

# Four Little Lincolns

LINCOLN'S SONS. By Ruth Painter Randall. Illustrated. 373 pp. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. \$5.

By ISHBEL ROSS

**A**BRAM LINCOLN'S four sons, two of whom died in childhood, one in his late teens and the fourth at the age of 83, are portrayed with convincing fidelity by Ruth Painter Randall in her new contribution to the cumulative lore on this rare family group. She found that Lincoln, the father, "firmly refused to take a back seat" when she tried to focus strictly on the children and subordinate their parents. But the glimpses she gives of him in this intimate family role add to the firm biographical texture and historical value of "Lincoln's Sons." This is a welcome supplement to Mrs. Randall's earlier book, "Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage."

Most of the familiar anecdotes, carefully weighed for their authenticity, are retold. Much that is new is added, particularly in the case of Robert, who alone lived long enough to demonstrate the ultimate consequences of being the son of Abraham Lincoln. The author's major achievement in this book is her portrait of Robert, the son most alien to his father. She defines a sensitive man bedeviled rather than blessed in his ancestry. Discounting William H. Herndon's estimate of him as "little, mean, malicious, pig-headed, silly, cold



Lincoln and Tad, five days before the assassination.

and a damned fool," she views him as modest, conscientious, loyal, honorable and deeply sensitive, a man "miscast in the role of his father's son," his entire existence conditioned by having "a shadow and a glare always upon him."

Some of Mrs. Randall's conclusions about Robert may be open to argument. Since no historian has trailed down his papers, the final appraisal has yet to be made of Abraham Lincoln's first-born, the aloof son who made no response to his father's encompassing humanity while he was alive. More a Todd than a Lincoln, he seemed to his father to be "one of the little rare-ripe sort, that are smarter at about 5 than ever after." But Robert's worldly success was considerable. He died a millionaire and a respected public figure who had served his country as Minister to Great Britain and as Secretary of War. His own embittered view of his appointments was that they came to him because he was his father's son.

**R**OBERT was the only one of his children whom Lincoln ever spanked. At the age of 17 he made his father as angry as he ever was in his life by mislaying the gripsack that held his first Inaugural Address. When he announced he was going to Harvard, Lincoln remarked: "If you do, you should learn more than I ever did, but you will never have so good a time." Robert's footnote on this is revealing: "That is the only advice I had from my father as to my career." He sometimes jested that his father might never have become President had he not flunked his entrance examinations to Harvard on his first try. Concerned about his son, Lincoln traveled East, com-

binning a fatherly mission with the speech at Cooper Union that sparked his nomination.

In spite of his priggish ways and the early lineaments of a snob, Robert gratified the President by emerging from college a "very decent fellow." Mrs. Randall traces with illuminating detail the searing effect on Robert of the biographies that exposed family history, the false and the true; of his mother's growing irrationality and his suffering in having her declared insane; of the hostility and misunderstanding he encountered because he was so unlike his father. As time went on he became morbidly averse to family revelation of any kind.

He ran down every slur on his father's memory that he could, but added nothing personally to the total picture of Abraham Lincoln's life, aside from the priceless boon of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collections of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln finally released to the Library of Congress. Mrs. Randall strongly suspects that he burned a trunkful of letters from Lincoln to his wife. But his "love and veneration for his father grew until it was a marked characteristic in his later life."

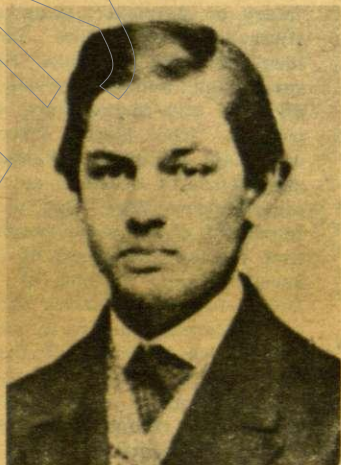
Even at the end things were different with Robert. His tomb is at Arlington, while the other Lincoln sons are buried with their parents at Springfield. Little Eddie died at the age of 3, and so never became a White House personality. But Willie and Tad are shown as national pets, romping around against the great backdrop of the Civil War and their father's omniscient figure. Lincoln is appraised as a "resourceful, interesting, and comforting father" who not only enjoyed the boys' horseplay but egged them on.

Thus Tad could and did break

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Willie Lincoln



Robert Lincoln

Photographs from "Lincoln's Sons."

Miss Ross is the author of "Proud Kate," a biography of the daughter of Salmon P. Chase, and other books.



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up his father's chess game by kicking over the table, invaded Cabinet meetings, hammered nails through costly carpets into the White House floors, set up a gingerbread stand on the portico, jangled the bell system and armed the staff with guns, waved the Confederate flag behind his father's back, swung a ham in the midst of silken crinolines and stripped Mr. Watt's strawberry beds of the berries he had forced for a state dinner. But Tad could always "light up the lantern" in his father's face and William H. Crook, one of the President's bodyguards, said of him: "I believe he was the best companion Mr. Lincoln ever had—one who always understood him, and whom he always understood."

Willie is sketched as the thoughtful, balanced son who seemed to have the most promise of the four Lincoln boys. The author suggests that he reasoned like his father—well and slowly. She traces the devastating effect of his death on his parents and the gradual disintegration of Mary Todd Lincoln under national and family stress. But the luminous shine remains on the father, although she finds his excessive indulgence of his sons "the one thing on which the most reasonable Mr. Lincoln was not exactly reasonable." Mrs. Randall makes no attempt to appraise the Lincolns as parents in the light of present-day scientific theories. She lets the facts speak for themselves, and they speak eloquently.

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