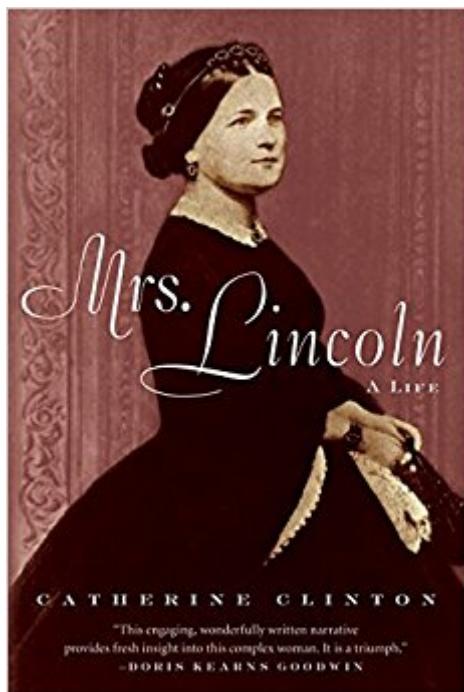


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# Mrs. Lincoln: A Life



## Synopsis

“This engaging, wonderfully written narrative provides fresh insight into this complex woman. It is a triumph.” Doris Kearns Goodwin Catherine Clinton, author of the award-winning *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom*, returns with *Mrs. Lincoln*, the first new biography in almost 20 years of Mary Todd Lincoln, one of the most enigmatic First Ladies in American history. Called “fascinating” by Ken Burns and “spirited and fast-paced” by the Boston Globe, *Mrs. Lincoln* is a meticulously researched and long overdue addition to the historical record. In the words of Pulitzer-Prize winning historian Joseph Ellis, *Mrs. Lincoln* “is distinctive for its abiding sanity, its deft and in-depth handling of the White House years, and for the consistent quality of its prose.”

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Book Description Abraham Lincoln is the most revered president in American history, but the woman at the center of his life, his wife, Mary, has remained a historical enigma. In this definitive, magisterial biography, Catherine Clinton draws on important new research to illuminate the remarkable life of Mary Lincoln, and at a time when the nation was being tested as never before. Mary Lincoln’s story is inextricably tied with the story of America and with her husband’s presidency, yet her life is an extraordinary chronicle on its own. Born into an aristocratic Kentucky family, she was an educated, well-connected Southern daughter, and when she married a Springfield lawyer she became a Northern wife—an experience mirrored by thousands of her countrywomen.

The Lincolns endured many personal setbacks— including the death of a child and defeats in two U.S. Senate races— along the road to the White House. Mrs. Lincoln herself suffered scorching press attacks, but remained faithful to the Union and her wartime husband. She was also the first presidential wife known as the "First Lady," and it was in this role that she gained her lasting fame. The assassination of her husband haunted her for the rest of her life. Her disintegrating downward spiral resulted in a brief but traumatizing involuntary incarceration in an asylum and exile in Europe during her later years. One of the most tragic and mysterious of nineteenth-century figures, Mary Lincoln and her story symbolize the pain and loss of Civil War America. Authoritative and utterly engrossing, Mrs. Lincoln is the long-awaited portrait of the woman who so richly contributed to Lincoln's life and legacy.

Questions for Catherine Clinton

Q: Why did you decide to write about Mrs. Lincoln in this book?

A: Of course, it was a daunting task to take on this project in the wake of so much new information on Lincoln and his world, and with the Lincoln Bicentennial looming on the horizon. But I knew that Mary Lincoln was being lost in the shuffle of the new Lincoln literature. With an outpouring of new work on Abraham Lincoln every year it's been over twenty years since the last biography of Mary. When it was written, we did not have the cache of new letters (uncovered by Jason Emerson) which showed Mary's state of mind during her incarceration. We also did not have the past quarter century of Civil War scholarship which has contextualized and expanded our appreciation of what it truly meant when families were divided by war.

Q: Was Lincoln's wife a southern sympathizer?

A: No, and this is one of the misconceptions I hope to counter in my study, although I do portray her as a daughter of the Bluegrass, and brought up to be a proper southern lady. However, she had always been unconventional--temperamental, articulate, not only better read than her husband (and conversing with diplomats on state occasions in French) but she had more than ten years of formal education. She also became a partisan abolitionist when he befriended Charles Sumner, and was opposed to anyone who advocated disunion. At the same time, when Elmer Ellsworth, the war's first casualty--shot while tearing down a rebel flag in Virginia in May 1861--was killed, his murderer was shot dead--a brother of a Dr. Jackson from her hometown of Lexington. So in this first armed encounter when Virginia seceded, the Lincolns mourned Ellsworth's passing, but Mrs. Lincoln could appreciate as well the sorrow of the Jacksons in Kentucky at losing a brother, a son, and the fratricidal nature of the conflict.

