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Mrs. Lincoln

MARY TODD LINCOLN: *Her Life and Letters*, by Justin G. Turner & Linda Levitt Turner; Introduction by Fawn M. Brodie (Knopf, \$15).

By Paul M. Angle

PERHAPS the outstanding feature of American historical scholarship in the last 30 or 40 years has been the collecting and publishing of the letters and papers of the nation's outstanding leaders. Thus we have, complete or in progress, the letters and papers of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Lincoln, Grant, Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson, not to mention a good many others who did not achieve the lofty eminence of these men. But as far as I know, Mary Todd Lincoln is the first person who did not influence history to be distinguished by a compendium of this kind.

The editors explain their reason for devoting years to the making of this book:

"In letters written over four decades, she (Mary Lincoln) has left behind a record of her life more trustworthy than autobiography, more revealing in its way than a diary. When this unwitting self-portrait is set in historical perspective . . . we begin to glimpse the truth about Abraham Lincoln's wife and in so doing add a new dimension to



Mary Todd Lincoln in 1862,
by Mathew Brady.

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our understanding of Lincoln."

MORE THAN 600 letters, half of them published here for the first time, document this assertion. They cover 42 years, and range from the gossipy effusions of a young woman to bitter denunciations of her own son and daughter-in-law. Nearly all attest to the recurring tragedies of her life: the death of a son in the White House, the assassination of her husband, the death of another son just as he approached maturity, her "poverty," and her commitment to a mental institution.

Apologists for Mrs. Lincoln have claimed that she was misunderstood. The fact of the matter, as her letters make clear, is that in her lifetime too many people understood her all too well. In the White House she tried to secure places and contracts for her friends. She fell prey to sycophants, often disreputable. She tried to influence Cabinet appointments, and publicly and bitterly criticized officials high in her husband's confidence.

She plunged wildly into debt, usually for clothes, and then importuned everyone she could think of for money, either as gifts or loans. In a word, even before she slipped away from normality, she was a foolish, irresponsible woman.

But she loved her husband and children, and — despite allegations to the contrary — she was intensely loyal to the Union. Where

the American people failed was not in understanding, but in charity and compassion. Long before it did, the Congress could well have afforded to give her the small pension she sought with so much intransigence, forgiving her frailties because of the paramount service her husband had rendered to the nation.

IN PRESENTING these letters the editors have performed their function superbly. Their commentary, smooth and judicious, places all the letters in their proper historical setting, and their identification of the persons named in this voluminous correspondence is faultless. In all the annotation I find only one flaw: they perpetuate the discredited myth that Abner Doubleday had something to do with the development of baseball.

Readers will agree with the summation of the editors: "The chief interest of Mary Lincoln's letters lies in their self-portrait of a woman who had the intelligence, energy, and compassion to have been ranked among the outstanding first ladies of the land, an anomaly in her era, but who came to the White House at the most tragic hour in a nation's history and was destroyed by the experience."

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