

Review Essay

The Celebrity Son

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Jason Emerson. *Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. Pp., 638.

How hard was it for Robert Todd Lincoln—oldest son of the great president who won the Civil War, ended slavery, and today tops most polls as most admired leader in American history—to make a mark in life as anything except being his father’s son? Pretty darn hard.

If we remember Robert today at all, it is usually for his quirky record of attracting bad luck. Robert had the distinction of being present for all three presidential assassinations of the nineteenth century: He was brought to Ford’s Theatre the night in 1865 his father was shot by John Wilkes Booth. He was at the Washington, D.C., train station the 1881 morning that President James A. Garfield, whom he served as secretary of war, was shot by Charles Guiteau. And in 1901 Robert was nearby again, attending the Buffalo Centennial Exhibition, when assassin Leon Czolgosz put a fatal bullet into President William McKinley.

That wasn’t all. After his father’s assassination, it fell on Robert Lincoln to care for his mother. It was Robert who had to deal with Mary Lincoln’s worsening mental condition and ultimately bear public scorn for placing her temporarily in an asylum, an act for which she never forgave him. A few years later, Robert found himself opposing Booker T. Washington, the leading African American advocate of the era, over poor treatment of African American railroad employees under Robert’s management, and then also opposing Theodore Roosevelt over his progressive New Democracy campaign in 1912. Add to this that Robert counseled railroad magnate George Pullman during the bloody Pullman Palace Car Company Strike in 1894, and it is no wonder many historians see Robert not only eclipsed by his famous father but as a favorite family villain.

There was another side, though. Robert Lincoln, despite these travails, rose to become one of the great men of late-nineteenth century America: captain of industry, accomplished lawyer, secretary of war,

minister to Great Britain, political figure, and stalwart keeper of his father's legacy.

Jason Emerson, a prolific Lincoln scholar, has produced a fine new biography in which he argues the positive side, and in doing so raises a deeper point: How should we judge children of celebrities or famous politicians, living under the burden of publicity, trying to make their own way, and constantly being measured against unrealistic expectations of matching their parents' signature achievements?

In this deeply researched and engagingly written book, Emerson makes a strong case that Robert Lincoln, son of the most famous president of all, was no villain and, in fact, was a fine person in his own right. The case has gaps; Robert falls short of being a "giant" on many scores. But it is a compliment to Emerson as a writer that he makes the shades of gray come to light so clearly.

What makes Robert Lincoln so interesting is not any special "greatness" but, rather, his normalcy. Emerson paints the image of a conventional man in remarkable circumstances. Toward the end of his book, he says this: "The truth is that had Robert Lincoln not been the son of Abraham Lincoln, his achievements today would be studied by schoolchildren along with other captains of industry such as Carnegie, Rockefeller, Morgan and Pullman." Of course, had Robert not been Abraham Lincoln's son, none of his accomplishments would have existed. It was the opportunities created by being his father's son that shaped Robert's life at every turn, and the resulting differences make for a compelling story.

How different were they? Abraham Lincoln grew up dirt poor in a log cabin, born in 1809 to settler parents clearing frontier land in backwoods Kentucky. By the time he became father to his first son Robert, however, Abraham was in his mid-thirties, a rising lawyer in bustling Springfield, Illinois, happy to give his son the advantages he never enjoyed. Whereas Abraham Lincoln taught himself through constant reading and study and built his legal career scratching for clients and riding the judicial circuit, he sent his son Robert to two of the finest boarding schools in America—New Hampshire's Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard University—where Robert bonded with his wealthy classmates and grew to assume his high station in life.

Then there was the generational distance. Abraham Lincoln's character, intellect, and attitudes all were shaped by the great conflicts sweeping America in the 1840s and 1850s: the struggle over slavery, the emergence of Republicanism, and the advent of Civil War. Lincoln, a man burning with both ambition and idealism, played a leading role in each. Robert, on the other hand, was just seventeen years old when

his father was elected president. As a child, Robert was raised mostly by his mother, while his father spent weeks at a time traveling, either giving political speeches or riding the judicial circuit.

