BOOK REVIEWS


Justin G. Turner and his daughter-in-law, Linda Levitt Turner, form a perfect team to comment upon the life, and edit the letters, of Mary Todd Lincoln, letting her speak for herself in six hundred letters written between July 23, 1840, and March 21, 1882. Indeed, Fawn M. Brodie concludes in her introduction to the book that these "six hundred letters, many of them written in moments of desperation, can become an austere verbal portrait more authentic than biography."

"A Note on the Editors" is tucked in after the index of the book. Justin G. Turner, for over forty years, has collected manuscripts relating to American history, with Abraham Lincoln as his favorite. He has also published many monographs on his collection, worked in numerous historical groups, and has acted as an honorary member of the national Civil War Centennial Commission; currently he is consultant to the Manuscript Department of the library at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Linda Levitt Turner's deep interest in American history was nurtured at Bryn Mawr College where twice she won prizes for excellence in the field. A former book editor, she is now at work on a biography of Mary Lincoln.

In preparation for Mary Todd Lincoln, Her Life and Letters the Turners consulted many American libraries, historical societies, archives, autograph dealers and collectors, Sotheby Parke-Bernet, and letters published in scholarly journals. The good will and research of many people are represented in this thick volume.

It is difficult to decide which makes the stronger impact on the reader: the Turners' low-keyed introduction to each group of letters, in total effect creating a biography; or Mary Todd Lincoln's letters themselves, which have an emotional range from gaiety, compassion, gossip, vindictive fury, and shrewd and desperate planning, to hopeless melancholy. She needed psychiatric help, but there was none to be obtained in her era.

An early friend, John Conkling, wrote about Mary Lincoln: "She is the very creature of excitement you know, and never enjoys herself more than when in society and surrounded by a company of merry friends." She loved clothes and parties, was in many ways a typical, nineteenth-century Southern belle, but she was strong-minded,
possessing a wit that was often cutting. Since girlhood, she displayed an unladylike interest in politics and was encouraged by her politically minded father to speak up in public. Later, in Springfield, she found local and national politics the chief topic of conversation; as Mrs. Lincoln, she promoted his career. She was ahead of her time.

However, her outspokenness on politics created her first adverse newspaper publicity in New York on her first shopping trip for clothes to be worn in Washington. Reporters followed her about as she gave forth on politics and on things “hearsay or fragmentary” on possible appointments. Certainly William Seward would not have been pleased to find out through newspapers that Lincoln had finally decided to name him secretary of state due to “pressures.” Lincoln quickly learned to keep state affairs to himself. Moreover, Mary Lincoln tried to engineer appointments to office. In short, she was a pushy, aggressive woman. What city newspapers did not carry as inside stories, later to be picked up by small newspapers, Washington gossip spread swiftly, and she had few real friends. “The Vampyre press” pursued her almost to the end of her life.

Yet her hospital visiting during the war, which showed the compassionate, feminine side of her nature, was never reported in newspapers. And her letters could be tender, too, as when she wrote to Sarah Bush Lincoln, telling her of her stepson’s affection, and sending her a gift. Or her reassuring letter to Mrs. Agen, a soldier’s mother, that her son was getting well, signing the letter “with respect for the mother of the young soldier.”

At the outset of the war, Mrs. Lincoln was also in trouble with newspapers over exceeding her White House redecorating budget by $6,700. Reporters, of course, followed her shopping expeditions. Her husband was furious with her for overrunning the budget “for flub dubs . . . when the soldiers cannot have blankets.”

Criticism also arose over her private social affairs at the White House or at the Soldiers Home, the president’s Camp David. When Lincoln worked far into the night, she often had a salon, which had some unfortunate consequences in newspaper stories. HenryWikoff gained her confidence, then betrayed it by sending inside reports of her social gatherings to the New York Herald; and she was also implicated when Wikoff received parts of Lincoln’s annual message to Congress in 1861 from a White House employee and had prematurely published it in his paper. There was also in the group Oliver S. Halstead, Jr. (“Pet”), of a prominent family, who was an effective
lobbyist for munitions manufacturers. But the majority of the men were persons of integrity, such as Senators Charles Sumner and Ira Harris, and the poet-journalist, N. P. Willis. All the women were of impeccable character.

