



## **Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln**

*Jason Emerson*

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Although he was Abraham and Mary Lincoln's oldest and last surviving son, the details of Robert T. Lincoln's life are misunderstood by some and unknown to many others. Nearly half a century after the last biography about Abraham Lincoln's son was published, historian and author Jason Emerson illuminates the life of this remarkable man and his achievements in *Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln*. Emerson, after nearly ten years of research, draws upon previously unavailable materials to offer the first truly definitive biography of the famous lawyer, businessman, and statesman who, much more than merely the son of America's most famous president, made his own indelible mark on one of the most progressive and dynamic eras in United States history.

Born in a boardinghouse but passing his last days at ease on a lavish country estate, Robert Lincoln played many roles during his lifetime. As a president's son, a Union soldier, an ambassador to Great Britain, and a U.S. secretary of war, Lincoln was indisputably a titan of his age. Much like his father, he became one of the nation's most respected and influential men, building a successful law practice in the city of Chicago, serving shrewdly as president of the Pullman Car Company, and at one time even being considered as a candidate for the U.S. presidency.

Along the way he bore witness to some of the most dramatic moments in America's history, including Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse; the advent of the railroad, telephone, electrical, and automobile industries; the circumstances surrounding the assassinations of three presidents of the United States; and the momentous presidential election of 1912. *Giant in the Shadows* also reveals Robert T. Lincoln's complex relationships with his famous parents and includes previously unpublished insights into their personalities. Emerson reveals new details about Robert's role as his father's confidant during the brutal years of the Civil War and his reaction to his father's murder; his prosecution of the thieves who attempted to steal his father's body in 1876 and the extraordinary measures he took to ensure it would never happen again; as well as details about the painful decision to have his mother committed to a mental facility. In addition Emerson explores the relationship between Robert and his children, and exposes the actual story of his stewardship of the Lincoln legacy—including what he and his wife really destroyed and what was preserved. Emerson also delves into the true reason Robert is not buried in the Lincoln tomb in Springfield but instead was interred at Arlington National Cemetery.

Meticulously researched, full of never-before-seen photographs and new insight into historical events, *Giant in the Shadows* is the missing chapter of the Lincoln family story. Emerson's riveting work is more than simply a biography; it is a tale of American achievement in the Gilded Age and the endurance of the Lincoln legacy.

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## Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln Details

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# From Reader Review Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln for online ebook

## Phrodrick says

Biographers tend to like the subjects of their biographies. In the case of Robert T Lincoln there is apparently much to like. In his youth he knew something of extreme poverty. He entered the adult world with a number of fine advantages and having survived a number of personal and public tragedies. For all of this, *Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T Lincoln* by Jason Emerson succeeds only in so far as it minutely details the contention that this was a good man.

As the only surviving son of America's first murdered president, Robert Lincoln will have experienced some of the worst of the Civil War (by visiting hospitals with his then-President father) and by serving for four months on Gen. Grant's staff as the Southern armies collapsed. He would have completed a Harvard education and would have the finest possible contacts in the business world. He would also be shackled to an emotionally dependent mother who may have been insane. Robert Lincoln would have choices and he would choose to be a hard-working lawyer, and dedicated appointee to two national offices. By the end of his long life he would be a multimillionaire capitalist, and a careful superintendent of his father's reputation.

It is not the subject of this biography that makes this a weak biography. Jason Emerson is a capable writer and his book is an easy read. With thousands of footnotes it is well documented. What keeps me from rating this as a superior biography is its inconsistency and lack of depth. At one point we're told that the young Robert is very brave in making a speech for his then candidate father on the next page we are told he is very modest because he refuses to make other speeches. In one sentence we are told that Robert T Lincoln is pro-labor and the following pages documenting his active disinterest in the cause of labor. Detailed is his refusal to consider that the mostly black Pullman porters were underpaid and ill-treated. We are asked to excuse his lack of concern for the treatment of his black customers because that was the typical opinion of his era. A giant of a man and the son of the Great Emancipator who fails to see beyond the typical opinions of his era is probably not that giant.

