

The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln. By Mark E. Neely, Jr., and R. Gerald McMurtry. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986. Pp. xiv, 203. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index. \$19.95.)

The story behind the writing of Mark E. Neely and R. Gerald McMurtry's *The Insanity File* is almost as fascinating as the details that the book reveals about Mary Todd Lincoln's involuntary civil commitment trial. Shortly before his death Robert Todd Lincoln Beckwith, the last surviving direct descendant of the Lincoln family, decided to make available to scholars the news clippings and legal briefs collected by his grandfather, Robert Todd Lincoln, and labeled "MTL Insanity Trial." Beckwith asked the well-known Lincoln scholars, Neely and McMurtry, to publish these materials in the hope that they would persuade readers to think more kindly of both his great-grandmother and his grandfather. Every researcher will identify with Neely and McMurtry's excitement, eloquently described in their preface, as they read through the long-hidden documents during predinner cocktails at Beckwith's Illinois farmhouse. That excitement served to sustain the two during the long months that followed when they found themselves scrambling to acquire expertise in areas of medical and legal history remote from their own training.

As a result, Neely and McMurtry's view of the Lincoln insanity trial considers not only the conflict between mother and son but also the intense nineteenth century debate about involuntary civil commitment laws and the value of institutional care for the mentally ill. The result is a book of interest to specialists in American history as well as to general readers fascinated by the tragic lives of the Lincoln family and in particular of the "pathetic remnant" (p. xiii) who survived the Civil War only to fall apart when, in 1875, Robert forced his mother's commitment to an Illinois insane asylum.

The most valuable part of this book is the insight it offers into Robert Lincoln, a rigid and not always likeable man but one who clearly agonized over his mother's unpredictable behavior and feared for her safety. Thus, the authors describe in much detail the reasons why he decided to commit his mother, and they defend the Illinois legal procedure under which she was committed. At the same time they admit that the relatively quick release of Mary Lincoln, under an "interdiction" that permitted outside supervision of her finances, was more appropriate than institutionalization.

An interesting complement to Neely and McMurtry's presentation is Jean H. Baker's biography, *Mary Todd Lincoln* (1987). Relying upon many of the same sources, Baker looks at the insanity trial from the perspective of the mother, not the son. Not surprisingly, she sees it somewhat differently than do Neely and



MARY TODD LINCOLN

As a widow Mary Todd Lincoln grew interested in spiritualism. This photograph with the ghostly hands of Abraham Lincoln on her shoulders stems from that interest. The precise origins of the photograph are unknown.

Courtesy Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum,
Fort Wayne, Indiana.

McMurtry. In the spring of 1875, as the tenth anniversary of her husband's death approached, Mary Lincoln suffered enormous depression and migraine headaches, for which she took doses of chloral hydrate large enough to explain at least some of her behavioral extremes. Even though Baker describes Mary Lincoln as "both unwilling victim and . . . an agent provocateur" (p. 332) during the months leading up to her trial, she remains highly critical of that trial, noting that the beleaguered woman was inadequately defended and that the doctors who pronounced on her health were Robert Lincoln's friends and had never personally examined her.

Both works conclude with negative comments on the inadequacy of nineteenth century institutional solutions to mental illness. Read together, they convey the essential fascination of the historian's task: the unraveling of puzzles to which there seem to be no end. Was Mary Todd Lincoln merely a sad victim of her son's (and the culture's) increasing intolerance of eccentricity? Did her depressions come dangerously close to threatening her life? How embarrassed was Robert Todd Lincoln by his mother's bizarre dress and fiscal irresponsibility? What emotional damages had he suffered from the tragic deaths of his father and three brothers? Readers interested in such questions will want to read both of these books.

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Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography. By Jean H. Baker. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987. Pp. xv, 429. Illustrations, notes, index. \$19.95.)

Unlike most women of her time, Mary Todd Lincoln looked at her life in terms of wins and losses and scored them both in bold relief. Unfortunately for her and those around her, the defeats greatly outnumbered the victories. An exceptional woman of many aspirations and one who enjoyed being different, Mary Lincoln became a victim of a series of personal tragedies or "abandonments" and an array of "destructive conventions of Victorian domesticity" (p. xv).

Perhaps Mary Lincoln's fascination with politics made her view her life in such an "unwomanly" way. In Lexington, Kentucky, as a girl, she had used politics to foster a relationship with her father; years later, in Springfield, Illinois, politics provided the background for an on-again-off-again courtship with Abraham Lincoln. Independent, educated, and articulate, Mary Lincoln often listened to long speeches on the courthouse square and regularly talked about issues in the offices of the Sangamon *Journal*. Before mar-