

Review

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Donna McCreary. *Mary Lincoln Demystified: Frequently Asked Questions about Abraham's Wife* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2022). 329 pp.

Q. What is the concept of this book?

A. It's a question-and-answer book that distills the author's twenty years of experience in giving first-person historical presentations about Mary Lincoln.

From 1992 to 2012, Donna McCreary appeared before audiences as Mary Lincoln, in various one-actor shows that she had researched and written, as well as in tandem with Abraham Lincoln presenters. These shows were typically followed by question-and-answer sessions that gave some indication as to which issues aroused the most curiosity in connection with Mary Lincoln, at least among general audiences. *Demystifying Mary Lincoln* is a compilation of many of those questions (and answers) about Mary, organized to tell the story of Mary's life.

Q. So it's a biography in Q-and-A format?

A. Not entirely.

The first five chapters are arranged chronologically, but these are followed by five topical chapters that discuss Mary's sanity, her family, her relationships with African Americans, her personality, and how she has been remembered since her death.

Q. Let's start with the big question: What does McCreary say about Mary's sanity?

A. Legally, she was "insane" as determined by a court; medically, it's harder to tell.

McCreary concludes the chapter with a question as to whether historians will ever agree about Mary's mental health, and she answers it "Probably not." (142)

Q. That's not an especially satisfying answer. Does McCreary go into more detail?

A. Yes.

Mary Lincoln is the most polarizing figure in the Lincoln-verse, and how authors treat the issue of the "sanity trial" instigated by her son Robert tends to reveal where they stand, for or against. In her discussion of Mary's trial and subsequent institutionalization, McCreary is consistently sympathetic to her subject. At times she presents convincing evidence in Mary's favor. Answering a question about Mary's alleged purchase of 300 pairs of kid gloves early in 1865, McCreary draws on her experience of dressing as Mary to observe that these gloves were too thin to be laundered, making them essentially disposable. While shaking hands in a lengthy reception line, both she and her husband would go through multiple pairs of gloves in an evening. Thus, rather than an example of Imelda Marcos-like shopaholism, McCreary interprets Mary's purchase as a reasonable preparation for what she expected would be another four years of entertaining in the White House. Details like this, based on the author's research and experience as a historical performer, are one of the strengths of the book.

Q. How does the author defend her sympathetic portrayal of Mary against historians who view her less favorably?

A. She doesn't.

Where her research has uncovered factual errors in previous work, she is not shy about naming names, for example pointing out that Jean Baker's biography of Mary errs in the birth order of the Todd children. But on interpretative questions, she is content to express her views and say nothing about the contrary opinions of other writers. If any readers are disappointed in this book, it will be those looking for a new champion to enter the lists on behalf of Mary and to joust head-on with Michael Burlingame or Jason Emerson and their more critical perspectives. There's a question about the best and worst biographies of Mary Lincoln, so historiography isn't completely absent, but McCreary answers it briefly and doesn't elaborate on her judgments.

Q. So this is not an academic monograph seeking to shift the interpretive paradigm?

A. No, it's not aimed primarily at an academic audience . . .

... but that's not to say that scholars won't find value in it. McCreary's answers are supported by substantial research in primary and secondary sources. They don't offer new conclusions about their subject, but they excel at organizing and presenting known facts in a way that sometimes puts them in a new light. Her catalog of the workers known to have provided domestic labor in the Lincoln home in Springfield, for example, gives us at least a glimpse into the background and motivations of people who are normally presented solely for their anonymous testimony to Mary's poor management skills, rather than as individuals (many of them immigrants or African Americans) whose own abilities, or lack thereof, were a constant challenge to Mary in her role as homemaker, just as they were for other middle-class households in 19th-century America. Likewise, the discussion of Mary's evolving attitude toward African Americans, which McCreary presents as parallel to those of her husband, may not persuade those who believe that Mary never fully outgrew her upbringing as a Todd, but the listing of specific individuals and the circumstances under which they interacted with Mary is still a useful resource.

Q. Who then is the primary audience for this book?

A. Presumably, anyone with some curiosity about Mary Lincoln.

The strength of the Q-and-A format is that readers can dip into the book at whatever part interests them most, instead of having to read it from the start like a traditional narrative biography. This is good because the opening chapter, covering Mary's childhood, presumes a level of interest in Todd genealogy that few casual readers are likely to share. Did any real audience member ever ask a question like "What existing documents reveal the actual birth dates of the Todd children?" (8) Eventually, however, the author finds her voice, the questions flow more naturally, and readers will start to feel like they are witnessing a dialogue between an interested audience and an enthusiastic and very knowledgeable presenter.

Q. TL/DR.¹ Did you like it?

A. To answer with a question, What's not to like?

While those looking for a first book on the subject may want to start with one of the more traditional narrative biographies by Jean Baker or Catherine Clinton, readers already familiar with those works will find

1. Internet initialism for 'Too long, didn't read.'

this to be an updated, sympathetic take that complements rather than replaces those standards. Scholars will appreciate the topical organization, especially when looking for material to use in a lecture. The only readers who won't find what they are looking for will be those hoping the title is literally true and that the author has resolved all the mysteries of Mary Lincoln's complex personality. It's doubtful that anyone, not even Abraham, ever believed they had fully demystified Mary Lincoln, but in laying the most important questions before us and offering accessible and well-informed answers, Donna McCreary has done the next best thing.