Robert Lincoln's life would stretch from horse and buggy days with the telegraph in the railroad as new inventions; into a world of telephones, transatlantic, cables, Airplanes and Rolls-Royce automobiles. These advances simply appear in this book without comment or consideration. Robert Lincoln would be closely associated with the railroads, first as a railroad lawyer and later as president of the Pullman rail car company. Yet there is no discussion of the scandals, the lawsuits and struggles as Western farmers attempted to survive against predatory railroad companies. Robert Lincoln would be a close friend with a number of the great names of this gilded era including Vanderbilt, of course Pullman. There is little or no discussion of antitrust law, labor law or any of the great issues that would arise or be addressed during his lifetime or in his service as a lawyer. We're told that Robert Lincoln was a good friend of some presidents and some administrations and was greatly unhappy with others and we are never told why.

In the end the reader has a 420 page detailed recounting of Robert Lincoln's domestic life with continual reminders of how every one of his decisions was a good decision. As for the 125 pages of footnotes one has to wonder if Jason Emerson is substituting research for lack of analysis or ideas.

The life of Robert T Lincoln's an interesting life. This biography is a pleasant read. In terms of what is here the book is likable. What keeps it from being a better book is the absence of depth and critical analysis.

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## Caryn says

I originally checked this book out to research some specific items about Robert Lincoln and ended up reading the whole book, admittedly skimming through some parts. I was interested in his take on various subjects Lincoln biographers and historians have argued about over the years, as well as all the background on Lincoln's strife with unauthorized biographers spreading dirt on his parents obtained from questionable sources that have gained general acceptance. One of the main reasons I read the book, though, was to learn about Lincoln's role in the Pullman strike and the little backroom deal he struck for his client after Pullman ran out of town to escape prosecution. That got glossed over, and as to his claim that Robert Lincoln played a limited role because he wasn't the labor relations lawyer, I don't buy it. He was Pullman's right hand man and closest advisor, who took over the company after Pullman died. There's no question in my mind that Lincoln was calling all the shots in the strike. That opinion aside, I think the bio was well written and researched, a worthwhile reference with quite a bit of insight into its subject.

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## Steven Peterson says

Robert T. Lincoln. . . The only one of Abraham and Mary Lincoln's children to reach full adulthood. What is his story? What was his life like as the son of the legendary President? This book does a very nice job of delineating his life and times.

First, the book does tend to be very positive toward Robert Lincoln, toning down some of his business dealings and his role in committing his mother. Second, the book is quite well written and moves along nicely for the reader.

The volume takes a chronological perspective toward Lincoln's life. The look at his childhood and early adulthood provides considerable detail on his formative years. His play with his younger brothers; his early education; his Harvard years; his decision to follow in his father's footsteps and become an attorney. . . . He was also, for a brief period of time, in the Army as an aide with the Army of the Potomac. Indeed, he was present at Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House.

Tragically, he was also in some senses around at the time of the assassination of three presidents--his father, Garfield, and McKinley. Lincoln became the caretaker of his father's records, and the book chronicles some of the struggles coming from that.

Robert Lincoln had his own career. He was a successful attorney in Chicago. He became Secretary of War and Ambassador to England. He was even mentioned as a possible presidential candidate (he did receive some votes at Republican national conventions), but he wanted none of that.

The book describes his family life well, including the tragic death of Abraham Lincoln II (called "Jack"). His wife was frail, prone to illness. There were problems that came up with his children, and he soldiered on.

One of his colleagues was George Pullman. He came to work for Pullman as an attorney; upon Pullman's death, he became the chief executive of Pullman's company. The company flourished with him at the helm. There is a painful depiction of his relationship with his black porters that does not necessarily cast a good

light on him.

The end of his life is nicely drawn, including his continuing concern about his father's legacy.

All in all, a worthy biography on the subject of Abraham Lincoln's surviving son.

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### **Rob says**

A fascinating and in-depth life of Abraham Lincoln's only son to reach adulthood. Shows how Robert Todd Lincoln emerged from his father's shadow to become his own man while protecting the legacy of the 16th president. Well worth the time.

