“Solving a Lincoln Literary Mystery: ‘Little Eddie’”

SAMUEL P. WHEELER

Edward Baker Lincoln (1846–1850), Abraham and Mary Lincoln’s second son, was never a healthy child. He had been ill throughout much of his father’s term in Congress, and though he periodically showed signs of improvement, he was probably suffering from a chronic illness. The three year old’s last days began the day before his mother’s thirty-first birthday. He developed a dangerously high fever and endured furious coughing fits, followed by periods of intense exhaustion. Unable to eat or rest, nothing seemed to ease his suffering. Though doctors thought he was suffering from diphtheria, Eddy was probably in the final stages of pulmonary tuberculosis. Commonly called consumption, it killed more Americans in 1850 than any other disease: half its victims were under the age of five.

After lingering for fifty-two days, Eddy died on a cold and rainy February morning. Mary Lincoln’s cries echoed throughout the dark house. Her sisters tried to comfort her, as did Rev. James Smith, the new pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield. He no doubt encouraged the Lincolns to surrender to God’s will, perhaps explaining that their son’s death was somehow part of God’s divine plan. The next day, Rev. Smith conducted Eddy’s funeral in the Lincoln home.

2. Abraham Lincoln to John D. Johnston, February 23, 1850, Roy P. Basler, et al., eds., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 3:77. Lincoln writes, “As you make no mention of it, I suppose you had not learned that we lost our little boy. He was sick fiftytwo days & died the morning of the first day of this month.” December 12, 1849 was 52 days before February 1, 1850. Mary’s thirty-first birthday was December 13, 1849.
Five days after the funeral, an unsigned poem appeared in the *Illinois Daily Journal*:

[By Request.]
LITTLE EDDIE.
Those midnight stars are sadly dimmed,
That late so brilliantly shone,
And the crimson tinge from cheek and lip,
With the heart’s warm life has flown—
The angel death was hovering nigh,
And the lovely boy was called to die.
The silken waves of his glossy hair
Lie still over his marble brow,
And the pallid lip and pearly cheek
The presence of Death avow.
Pure little bud in kindness given,
In mercy taken to bloom in heaven.

Happier far is the angel child
With the harp and the crown of gold,
Who warbles now at the Saviour’s feet
The glories to us untold.
Eddie, meet blossom of heavenly love,
Dwells in the spirit-world above.

Angel boy—fare thee well, farewell
Sweet Eddie, we bid thee adieu!
Affection’s wail cannot reach thee now,
Deep though it be, and true.
Bright is the home to him now given,
For “of such is the kingdom of Heaven.”

The identity of the poet who penned “Little Eddie” has long been a mystery. Neither Abraham nor Mary Lincoln ever mentioned the poem in their letters. Indeed, none of their contemporaries ever spoke of the poem in the thousands of letters and interviews they left behind. Though the poem does not appear in the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, scholars have nonetheless suggested that the Lincolns had a hand in the poem’s production.

Speculation began in 1954 when Eddy Lincoln’s long-forgotten tombstone was rediscovered lying face down in Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield. Onlookers, including historian Harry Pratt, noted the

epitaph at the bottom of Eddy’s tombstone, “Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Though the Biblical phrase often appeared on children’s tombstones throughout the nineteenth century, Pratt recognized that it also matched the final line of the poem that appeared in the *Illinois Daily Journal* shortly after Eddy’s death. This connection, along with Pratt’s assessment that the poem was similar to William Knox’s “Mortality”—Lincoln’s favorite poem—led him to conclude that it was not “unreasonable to believe that Lincoln composed the poem.” A year later, Ruth Painter Randall reached a similar conclusion but added that Mary Lincoln also might have had a hand in drafting the piece.

7. “But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven,” Matthew 19:14 KJV. Parallel versions also appear in Mark 10:14 and Luke 18:16.


Thirty-two years later, Mary Lincoln biographer Jean Baker offered a seemingly definitive answer when she declared that Mary, not her husband, was indeed the poet behind the verses. Confidently declaring the poem a “mother’s production,” Baker argued that Abraham Lincoln could not have produced such a sentimental piece; instead, she praised Mary for making an effort to “move beyond the devastating first stages of mourning to resignation and acceptance.” No doubt inspired by Baker’s assurances, both Jennifer Fleischner and Catherine Clinton subsequently declared that Mary Lincoln composed “Little Eddie.”