Robert largely missed his father's 1860 campaign for president. He had started school at Exeter in June 1859 and finished in June 1860, shortly after his father won the Republican nomination. Rather than coming home, Robert decided to spend that summer in New England before entering Harvard in the fall. Robert certainly followed the campaign, but from a distance. He enjoyed the attention of being the candidate's son and happily attended local speeches and events. The East Coast press dubbed him the "Prince of Rails" after Lincoln's own "rail splitter" campaign motif. But beyond that, Robert lived his own life.

The one time in 1860 that Robert did spend time with his father only dramatized their growing distance. In February 1860, early in his presidential bid, Abraham Lincoln visited Exeter as part of a political speaking tour that included his famous address at New York City's Cooper Union. He took his son to dinner and brought him along for a few days on the road; then Robert gave his dad a tour of the Exeter campus. But the capstone of the visit was Lincoln's speech at Exeter in front of Robert and his classmates. Emerson describes in nice detail the "shock and even embarrassment" among Robert's Exeter friends, Eastern snobs *extraordinaire*, at first seeing Robert's frontier father. They cringed at Abe Lincoln, his "ill-kempt and uncouth exterior," his "lankness of stature," and "occasional uncouth posture or gesture." His "neckwear was all awry," said one student, and "he sat somewhat bent in the chair, and altogether presented a very remarkable, and, to us, disappointing appearance" (45-46).

It was only after the elder Lincoln started to speak that the students realized they were dealing with a man of intelligence. Said one: "There was no more pity for our friend Bob; we were proud of his father." This was Robert Lincoln's new social milieu.

Robert traveled home to Springfield after the election to share the adventure of the family's trip to Washington, D.C., in March 1861 for Lincoln's inauguration. This was a dangerous journey that included an assassination plot against the president-elect, plus a tense stand-off for Robert with an ugly mob that surrounded their train cars in Baltimore at one point and threatened violence. Robert made it to Washington and attended the swearing in, but then hurried back to Harvard to miss most of the Civil War.

Though eighteen years old in August 1861, Robert failed to join the Union army, and there was no shortage of newspaper criticism over

his absence as the great bloodbath battles of the Civil War unfolded in 1862 and 1863. Emerson makes clear that this was not Robert's fault. Robert asked to go, but, embarrassingly for him, his mother refused to let him enlist, and his father agreed. Abraham and Mary Lincoln had enough stress facing them in the White House during those years without also having a son in uniform being targeted by Confederates. Robert mostly stayed away from Washington as the war dragged on. Often, on school breaks, he would meet his mother in New York City or Long Branch, New Jersey, lessening his time at the White House. "I was very little in Washington while [my father] was there," he wrote a friend many years later (80).

But to his credit, Robert kept pressing his desire for military service, and finally, in January 1865, his father agreed. By then the war was drawing to a close, and Robert had already graduated Harvard and finished a year of law school. Lincoln privately asked his commanding general, Ulysses S. Grant, to find a relatively safe spot for his son: "I do not wish to put him in the ranks," he wrote Grant. "Could he, without embarrassment to you, or detriment to the service go into your military family in some nominal rank?"

Grant delivered, and Robert arrived on the front in February 1865 as a captain assigned to General Grant's immediate staff—one of the most coveted assignments in the military. He didn't see much fighting, but, being a Grant aide, he managed a ringside seat for one of the great events of the era, Robert E. Lee's April 1865 surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. This was a moment of jubilant relief for most Americans. But Robert, who got to enjoy the glory without much of the gore, later described it with striking emotional distance: "As I recall the scene now, it appeared to be a very ordinary transaction. . . . It seemed just as if I had sold you a house and we had but to pass the titles and other conveyances" (98).

Robert's real adulthood began the following week in Washington, D.C., when he arrived home just in time for the terrible shock of his father's assassination. The next morning Robert found himself responsible for leading the family—his bereaved mother and sickly younger brother—while wanting finally to start his own life and career. Robert could count on help from a galaxy of Lincoln family friends, but he decided to settle in Chicago, an arm's-length distance from the family's roots in Springfield, Illinois, and far from Washington, D.C. Here he would hang his shingle and make his own way.