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### **Gayla Bassham says**

I liked this book, but mainly because of my Lincoln obsession. The writing is a bit dry, and I felt that there wasn't a lot of insight into who Lincoln was as a person. This may be due to his own reticence and desire for privacy, so I cut Emerson some slack; still, 640 pages is a lot to read about someone who never really comes alive.

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### **Tracy says**

A pretty interesting book on the life of Abraham Lincoln's only son to make it to adulthood. It's ridiculously (and unnecessarily) long though and I had to renew it two times from the library in an attempt to finish it. Still didn't end up finishing it but I hope to at some point. The author manages to write in an stylistic and fluid way but I don't think he really got to the core of Bob Lincoln. I wanted to know more about his relationship with his brothers and parents and less about the colleges he went to or what his friends ended up becoming later in life. I know the thesis was an attempt to show Lincoln's historical importance beyond his father but there should have been more on the man himself. Furthermore, some of the notes on Mary Todd Lincoln see a bit off.

All of this sounds like I didn't like it. I did - I just wanted a bit more.

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### **Brian says**

Fascinating to learn about the life of Robert Lincoln, the eldest son of Abraham and the only to survive into adulthood. I came across this book on a visit to Hildene - Robert Lincoln's estate in Vermont in late adulthood (worth a visit!). Robert Lincoln had quite the life himself (Secretary of War, President of the Pullman Railroad Company, etc.), in addition to all the intrigue surrounding his relationships with his father and especially his mother Mary Todd Lincoln. Its fascinating to view the events of Abraham Lincoln's life (election, dealing with Civil War, assassination, etc.) through the perspective of his son. The book was a great read - highly recommended for history fans!

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## Amy says

This book teases you a bit. Although it does have a lot of pages, more than 200 of them are wrapped up in meticulous notes, a detailed bibliography and an index; actual reading only takes up a little over 400 pages, and although a bit dry at times, overall, this was still a fascinating read.

I learned a lot about not only Robert Lincoln, but about his parents -- Abraham & Mary Todd, and others in his family as seen through Robert's eyes.

A couple of interesting tidbits that I learned:

Robert Lincoln is the only known person in American history to be directly associated with the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield and William McKinley. He was not in Ford's Theatre when his father was shot, but he was in the Petersen house when his father died; he was not with Garfield when he was shot, but he was only yards away, having just arrived at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Depot; he was not with McKinley when he was shot, but he was on his way to the Pan-American Exposition. Such coincidences are the stuff of legends ...

On January 23, 1923, Robert Lincoln formally donated the papers, now known as the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, to the United States of America, "to be deposited in the Library of Congress for the benefit of all the People." It was the single greatest gift of historical materials to the library in American History! From a librarian's perspective aka my perspective, this is fabulous!

However, there was a caveat to the deal -- the papers had to stay sealed from public view until twenty-one (21) years after Robert Lincoln's death. The speculative story behind this is very interesting!

At the end of the book, after information about Lincoln's death, the author wraps up with information about Lincoln's wife, children and grandchildren and what happened to them. It is interesting to note that there are no more direct descendants of Abraham Lincoln -- this line has died.

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## Dennis Goshorn says

It took me a long time to read this book, but it was a really good book. It took awhile partly because as I would read about events or things the piqued my interest and I would put the book aside for a time and read about those--such as, Presidents Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur (one of Robert's good friends), B. Harrison, McKinley, T. Roosevelt, Taft & Wilson. The section on the Pullman railway cars was also very interesting.

Even though this is primarily about Robert Todd Lincoln, it gives a fairly thorough treatment of Robert's entire family, especially Mary Todd Lincoln. Robert, the first born of Abraham & Mary and the only one to live to adulthood, is a fascinating character. Not wanting to trade on the Lincoln name, Robert made his own way in the world, becoming a successful lawyer, Secretary of War & Minister to the Court of St. James. He was urged many times to run for president, and given his surname and the long string of Republican presidents from 1861-1912, he would have probably been elected; it's fun to speculate on what might have

happened, how our history would have been altered, if he had been elected president.

