

# Review

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Michael Burlingame. *An American Marriage: The Untold Story of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd*. New York and London: Pegasus Books, 2021. 302 pp.

To fully understand a man, it is essential to also understand his wife and his marital relationship. Abraham Lincoln is no different. Whether positive or negative, a spouse has a huge impact on a person's ambition, mental and emotional stability, social status, even profession. The relationship between Abraham and Mary Lincoln has long been—as it should be—one of the great debates in Lincoln scholarship. Beyond just an understanding of how husband and wife met, lived together, treated each other, and raised a family together, etc., lies the essential, indeed, the critical, bedrock question of how Abraham Lincoln's life and leadership were impacted by this woman he married.

In his book *An American Marriage*, Michael Burlingame delves deeper into the Lincoln relationship than any previous scholar, creating a paradigm shift in how we must examine and understand this family dynamic and its effects on the historical figure of Abraham Lincoln. Not everyone will like, accept, or endure what Burlingame has uncovered and states in the book, but the evidence he puts forth to bolster his conclusions is, quite frankly, overwhelming.

The basic facts of the Lincoln-Todd relationship are known and accepted: They met and courted, got engaged but broke up, reconciled, and got married. Mary was born and raised in southern aristocracy; Abraham was a poor midwestern farmer's son with little money who earned his way through life. The Lincoln-Todd pairing was an incongruous one to say the least, but they certainly had a mutual attraction and understanding that led to a 23-year marriage that ended only due to assassination.

In Springfield, the Lincolns lived a middle class life—and by the late 1850s, an upper-middle-class life. Worries about the children, the home, and Lincoln's legal profession and regional political aspirations were the norm. The Lincolns' ascendancy to the White House, particularly during a time of civil war, caused a new family dynamic,

one in which Abraham focused on his work saving the country and Mary focused mostly on herself, causing the two to drift apart. One of the final important things Abraham said to his wife on the day he was killed was that they needed to rekindle their relationship as, due to the war and the death of their son Willie in 1862, they had both "been very miserable."

But what about the inner dynamic of the Lincolns? This is where opinions and interpretations vary. Did they love or despise each other? Did Mary impel Lincoln to greater achievements than another, less ambitious wife (such as Ann Rutledge or Mary Owens) would have done, or would Lincoln have reached the presidency anyway? Was Lincoln's life a miserable hell because of his onerous mate, and, if so, how thoroughly did his legendary patience and empathy, learned by suffering with a termagant wife, impact his Christ-like character as Civil War president? And if his life was not a veritable hell, then does Mary, and Lincoln's marriage to Mary, deserve a reassessment of the positive impacts she had on her husband on his journey to immortality?

Burlingame is not the first scholar to examine this subject. Of course, William Herndon's statements and assessments about the Lincoln marriage laid the foundation for practically everything that came after (and are cited extensively by Burlingame). Mary's family members and friends wrote articles or gave interviews about the Lincoln marriage throughout the late nineteenth century, but nearly all of them were intended as support and defense of Mary Lincoln against the negative assessments of Herndon. For book-length studies, Ruth Painter Randall broke the first ground in her 1953 book *Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage*, even though her efforts were more focused on Mary and were more apologetic than objective. In 2008, Daniel Mark Epstein attempted his own portrayal of the marriage in *The Lincolns: Portrait of a Marriage*, although his results were, as Burlingame says, "unconvincing as a work of history." Most recently, in 2011, Kenneth J. Winkle offered his small book *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, which looks at all aspects of the two Lincolns, but gives surprisingly little attention to the marriage itself.

Burlingame's vast historical oeuvre as writer and editor contains volumes of information about the Lincolns. He created a new standard for examining the Lincoln marriage with his 1994 book *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, revealing the dark side of the Lincoln-Todd union. He has continued broadening and deepening this work, mostly through groundbreaking discoveries and revelations about the character and actions of Mary Lincoln, for nearly 30 years. All of this

information about the Lincolns and their marriage has been spread throughout Burlingame's numerous books—particularly his Lincoln Prize-winning biography of Abraham Lincoln in 2008—but *An American Marriage* is his first time solely focusing an entire study on the Lincoln marriage. It includes all of his previous information, revised and updated, along with additional new research. The result is the most detailed and comprehensive look at the matrimonial state of the Lincolns ever written.

Anyone who has read Burlingame's books and articles, or has heard him speak about the Lincolns, knows that he has no love or respect for Mary. So it will be no surprise that *An American Marriage* is mostly a jeremiad against Mary Lincoln. As he writes on the first page of the introduction: "This book describes and analyzes why Lincoln had good reason to regret his marriage. . . . Lincoln is justly known as a man of sorrows, largely because of the soul-crushing responsibilities he shouldered as president during the nation's bloodiest war. But it is impossible to understand the depth of that sorrow without realizing just how woe-filled his marriage truly was."