As for her husband, Mary Lincoln was extremely proud of him, concerned about his health and relaxation, and loved compliments from him. Lincoln was a patient, kind husband. Both of them were devoted parents, overindulgent by nineteenth-century standards. Later, Mary Lincoln wrote of her son Tad: "His dark loving eyes — watching over me, remind me so much of his dearly beloved father." Lincoln was always under great stress when his wife was ill. In her widowhood, Mary Lincoln's love for Tad and Robert was almost crushing.

Suddenly, to the stress of life in the White House, war worries, the whispers that she was a secret Southern sympathizer, the criticism of the Vampyre press, was added the death of a second son in the family, that of Willie in 1862. This time, she barely averted a nervous breakdown.

The next tragedy in Mary Lincoln's life was the assassination of her husband at Ford's Theatre, April 14, 1865.

Then followed the rigorous ritual of Victorian widowhood; the reader pictures her sitting at her writing table for hours each day, smothered in layers of black crepe, writing endlessly on black-bordered stationery, reading and clipping news of happenings in Washington, reading the flood of books that were printed about her husband, and finally winning the battle with the Springfield Monument Committee over Lincoln's place of burial. And the reader sees the widow in small rooms in Germany while Tad attended school, writing "campaign" letters to friends for help in securing a pension, finally granted by a grudging Congress.

When her creditors pressed her for payment on long overdue accounts for clothing and jewelry, conservatively estimated at $20,000, she naturally tried to keep the news from her son Robert, now a young attorney. In her desperation, she commissioned Mrs. Elizabeth Keckley, her colored seamstress at the White House, to sell her White House finery. Result: the Vampyre press had a field day over the "Old Clothes Scandal." Robert found out through the newspapers.

Mary Lincoln's two trips to France, Germany, and England did her little good. She was like the poet Shelley, who said that the skies were blue in Italy, but that he was the same old Shelley.
Reports of William H. Herndon's lectures on Lincoln further disturbed her mental balance, especially the legend of Ann Rutledge as Lincoln's sweetheart, and of Lincoln's lack of religious belief. Tad's death next drove her into highly erratic behavior, so that Robert had her committed to a private sanitarium in Batavia, Illinois.

Her final days were spent in Springfield at the home of her sister, Mrs. Ninian Edwards. Mary Lincoln was almost blind, partially crippled, and still fearful of poverty. There were sixty-four trunks in a nearby room; her estate was valued at $90,000. What a blessing death was. A novel with a heroine suffering as many trials would never pass the first reading in a publisher's office, but they happened to Mary Todd Lincoln.

Pittsburgh

Florence C. McLaughlin


In this fine biography of one of America's most zealous reformers Clarke Chambers has not only revealed much about the impact of industrialization but has also illuminated the origins and development of welfare liberalism in the United States. Born in Michigan in 1879, Paul Kellogg reacted emotionally to urban America, quickly developing into a journalist deeply interested in public policy and social problems. In 1907, five years after joining the staff of the New York Charities Organization Society, Kellogg began a thorough investigation of industrial society in Pittsburgh; an investigation which discovered chronic unemployment, labor exploitation, occupational disease and accidents, tenement housing, and grinding, endemic poverty. Through the pages of a new journal, The Pittsburgh Survey, Kellogg publicized those discoveries, in rich and crusading detail, to the social work and philanthropic community in the United States. In the process he not only set the tone for a generation of social-work journalism, but also helped transform the whole field of social work from its traditional attachment to administrative philanthropy to its contemporary, professional concern for the social and economic dilemmas of industrial poverty.

During the course of his long life (1879-1958), Kellogg embraced and campaigned for virtually every major social reform associated with