However, Mary did not write the poem. In the days following Eddy’s death, she was unable to compose herself long enough to draft such reflective verses. Instead, she retreated to her room, was unable to stop crying, and refused to eat or sleep for days at a time.\textsuperscript{12} Her six-year-old son Robert, her husband, her sisters, and Rev. Smith tried to comfort her, but it was no use; they could not penetrate the black veil that enveloped her.

Her grief followed a similar pattern a dozen years later when she lost another son. Like Eddy, Willie Lincoln died during February after an extended illness.\textsuperscript{13} Again overwhelmed by grief, Mary confined herself in her room in the White House, where she remained for three weeks. Though her youngest son, Tad, was critically ill at the time, she was unable to care for him. As a result, Lincoln hired a nurse and summoned his sister-in-law Elizabeth Todd Edwards to the White House. When she arrived, she quickly prioritized the situation. Instead of trying to ease her sister’s “excessive grief,” Edwards found that her primary duty was to “aid in nursing the little sick Tad.” Mary was “but little with him,” Edwards wrote, “being utterly unable to control her feelings.”\textsuperscript{14} Similarly, Mary’s dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckly, tried to comfort the first lady, as did family friend Eliza Browning and Mary Jane Welles, the wife of the secretary of the navy. Welles knew what it meant to lose a child—she had lost five of her own and, before the year was over, another.\textsuperscript{15} Like the poet who penned “Little Eddie,” Welles

\textsuperscript{12} After Eddy died, Mary would not eat. “Mr. Lincoln said, ‘We must eat, Mary, for we must live,’ and he sat down and forced himself to eat, but she wouldn’t,” remembered Mary’s great niece. Mary Edwards Brown, “An Old Lady’s Lincoln Memories,” \textit{Life Magazine} 46 (February 9, 1959): 57–60; Mrs. John Todd Stuart, interview, \textit{Chicago Tribune}, February 12, 1900; Octavia Roberts, \textit{Lincoln in Illinois} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 65.

\textsuperscript{13} William Wallace Lincoln, born just ten months after Eddy’s death, was named after Dr. William Wallace (Mary’s brother-in-law), the physician who cared for Eddy during his final illness.


\textsuperscript{15} Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall, eds., \textit{The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning}, 2 vols. (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1925), 1:530–31; Orville H. Browning to Isaac N. Arnold, November 25, 1872, Arnold Papers, Chicago History Museum. When Willie died, the Lincolns sent their carriage to pick up Senator Orville H. Browning and his wife Eliza. Eliza stayed with Mary for “about a week” following Willie’s death. Not only did her husband help arrange Willie’s funeral, but he also stayed with Tad “several consecutive nights” in the White House. “The President
urged Mary to accept that her boy was far happier in his heavenly home. Yet almost a year after Willie’s death, Mary admitted she had not yet been able to take Welles’s advice.16

While a host of caring individuals tried to comfort Mary when she lost Eddy and Willie, there is little evidence to suggest that she was concerned with how others processed their grief. Conversely, the poet who penned “Little Eddie” seemed unconcerned with personal grief; instead, the poet was thoroughly interested in how others mourned the boy’s passing.

Mary Lincoln did not write the poem, nor did she appear to follow the poet’s advice. She never truly accepted the many losses life handed her. Three-and-a-half years after Eddy’s death, Mary admitted she still did “not feel sufficiently submissive to our loss.”17 While the poet who wrote “Little Eddie” imagined the “angel child” was “now at the Saviour’s feet,” Mary sought out spiritualists who convinced her they could part the curtain that separated this world from the next.18 Within weeks of Willie’s death, for instance, a wide-eyed Mary Lincoln pulled her half-sister Emilie Todd aside and told her that Willie’s ghost visited her often. “He comes to me every night and stands at the foot of the bed with the same sweet adorable smile he always has had. Little Eddie is sometimes with him,” she said. Emilie Todd was stunned. “It is unnatural and abnormal, it frightens me,” she confided in her diary.19

Jean Baker, even though she argued that Mary wrote “Little Eddie,” conceded that the sentiments expressed in the poem seemed to contradict everything she knew about her grief. “Orphaned herself,” wrote Baker, “Mary Lincoln was never able to incorporate memories of her dead into the comforting recollections that today’s psychologists

was in the room with me a portion of each night,” Browning later wrote. “He was in very deep distress at the loss of Willie, and agitated with apprehensions of a fatal termination of Tad’s illness;” Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 212, 214.