As a lawyer Robert did well from the start. He was a good craftsman with a level head that clients appreciated. He specialized at first in insurance and real estate and soon branched out. But the Lincoln

name followed him everywhere. He resisted public life, but people never failed to mention him for opportunities. The special doors open to the son of the Great Martyred President became almost impossible to avoid.

For instance, when Ohio Congressman James Garfield became president in 1881, it was Robert T. Lincoln's name that bubbled up as a natural pick for Garfield's cabinet. Why? Robert, then thirty-seven years old, had little to offer on his own. He had scant political background, had done little work for Garfield's campaign, and had no government experience. Robert had not even asked for a Washington job; he was happily busy raising his three children and building his private legal practice. But recommendations came in from such Republican luminaries as ex-President Grant and U.S. senators John Logan and Donald Cameron, and Garfield himself saw the benefit of having a genuine Lincoln on his team. So Robert, who had served just three months in the military on General Grant's staff in 1865, became secretary of war.

Once in the job, he performed well. Contemporaries called him the "best War Secretary since Jeff Davis," and he kept the job until 1885 before returning to Chicago. The revolving door turned again a few years later when newly elected President Benjamin Harrison in 1889 decided that he too wanted a genuine Lincoln on his team. So he named Robert as American Minister to the Court of Saint James in London. Robert turned in another solid, competent performance, though saddened by the loss of his only son, sixteen-year-old Jack, who died in London of infection after a long, painful illness.

Unlike his father, though, Robert had little passion for government. After leaving London in 1893, he returned to Chicago and his law practice, now with the kind of national reputation that drew big-money clients. About that time a journalist described Robert this way: "The son [of Lincoln] is a hard, matter-of-fact man in the extreme. . . . His eyes are dark and piercing. He looks like a typical Chicago board of trade man" (344).

At fifty years old, having paid his dues to public service, Robert now felt free to pursue what he really enjoyed . . . business. One of his biggest clients was George Pullman, founder of the Pullman Palace Car Company, and the great opportunity of Robert's life came in 1897 when, upon Pullman's death, the Pullman board of directors named Robert the company's new president. This placed Robert at the helm of one of America's great corporations and, unlike his government jobs, Robert relished it. In pure business terms—the kind he valued—he grew the company's profits every year while in charge except one, 1908, an aberration caused by the financial panic of 1907.

That Robert's interest in money contrasted so sharply with his father's famous idealism drew quick notice from critics happy to denigrate the son. "It seems strange to me that he should consider the presidency of a private corporation, above the Presidency of the greatest of all Republics," one wrote. "How unlike his father!" (348). And with Robert in a position of actual power, the contrasts became even more stark.

Rather than Abraham Lincoln's groundbreaking egalitarian views on race and free labor in the 1850s, Robert's attitudes in the 1890s toward his company employees, white and black alike, came straight from the nineteenth-century paternalism of the moneyed class. "Robert's correspondence and papers show that while he was a good and decent man who cared about the health and well-being of his employees, he was still upper management and a man of business," Emerson explains.

As such, Robert despised labor unions. He learned the anti-union game early, serving as outside counsel to company president George Pullman in 1894 at the height of the notorious Pullman strike, an extravaganza of unprovoked violence and government intervention to crush an early attempt at employee collective bargaining. On the positive side, Emerson demonstrates that Robert played no direct role in the episode's worst abuses. Robert's major contribution was helping George Pullman avoid testifying in the 1895 conspiracy trial of the railroad union leaders, including future Socialist presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, who was represented by lawyer Clarence Darrow. But Robert had no problem with Pullman's basic approach—the use of federal troops to crush the strike—and thereafter would insist on the "freedom" of large corporations to run their own affairs. As Emerson puts it, "Union busting was a policy created by George Pullman in the wake of the 1894 strike and one that Robert Lincoln supported and continued" (365).

