health, many readers will enjoy Dr. Brust’s modern psychoanalysis of Mary Lincoln; and Wayne Temple’s essay on Mary Lincoln’s travels up to 1865 offers descriptions of Mary’s personal interests that many historians have overlooked. The Mary Lincoln Enigma, however, is better than the sum of its parts.

As I read each chapter, a particular question remained foremost in my mind. In pondering that question, I reflected on the general contributions this volume makes to our understanding both of Mary

Lincoln and of the historiographical problems that undermine our ability to fairly evaluate her. Is Mary Lincoln really an enigma? In the introduction, one of the book’s editors, Frank J. Williams, asks, “Who was the real Mary Lincoln?” He then suggests that historians should attempt to resolve the question because “Mary Lincoln deserves a more nuanced picture than the caricatures given by both apologists and critics heretofore.” While I doubt the degree to which we can know the real Mary Lincoln, I do agree that she deserves better than the caricatures. Mary Lincoln, like every historical figure about whom historians write, deserves a nuanced portrayal. We should consider historical figures as human characters with human failings and human complexities. I agree with Williams that historians, especially those who have written about Abraham Lincoln, have rarely given Mary Lincoln a fair assessment. They have either apologized for her or depicted her as a “violent and corrupt shrew.” Is Mary Lincoln an enigma then, because historians have failed in their job to present nuanced biographical treatments of her? I might argue that historians who have chosen those extreme positions do not find Mary Lincoln to be an enigma at all, but rather they have strongly believed that they understand exactly what she was.

Vocabulary.com defines enigma as “something that baffles understanding and cannot be explained.” None of the contributors to this book of essays, however, define Mary Lincoln as baffling. Complicated, yes; but not a person that baffles understanding. In fact, most of the contributors succeed in their efforts to better understand her within the historical contexts in which they are individually concerned. Although they certainly do not all agree with each other, all of them have fairly strong interpretations about the woman and her life. They all do contend that Mary Lincoln was a complex individual with contradictory personality traits; and that those contradictions in her character and in her life make her a challenging historical figure to define. Bravo. Mary Lincoln was a complex woman; and her life cannot be neatly defined.

But were not most historical characters that we find interesting complex individuals with contradictory personality traits that make them hard for us to define? Thomas Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence, but he owned slaves until the day he died. Andrew Jackson was the architect of American Indian removal policy, yet he raised a Native American son. Abraham Lincoln was a master at spinning humorous stories and making people in his presence feel at ease, all while he suffered severe periods of intense melancholy. So, are Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln enigmas? Historical characters are
always at least somewhat a mystery to us because we cannot know their innermost thoughts, we cannot be privy to all of their conversations, and we cannot fully understand their beliefs, their choices, or their experiences. So, is Mary Lincoln really an enigma? Or have historians set up a false construct for her? Have they held her to a different standard? Is it because she was a woman? Is it because she was married to Abraham Lincoln? Is she really somehow more enigmatic than any other historical characters that excite our imaginations?

With the notable exceptions of Ruth Painter Randall, Jean Baker, and Catherine Clinton—who have written the most scholarly full-length biographies of Mary Lincoln—most historians have exhibited general hostility, if not downright hatred, for Mary Lincoln. And the editors of this volume are absolutely correct that those extreme interpretations do not take us closer to understanding her. Thankfully, none of the most virulent Mary Lincoln haters contributed to *The Mary Lincoln Enigma*. Clearly, the editors of the volume sought out authors who would offer more balanced interpretations; and the essays as a whole provide the nuances for which the editors called. That said, I wonder if the title of the book does a disservice to what actually resides within it. For me, the title does pose an interesting question with, perhaps, an implied answer: Is Mary Lincoln really an enigma? Or are the historians who have helped to create the unfortunate historiographical dichotomy of her life the ones that truly “baffle understanding and cannot be explained?”

Historiographical rants and quibbles with title aside, *The Mary Lincoln Enigma* is a good volume, as it covers a great many aspects of Mary Lincoln’s life and is mostly well written and engaging. It also offers a variety of scholarly interpretations by very good historians that together reveal the complexities of Mary Lincoln. As a group, the essays offer up the varied historical contexts that will help readers better understand the woman, her life, and her legacy. Perhaps because of the great admiration that most historians and readers of history have for Abraham Lincoln, his wife will always suffer by comparison. The debate, no doubt, will continue. However, the authors in this book illustrate exactly why it is within the contradictions and complexities of human nature that we find a more accurate, albeit—dare I say it—enigmatic, picture of human historical experience.