16. Mary Lincoln to Mary Jane Welles, February 21, 1863, Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 147. “[I]f we could only realize, how far happier they now are than when on earth! Heaven help the sorrowing, and how full the land is, of such!”


consider a vital part of a normal recovery from bereavement.”

Indeed, guilt was the predominant emotion that colored Mary Lincoln’s grief. For instance, though modern medicine explains that Willie died from typhoid fever, probably caused by pollution in the White House water system, Mary endorsed a more supernatural explanation. She believed Willie’s death was a scourge from above: his parents had worshipped their personal political advancement more than they loved their Creator; now He had seen fit to punish them. Mary believed there had been warning signs all along the way. Two years before his death, while the Lincolns were dreaming of life in the White House, Willie was stricken with scarlet fever. It “was but a warning to us,” Mary wrote four months after his death. God was trying to “wean us from a world, whose chains were fastening around us.”

Two years later, she elaborated on the theme: “We were having so much bliss. I had become, so wrapped up in the world, so devoted to our own political advancement that I thought of little else besides. Our Heavenly father sees fit, oftentimes to visit us, at such times for our worldliness, how small & insignificant all worldly honors are, when we are thus so severely tried.”

While Mary Lincoln did not write “Little Eddie,” she was married to a sometime poet. Just four years earlier, Abraham Lincoln shared at least two original pieces of poetry with Andrew Johnston, a newspaper editor in Quincy, Illinois, who promptly published the melancholy verses in his newspaper. Moreover, if Lincoln had written “Little Eddie” to mourn the death of his child, he would not have been the first future president to participate in such an exercise. For instance, when John Tyler lost his three-month-old daughter Anne, he composed an elegy that contained several similar metaphors: “Oh child of my love, thou wert born for a day; / And like morning’s vision have vanished away / Thine eye scarce had ope’d on the world’s


23. Mary Lincoln to Hannah Shearer, November 20, 1864, ibid., 189.

beaming light / Ere 'twas sealed up in death and enveloped in night. / Oh child of my love as a beautiful flower; / Thy blossom expanded a short fleeting hour. / The winter of death hath blighted thy bloom / And thou liest alone in the cold dread tomb.”

In addition to his interest in poetry, Lincoln also expressed a growing interest in Christianity from the 1850s onward. For instance, Rev. Smith did not fade away after conducting Eddy’s funeral. More than two years after Eddy’s death, Mary officially joined the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, where the family rented a pew, and remained close with Rev. Smith throughout much of the next decade. Like Lincoln, Smith had been a religious skeptic for much of his youth; however, he had a dramatic conversion experience. Rev. Smith penned a six hundred-page book entitled *The Christian’s Defense* that defended Christianity on rational grounds. Lincoln reportedly read at least parts of the book and discussed it with him in some detail. Though Lincoln never officially joined the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, his wife nonetheless concluded that Eddy’s death had directed his heart “towards religion.”

Twelve years later, when Willie died in the White House, Lincoln’s journey toward Christianity progressed considerably. As Rev. Smith had done after Eddy’s death, men of faith spoke with Lincoln when he lost Willie. For instance, Rev. Phineas Gurley told the president that Willie was not dead at all, but alive and well in heaven. Instead of nodding his head in agreement or responding with an appropriate Bible verse, Lincoln quoted Shakespeare’s grief-stricken Hamlet: “There’s divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will.” Similarly, some three months after Willie’s death, while visiting Fortress Monroe, Lincoln again expressed his feelings in verse by reading aloud from Shakespeare: first a passage from *Hamlet*, another from *Macbeth*, and finally a passage from *King John*, in which Constance laments her lost son. With tears in his eyes, Lincoln closed the book and repeated the verse: “And, father cardinal, I have heard you say / That we shall see and know our friends in heaven: / If that be true, I shall see my boy again.” Turning to a colonel, Lincoln asked if

29. William Shakespeare, *King John*, 3.4.76–78. In the next line, Constance compares
he had ever dreamt “of a lost friend” and felt as if had a “direct communion with that friend” and was yet somehow aware that it was not reality. When the stunned colonel acknowledged he had experienced such dreams, Lincoln confessed, “So do I dream of my Boy Willie.” The colonel recalled that Lincoln “was utterly overcome. . . . His great frame shook & Bowing down on the table he wept as only such a man in the breaking down of a great sorrow could weep.”