Burlingame claims that Mary Lincoln is more to be pitied than censured, and that his book seeks neither to excuse nor denounce Mary, but rather to "describe accurately and fully her marriage and her idiosyncrasies of character and make the latter understandable." To do this, his book examines the Lincoln relationship in three sections: their courtship in 1839–1842, the Springfield years, and the White House years. The book also contains a valuable appendix in which Burlingame appraises the major literature on the Lincoln marriage.

In exploring the Lincoln-Todd romance, Burlingame sticks with his belief that Lincoln broke his engagement to Mary in the winter of 1840–41 after falling in love with Mary's gorgeous 18-year-old niece-in-law Matilda Edwards. This change of heart came about after Lincoln realized that he just did not love Mary as he thought he did, and he realized "it would just kill me to marry Mary Todd." The two later reconciled and married not because either loved the other, but for more insipid reasons: Lincoln for honor and Mary for her own political aspirations. After the wedding, this loveless marriage progressed as badly as one might expect, especially as it was subject to what Burlingame calls the "corrosive forces" of "her ungovernable temper and his emotional reserve." The next 17 years for the Lincolns were filled with physical, mental, and emotional pain and abuse, mostly flowing from Mary toward her husband, and rarely the other way around. There were, however, two things that Abraham and Mary could agree on, according to Burlingame: their love of their

children and their incendiary political ambitions. In these two things, the Lincolns found solace from their miserable lives—that and the fact that Lincoln actively avoided being home, whether he was riding the judicial circuit, traveling for politics, or just sleeping in his law office.

During the White House years, Mary's abhorrent—unethical and even illegal—behavior as first lady is on full display by Burlingame, and the evidence is just too overwhelming for anyone to deny that it is true, either in whole or at least in part. That being the case, the unnecessary grief and anxiety that Mary caused her husband has a massive impact on the history of Lincoln as president. As Burlingame shows, Mary, a victim to her own greed and self-importance, engaged in myriad unethical practices, including “influence peddling, falsifying bills, padding payrolls and expense accounts, pinching servants' wages, selling permits to trade, misappropriating funds, selling government property, accepting bribes and kickbacks, and engaging in extortion.” These were things Lincoln had to deal with, not just privately, but also publicly to avoid damage to his administration and his efforts to win the war. These include instances such as when Mary may have tipped off a reporter to the president's anticipated call for a new draft, and that reporter subsequently used it as a basis for issuing a bogus proclamation under the president's name as a way to raise the price of gold in which he had invested heavily; Mary's overspending her \$20,000 White House decorating appropriation by \$7,000; her selling of access to her husband's first annual message to Congress to the unctuous rogue “Chevalier” Henry Wikoff; and her controversial February 1862 White House party that spent thousands of dollars on food and entertainment while regular citizens lived hand-to-mouth and some soldiers slept without blankets or tents.

As always, Burlingame's research is astounding in its breadth and depth, and his source materials are copious, from contemporary reports to first-hand writings and reminiscences, and even to second- and third-hand memories from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Burlingame makes great use of Herndon and his sources, Ida Tarbell and her sources, and a vast array of newspaper reportage covering a half-century of interviews.

The one shortcoming of this book is the imbalance with which it handles the flaws of Abraham and Mary as spouses. While Burlingame does admit that Lincoln was hardly a model husband and caused his wife a fair share of frustration and angst due to his manners and idiosyncrasies, there is little stating of evidence and facts to support the statement. It is a handful of pebbles compared to the avalanche of negative information and opinions presented about Mary. There

is ample testimony from contemporaries that Lincoln was occasionally flighty, oblivious, un-mannered, and coarse, all of which drove his wife to distraction and frustration. But little of that testimony is included in this book. There is obviously far more about Mary's failures as a spouse to censure than there is about Abraham, but the mere lip service to Lincoln as a poor husband without any real depth of detail does slightly vitiate Burlingame's stated objectivity in assessing the marriage. He clearly places the blame and the failure squarely on Mary's head without really giving Lincoln any accountability. While the conclusion is certainly accurate, it comes across as too protective of Abraham and too one-sided and vicious against Mary.

After 20 years of studying Mary Lincoln and writing or editing five books about her, I will admit that Burlingame's book has caused me to reassess my conclusions about the Lincoln marriage. I always believed the Lincolns loved each other deeply and were a perfect match, in which each balanced out the other's issues and shortcomings. After reading this book, however, I see that my interpretations about Mary and the Lincoln marriage may have been too generous. Lincoln certainly suffered more than I was willing to concede and, as journalist Oswald Garrison Villard once wrote, perhaps Mary "had more to do with the lines in Lincoln's face than all the cares of state."

Burlingame is correct in concluding that more objective biographical work needs to be undertaken about Mary Lincoln, and his conclusions as laid out in this book will stand the test of time. Like it or not (and Mary's defenders certainly will not), Burlingame has made a powerful case against Mary Lincoln and shown that her part in Abraham Lincoln's story was likely more damaging than it was beneficial.