Q: So were the Lincolns racist as some modern critics have suggested?

A: I think both Abraham and Mary reflected the prejudices of their era, but not only the wealth of new work on race and gender over the past few decades has informed my approach in Mrs. Lincoln, but some of the real, human aspects of life in the White House were new to me.

Q:

How so? A: Mary Lincoln's relationship with the black women who were a part of the White House staff, as well as her crucial relationship with Elizabeth Keckly (whose biography appeared in 2003) needed a fresh approach. I used memoirs and interview material drawn from the lives of those who knew the Lincolns in the White House. I was especially impressed to discover that Abraham Lincoln, who doted on his sons, had taken his son Tad to the Slade house on Massachusetts Ave. N.W., where he might play with the African American children of his father's trusted aide, William Slade. So it was really these kind of details that I hope will bring both the Lincolns to life. Q: A lot of people want to know if Mrs. Lincoln was crazy? A: My degrees from Harvard and Princeton are not in medicine--so I cannot diagnose. I can say that I felt she did deteriorate mentally during her time in the White House and my study attempts to place into context some of her challenges and failings. But I also wanted to show her relationship with the press, her relationship with her children, and especially the many trials she faced as a widow...which is why I begin the book with Lincoln's assassination as the defining moment of her life. Q: Do you think Mary Lincoln could give any advice to Michelle Obama? A: Many of Lincoln's critics went after his wife to get at him--using the folk wisdom, if you want to destroy a house, set fire to the thatch. The wife of our 44th President has shown wit and humor and intellect that mirrors perhaps many attributes Mary Lincoln brought to the White House, but Michelle Obama has advantages that Mrs. Lincoln did not have. But the one thing I think the campaign has already taught our newest occupant of the White House is to not let those who hang on her every word and focus on fashion define her. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Any biographer of Mary Lincoln has a tough act to follow in Jean H. Baker's groundbreaking and definitive *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography*, published two decades ago and reissued in paperback in 2008. Queens University (Belfast) history professor Clinton (Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom) fails to rise to the occasion. For starters, the book seems to have no *raison d'être*: Clinton offers no revisionist interpretation and has uncovered no new sources. Add to this Clinton's annoying style, such as a penchant for ESP, narrating Mary Lincoln's thoughts through various key moments in her life, such as this upon the day in April, 1865, when her husband triumphantly visited the Confederate capital of Richmond: "Mary found a sense of serenity that was distinctly new and uncharacteristic ... she imagined that she might be reconciled with those alienated...." The author also too frequently paraphrases the contents of diaries and letters, without quoting them directly. Although Clinton's book provides an adequate summary of an important life, readers can find a far more than adequate rendition elsewhere. B&w illus. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a

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Very well written overall, and insightful, and I like the formatting. At times repetitive, with confusing phrasing, and some inaccurate or distorted information. But a needed addition to the field, more concise by means of drawing inferences and directing attention to key quotes, instead of just covering them all. Yet most of the inferences were not in any way a stretch but seemed dead on, so this wasn't a problem in the way it might have been. It made it a lot more entertaining and was refreshing to read. She connected a lot of dots and has a fun writing style.