Such displays of emotion were enough to bring Rev. Francis Vinton of Trinity Church in New York to the White House. Though he understood the president’s grief, he nonetheless delivered a stern message. As president, Lincoln was the “chosen father, and leader of the people,” Vinton reminded him. He was entrusted with great responsibility, which would not yield to grief; moreover, Lincoln’s behavior was not Christian-like. “To mourn the departed as lost belonged to heathenism, not to Christianity,” Vinton chided.

Like the poet who had written “Little Eddie,” Vinton reminded Lincoln that the departed were not dead at all. “Your son, is alive, in Paradise,” said the preacher. “Do you remember that passage in the Gospels: ‘God is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live unto him’?” Your son is alive.”

“Alive! Alive! Surely you mock me,” Lincoln exclaimed. “No sir, believe me,” Vinton continued, “it is a most comforting doctrine of the church, founded upon the words of Christ himself.”

Lincoln threw his arms around the preacher and cried aloud in an inquiring manner, “Alive? Alive?” The preacher nodded and promised to send him a sermon that explored the topic in greater detail.

Though the loss of his sons encouraged Lincoln to travel the path toward Christianity, he never completed that journey. He certainly reached for his Bible during trying times throughout his life; however, he most often turned to secular poetry. William Knox’s “Mortality,” Oliver Wendell Holmes’s “The Last Leaf,” and the words of Shake-
Shakespeare’s most grief-stricken characters—Hamlet, Macbeth, Constance, and even Claudius—seemed to offer consolation; it seemed enough for Lincoln to know there were others who drank from the same bitter cup. Conversely, “Little Eddie” was a much different literary work: Lincoln had never written a poem nor even expressed admiration for a literary work with such a mature religious message.

Moreover, structural clues within “Little Eddie” disallow Lincoln’s authorship. Most often, Lincoln constructed his poetry using four-line verses, with an alternating rhyme scheme, \textit{abab}. Just four years earlier, for instance, Lincoln adhered to the basic structure in each of his anonymously published pieces: “I range the fields with pensive tread, / And pace the hollow rooms, / And feel (companion of the dead) / I’m living in the tombs.” Conversely, “Little Eddie” was composed using six-line verses, with a slightly more sophisticated \textit{abcbdd} rhyme scheme, structures not used in any of Lincoln’s surviving poetry. Further internal evidence points away from both Abraham and Mary Lincoln as well. Neither parent, for instance, spelled their son’s name “Eddie,” as it appeared in the poem; instead, throughout their letters, they referred to their son as “Eddy.” Furthermore, the editor of the \textit{Illinois Daily Journal} never claimed the poem was written by a local bard. The caveat “For the Journal” usually preceded verses by local poets in this newspaper, but the note “By Request” accompanied “Little Eddie.”

Despite the hopeful assurances of dozens of historians, neither Abraham nor Mary wrote “Little Eddie”; instead, the poem was written by a young woman from St. Louis who most likely had no knowledge of the Lincoln family. Penned in 1849, the poem “Eddie” appeared in Ethel Grey’s first book, \textit{Sunset Gleams from the City of the Mounds}, published in 1852.

35. Jason Emerson, “Of Such is the Kingdom of Heaven: The Mystery of ‘Little Eddie’,” \textit{Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society} (Autumn 1999): 210. In this evenhanded examination of authorship, Emerson acknowledges that poets often alter their style to suit the occasion, though I concur with his observation that “such a revolution in style at such a traumatic time seems unlikely” for Lincoln.
38. Ethel Grey, \textit{Sunset Gleams from the City of the Mounds} (New York: John F. Trow,
Eddie.

“How should e’en joy, but a trembler be,
Beautiful dust, when we look on thee!”

Hemans.

Those midnight stars are sadly dimmed,
That late so brilliantly shone,
And the crimson tinge from cheek and lip,
With the heart’s warm life has flown;
The Angel of Death was hovering nigh,
And the lovely boy was called to die.

The silken waves of his glossy hair
Lie still on his marble brow,
And the pallid lip and pearly cheek,
The presence of death avow.
Pure little bud, in kindness given,
In mercy taken to bloom in heaven.

Happier far is the angel child,
With the harp and the crown of gold,
Who warbles now at the Saviour’s feet,
The glories to us untold.
Eddie, meek blossom of heavenly love,
Dwells in the spirit world above.