This same anti-labor, pro-corporate attitude would lead Robert in 1912 to publicly blast Theodore Roosevelt for trying to link his New Nationalism ideas—essentially using federal power to protect citizens by regulating corporations on issues like safe food and child labor—to the Great Emancipator. "I am not only impatient but indignant that President Lincoln's words and plain views should be perverted and misapplied before trusting people into support of doctrines which I believe he would abhor if living." Really? Abraham Lincoln would "abhor" strong government to protect the weak? (397)

Then there was the matter of race. Southern states began passing Jim Crow laws in 1900 that, among other things, would require Pullman passenger cars to segregate while on Southern soil. The Pullman

Company had never before allowed its cars to be segregated and prided itself on its African American porters. Booker T. Washington, the country's premier African American leader at the time, wrote multiple letters to Robert asking him, as Pullman president, to resist, or at least speak publicly against the new threat. Certainly, as son of Abraham Lincoln, Robert's moral impact could have been decisive. But he did nothing. Said Booker T. Washington: "If he would just stand up straight there would be little trouble . . . George Pullman let the world understand that no discrimination was to be tolerated, consequently there was practically no trouble while he lived" (367).

Perhaps Robert Lincoln was no racist, at least by 1900s standards. But he was no hero either. As the critic said, "How unlike his father!"

The one score on which Emerson shows Robert Lincoln as particularly sympathetic and quite admirable, though, is unexpected—the controversy over his mother's mental health. Today we are increasingly sensitive to the heartbreaking problems faced by adult children caring for aging parents, especially parents suffering debilitating physical or mental declines. The pain and guilt of forcing a parent to surrender his or her freedom and move into a nursing home or treatment facility can be traumatic. Robert had the worst of all worlds: having to make this hard decision about his mother in the glare of publicity and self-serving political sniping.

Mary Lincoln had always been what we today would call "high maintenance"—personally stingy with money but extravagant in tastes, padding expense accounts even as First Lady, and prone to shopping binges, constantly complaining about money and ingrate people, and so on. Mary's "egregious emotionalism" and "overwrought show of Victorian mourning," as Emerson describes it, caused her to be bedridden during repeated arguments over treatment of her husband's body after his death. By 1875 her outbursts, inability to care for herself, negligence with money, and unstable emotional state reached crisis levels. Robert sought advice of family friends and medical professionals, then took the hard, painful step of legally committing her for treatment. Mary resisted and soon found allies to plead her case, not just in court but in the newspapers, attacking her son and rubbing salt in the emotional wound. She was released after a few months and ultimately toned down her excesses.

It is easy to criticize children of celebrity parents for failing to live up to their parents' often impossibly high standards, or to dislike them for having advantages in life they never earned. Emerson, in his new book, presents a Robert Lincoln who deserves respect for being his own person, honest, capable, and able to excel despite his famous

name. Is it Robert's fault that his talents were more as technocrat or corporate executive rather than as political leader like his father? Is it fair to measure one against the other? As Emerson puts it, Robert "[w]as, in fact, exactly the type of man his father had hoped he would become: successful, respected, wealthy, and with a happy and loving family. What's more, the son had earned it all on his own initiative and notwithstanding his illustrious parentage."

We will never know what kind of person Abraham Lincoln himself might have become after leaving the White House had John Wilkes Booth not shot him in 1865. Abraham Lincoln was far less popular while alive, as dramatized in the 2012 novel *The Impeachment of Abraham Lincoln* by Stephen L. Carter. But given his chance to excel in the national spotlight during the crucible of Civil War, the elder Lincoln used it to accomplish great things for the country.

Robert, too, as Abraham's son, had opportunities to make a special contribution to the country. What did he do with them? Is it enough that he lived a responsible life, did quality work for his clients and as a government official, raised a close family, protected his father's legacy, and made money for the Pullman stockholders? Did being the son of Abraham Lincoln raise the bar for him?

Robert lived long enough to attend the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial on the Washington, D.C., Mall in 1922. By then he was an old man of seventy-nine years. Whether Robert, the president of the Pullman Palace Car Corporation, was the best representative for the legacy of his father Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator Who Saved the Union, is a debate for the ages. Emerson has given us a fascinating portrait of the son living under the shadow of the father and managing to be his own person.