Catherine Clinton has written the newest popular history of Mary Todd Lincoln (1818-82). While the book is not as well written as Jean H. Baker's older book on the Kentucky belle it is worth a read. Mary Todd Lincoln was born the daughter of a Lexington banker and businessman Robert Todd. As a child men like Henry Clay were guests in her mansion. Her family was large with many children produced by Todd and his two wives. Mary did not like her stepmother. She decided to leave Lexington for the frontier town of Springfield, Illinois to live with her sister Elizabeth who was married to Ninian Edwards son of a former governor of Illinois. Mary had been well educated, was fluent in French, enjoyed the poetry of Burns and the Romantics and knew her Shakespeare. She was raised Episcopal but would later join Presbyterian churches in Illinois and in Washington, D.C. Mary was five feet tall and weighed 120 pounds., She was acerbic, witty and hot blooded often throwing tantrums. She met Lincoln in Springfield and decided to wed the ill educated, rawboned complex Kentuckian. She and Abraham wed in November, 1842 in her sister Elizabeth's Springfield parlor. Both of the Lincolns were ambitious intellectuals interested in politics. Mary saw Lincoln serve in the Illinois House of Representatives, lose two races for the US Senate from Illinois and become a well to do lawyer in the eighth Illinois Circuit. The family was beset by tragedies. Mary saw her son Eddie die in 1850, Willie at the White House and in 1871 her son Tad who was only eighteen. She also saw her husband murdered before her eyes by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theatre on Good Friday 1865. Mary was the first president's wife to be known as "The First Lady." She is among the most controversial of all first ladies in league with such notable women as Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Rodham Clinton. She was hated and scorned by many during the Civil War who were cave dweller aristocrats in Washington. Among the reasons Mrs. Lincoln were loathed were these factors:1. She was a Southern woman thought by some to be a Confederate spy! Two of her half brothers died in Confederate Grey at Shiloh and Baton Rouge. Mary, however, was a staunch

Unionist who visited army hospitals to comfort the wounded. She supported the freeing of the slaves.2. Mary often sought to meddle in national politics to her husband's disgust. She was involved in the early release of Lincoln's speeches to the press and was abrasive in her treatment of other politicians, their wives and the spouses of leading Union generals. She hated Grant's wife Julia Dent Grant and younger and prettier women. She could be warm and loving but also a tempest when her dander was up. Nicolay and Hay the secretaries of Lincoln called her "The Hellcat!3. Mary was an inveterate shopaholic who spent wildly in New York at famous department stores such as A.T. Stewarts. She spent thousands on renovation of the White House.4. Mary was institutionalized in a genteel mental hospital following her husband's death. We cannot be sure but she did have moments when her behavior could be quite bizarre. She fell out with her Harvard educated oldest son Robert when he put her in the hospital. She hated Robert's wife Mary Harlan Lincoln and was estranged from her sole surviving son's wealthy family. Mary spent her last sad years as a traveler and resident in Europe especially in Pau France. She returned to America dying at the home of her sister Elizabeth in Springfield in 1882. This new biography is well researched and written. Clinton is good at exploring Victorian culture and the lives of women in nineteenth century America. She is also good in exploring the topic of spiritualism which attracted Mary's attention. It has never been easy to be a woman and Mary Lincoln lived a life of triumph and also tragedy. She was a bright person who was beaten by the forces of history which captured the lives of her husband and three of her sons. She deserves our pity and understanding.

I've always had a keen interest in Mary Lincoln because I believe she was the "woman behind the man" - especially at the beginning - I think she was a woman before her time - Each set of circumstances in her life seemed to sink her deeper into depression. When Lincoln was elected president, our country was preparing to enter it's darkest days - Mary Lincoln, unlike President's wives today, had no advisors or a team of public relations people guiding her every move, protecting her public image. When Lincoln was killed before her very eyes there were no therapists and Dr. Phil's to guide her through all her emotions - she was left to cope with all this on her own (and she did a terrible job of it too) I think Mary Lincoln had a lot of enemies who dedicated themselves to tarnishing her image in history - I believe in the end she was mentally disturbed having been isolated from her family and friends for years - I think she needed help - never got it - and declined to near insanity - all I can say is "poor thing" - it wouldn't have happed that way today... Loved this book - everyone should read this book - it is our history and very well written..

## An informative and engaging study of Mary Todd Lincoln

Since Tuesday this week was the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, this was my book of choice for the week. It is well written and is very insightful on what it was like to be the first lady during the Civil War. Both she and president Lincoln suffered terrible bouts of depression and who could blame them after losing 2 children. I followed up this read with a trip to the local cemetery to put flowers on the graves of 15 local men who served this country during the Civil War. I would recommend this book, *Mrs. Lincoln A Life* to anyone who enjoys history and is patriotic about all of our veterans.

*Mrs. Lincoln: A Life* is an interesting book that sheds light on the unknown life of Mary Todd Lincoln. It details the tragedies she endured through the deaths of her children and husband and her unhappy life in Washington D.C. society. Declared mentally incompetent by her only surviving son, Mrs. Lincoln's historical correspondence was lost, and the American people were denied much information about the interesting life of the wife of our most beloved U.S. president.

Very revealing. Enjoyed it immensely.

lovely book

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