Angel boy, fare thee well, farewell!—
Sweet Eddie, we bid thee adieu;
Affection’s wail cannot reach thee now,
Deep though it be and true.
Bright is the home to him now given,
For oh! “of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

St. Louis, 1849.

Grey undoubtedly published an earlier draft of the poem, prior to February 1850, most obviously because the Sunset Gleams version was published after Eddy Lincoln’s death, but also because there are slight grammatical variations between the Sunset Gleams version and the poem that appeared in the Illinois Daily Journal. Most significantly,


Grey’s two-line preface is entirely absent from the newspaper version.40

The preface is important for understanding the inspiration behind the poem. The preface is the final two lines of a poem called “The Child’s Last Sleep,” written twenty years earlier by one of England’s most successful female poets, Felicia Dorothea Hemans. Hemans wrote her poem after viewing a sculpture of a deceased child.41 Throughout the poem, Hemans described the sculpture in detail. At first glance, it appeared as if the child was merely sleeping, but the poet eventually realized that death was the cause of the child’s stillness. If the child had been suffering from an illness or injury, death had brought finality. However, the poet’s thoughts did not turn to eternity; instead, Hemans focused on what the survivors had lost.

By beginning “Eddie” with those two lines, Ethel Grey appeared to be issuing a Christian response to Hemans’s secular piece. Throughout “Eddie,” Grey reminded her readers to look beyond the pain of their loss and focus instead on the Christian promise of eternity: Death transformed “Sweet Eddie” into an “angel child” and transported him to “the spirit-world above” to live eternally in Christ’s presence. Eddie was now in a far better place.

While both Hemans and Grey had written poems mourning the loss of a child, neither had experienced such a loss first-hand. Hemans was simply reacting to a sculpture, while Grey was offering a religious critique of an earlier poem. Indeed, Ethel Grey had not yet had children of her own; when she penned “Little Eddie,” she was still a teenager living with her parents in St. Louis. “Ethel Grey” was merely a pseudonym; the poet’s real name was Mary E. Chamberlain. She continued to use the pseudonym until 1867, when she began publishing under her married name, Mrs. Mary E. C. Wyeth. Religious themes, like the one found in “Eddie,” dominated her poetry and fiction throughout her lengthy literary career.42

40. In addition to the absent preface, there are more than a dozen slight grammatical differences, ranging from discrepancies in capitalization to comma disagreements.
42. Schaff and Gilman, Library of Religious Poetry, 27. Born in Salem, Massachusetts, on December 1, 1832, Chamberlain moved to St. Louis the next year. Her short story, “The Victor of Cross Road Mission,” appeared in the New York Independent, while a collection of her stories from the Christian Weekly was later published by the American Tract Society. In 1880, Wyeth was still publishing poems in St. Louis.
So now at least part of the Lincoln literary mystery has been solved: Neither Abraham nor Mary Lincoln wrote “Little Eddie.” However, solving one mystery often reveals others. For instance, the poem appeared in the *Illinois Daily Journal* “by request,” but who requested it? If it was Lincoln, it would not have been the only time he chose a poem to eulogize someone. Just five months after Eddy’s death, for instance, Lincoln ended his twenty-eight-hundred-word eulogy of Zachary Taylor by reciting his favorite poem, “Mortality,” by William Knox. Lincoln had first discovered the poem in a newspaper and committed it to memory. However, if Lincoln had discovered “Little Eddie” in a newspaper and clipped it or committed it to memory, it would seem to be out of character, as his poetic sensibilities ran decidedly more secular.

If not Lincoln, perhaps someone close to the Lincoln family placed the poem in the newspaper. Before it appeared in *Sunset Gleams*, Grey likely published a draft of the poem in a St. Louis publication. Perhaps someone who had frequent access to St. Louis newspapers—editor Simeon Francis, for instance—discovered the poem and published it to comfort the Lincolns. If the poem originally appeared in a religious tract, perhaps Rev. Smith or another friend of the Lincoln family was responsible for placing it in the Springfield newspaper. Though the identity of the person who requested the poem in the *Illinois Daily Journal* remains a mystery, perhaps that answer is not as important as finally knowing the identity of the poet whose words may have comforted the Lincolns during one of the most inconsolable moments in a parent’s life.

44. Lincoln to Johnston, April 18, 1846, ibid., 1:378.