

## The Woman In His Life

**MARY LINCOLN:** Biography of a Marriage. By Ruth Painter Randall. Illustrated. 555 pp. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. \$5.75.

By PAUL M. ANGLE

SOME years ago the Alton Railroad put two new streamliners into service between Chicago, Springfield and St. Louis. They were called, and still are, the "Abraham Lincoln" and the "Ann Rutledge." The railroad management (since changed) considered the name of Mary Todd Lincoln unworthy of being ranked with that of her husband. In this, beyond question, it represented the sentiment of most Americans.

No wonder, then, that a touch of the advocate characterizes Ruth Painter Randall's approach in this biography. Mrs. Lincoln, she contends, deserves "a new trial before the court of historical investigation." It is clear that Mrs. Randall, wife of the Lincoln scholar J. G. Randall, intends to reverse the accepted verdict.

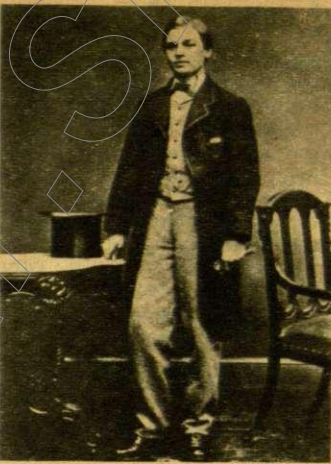
And why not? In the twenty-five years that followed Lincoln's death his former law partner, William H. Herndon, drew the portrait of Mrs. Lincoln which the world—or most of it—has since accepted. Ann Rutledge, Herndon proclaimed, was the only woman Lincoln ever loved. Mary Lincoln became his wife only to spite him, and that because he had publicly humiliated her by not appearing when their wedding was to have taken place. Ever afterward, partly through vindictiveness and partly because of her vile temper, she made their marriage unbroken hell.

Mrs. Randall, of course, is not the first biographer to challenge the Herndon interpretation. Critic after critic has pointed out the flimsy character of the evidence supporting both the Ann Rutledge romance and the story of the missing bridegroom, and today no serious student puts credence in either episode. And five years ago David Donald, in "Lincoln's Herndon," punched so many holes in Herndon's reputation for veracity that his word will never again be accepted without corroborative

**MRS. RANDALL'S** real contribution, therefore, is not the demolition of the Herndon portrait so much as it is the feat of burying it under an abundance of contrary evidence, either new or relatively unknown. She is the first to make extensive use of Noah Brooks' letters to The Sacramento Union, of the papers of Benjamin B. French (Superintendent of Public Buildings in Lincoln's Administration), of pertinent documents in the National Archives and of hundreds of Mrs. Lincoln's own letters.

From these and familiar

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The Lincoln children: Robert, Willie

sources Mrs. Randall establishes certain fundamental facts. First among these is the certainty that Mrs. Lincoln and her husband held each other in deep affection. (Be it remembered that one of the synonyms of "affection" is "love.") In the entire record there is no evidence that Abraham Lincoln had the slightest emotional attachment to any other woman, but there is abundant evidence that he was inseparably linked by deep feeling to his wife.

The second fact is that for many years Mary Todd Lincoln was a woman who deserved to hold a strong man's affection— attractive, intelligent, well-educated for her time, a conscientious mother, a devoted wife. And the third fact is that sometime during Lincoln's Presidency—perhaps even before it—she showed signs of mental illness that became progressive-

ly worse until she crossed the line between normality and irresponsibility.

Mrs. Randall softens this third conclusion by contending that outside the area of her irrationality—chiefly money—Mrs. Lincoln was a normal woman. One wonders. One wonders, also, whether all readers will agree with certain other judgments of Mrs. Randall's. When Lincoln, during his service in Congress, wrote this passage: "All the house—or rather, all with whom you were on decided good terms—send their love to you; the others say nothing," was it only to "tease" his wife about her shortcomings?

**W**HEN, about the same time, he answered a letter intimating that she wanted to return to Washington by asking: "Will you be a good girl in all things,

1953

wife

1953



Illustrations from "Mary Lincoln" and Tad.

The daguerreotypes of Mary and Abraham Lincoln reproduced above were taken when they had been married several years. Robert Todd Lincoln wrote that the picture of his father was "one of a pair" and that they "were in all probability taken during my father's single term in Congress (1847-1849)." "The daguerreotype was on the walls of a room in my father's house from my earliest recollection as a companion picture to that of my mother, and always known as such, and after my father's death they were carefully preserved by my mother."



if I consent?" was his question no more than "a gentle, paternal reference to Mary's difficult temperament?"

The Lincolns' letters, Mrs. Randall believes, give an epitome of their married life. "Every element is contained in them: mutual interest in his work and hers, feminine coquetry met with humoring flattery, tender longing for each other. The wife's two worst failings are suggested, her irresponsibility as to money and her difficulty in getting along with people, and the husband's mention of these weaknesses shows his light, paternal way of dealing with them. There is a mutual rare devotion to and enjoyment of their children. This is evidence of a happy marriage that will hold in any court of law, or historical investigation, where theories based on hear-

say and gossip will be stricken from the record."

One cannot blink the fact—and certainly Mrs. Randall does not—that Mary Lincoln was often a difficult woman, and too frequently an incredibly foolish one. She indulged in fits of hysteria; she was unreasonably jealous; she was both niggardly and extravagant. In the White House she tried repeatedly to meddle with appointments, formed violent dislikes, pushed forward favorites, interfered in public affairs that were not her concern, and spoke and wrote incautiously. For history's unfavorable verdict she was at least partly responsible.

However, to overemphasize these failings is to perpetuate the injustice of which Mrs. Randall rightly complains. If, in redressing the wrong, she has tipped the scales a little in the other direction, should one cavil?

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