But, the real history is much more interesting! Consider these peculiarities: 1) Robert's life was once saved by Edwin Booth, brother of John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of his father, Abraham; 2) Robert, entering military service late in the war, was present at the surrender at Appomattox & was the first person to give an eyewitness account of that event to his father; 3) on a real estate settlement trip to Michigan, a niece of John Wilkes Booth, when asked to serve Robert's table, threaten to kill him; 4) his mother, whom he committed to an asylum, later threaten to kill him and kidnap Robert's first born, Mamie. The connections to the Booth family are particularly interesting and would be scoffed at in a novel as being too far fetched, yet they're true! 5) he was the last living witness of the surrender at Appomattox, and 6) Robert was present or nearby at the assassinations of his father, James Garfield and William McKinley—he's also buried within sight of the grave of John F. Kennedy.

The author states "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." The irony is that all his life he sought to remain in the shadows and downplayed his sonship with Abraham Lincoln—that shadow kept his out of the limelight and today most people know nothing about this remarkable man.

He was a kind, dedicated family man. He was as honest as ole Abe and inherited his father's humor and loved to tell stories as much as his father. He was known as a great conversationalist and could talk for hours with his close confidants.

My estimate is that if he were elected president that he would have been a capable chief executive, but not an outstanding one. He was more of a William Howard Taft than a Teddy Roosevelt, with whom he had numerous disagreements.

As I read about Abraham Lincoln II, Robert's son who died when he as sixteen I could not help but speculate over what might have been. "Jack," as he was called, was a remarkable youth and, according to his contemporaries, had many of the same characteristics as his grandfather. If he had lived, entered politics, he may well have been the second Lincoln in the White House—perhaps in 1920 when Jack would have been 47. The country would have perhaps been spared the Harding administration and its scandals. How that would have changed history we'll never know.

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## **Ken says**

A really enjoyable biography about one of America's lesser known icons. Robert T. Lincoln did everything he could to live his own life outside of the shadow of his father and was successful in his own right. I was disappointed in some of the other reviews that found the author too positive toward RTL. He was no more positive than was David McCullough was to John Adams. Emerson gave ample research notes to validate his perspective. And I hope everyone is reading the notes along with the text. You won't understand the authors perspective if you don't read the notes.

Emerson covered everything that I have heard about Robert from the committing of his mother, the Lincoln tomb robbers, through his connection to 3 presidential assassinations. He dispels to the best of his abilities the myths that have been spun around all of these cases. What was more interesting was all of the things that I did not know, such as his term as secretary of war, his life in Chicago and the part he played in the

aftermath of the Chicago fire. Being a local history buff of the greater Chicago area and Illinois in general, this book fits right into my collection. It was also a nice back way entry to the personal life of his father Abraham Lincoln.

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### **Steven Z. says**

I decided to read *Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln* by Jason Emerson for the simple reason that I was curious what it would have been like to be the son of the “Great Emancipator.” Mr. Emerson did not let me down. The reader is presented with a portrait of Abraham Lincoln through the eyes of his only surviving son and a wonderful and detailed narrative history of the Lincoln family from the 1840s through the 1920s. Emerson has written what I would describe as a “comfortable” book where the reader is invited into the mindset of Robert Lincoln. We see the many crises that “young” Lincoln suffered, the politics of the period, the expansion of the American economy and his role in it, in addition to his personal issues relating to both of his parents. We learn that Abraham Lincoln was an overindulgent parent in spite of the fact that Robert was mostly raised by his mother Mary since his father spent a great deal of time traveling the judicial circuit before pursuing a political career. The material that is presented on Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln, the death of their children, and the political background is written in an engaging style and is concisely presented though many of the details are not new.

What are new are the details of Robert’s relationship with his mother. Emerson drawing in part on his previous work on Mary Todd Lincoln provides an intricate description of his mother’s mental health following the assassination of his father. The emotional collapse, debts, and wrenching familial details eventually forced Robert to have his mother committed. From 1865-1875 his mother’s mental state dominated a significant amount of time and Robert grew mortified by his mother’s behavior. Robert was deeply concerned about his family’s historical legacy throughout his life so dealing with a mother who was probably bipolar was a challenge. Robert went so far as having his mother followed by Pinkerton detectives as she continued to spend inordinate amounts of money on clothing, furniture, and spiritualists. Eventually Robert consulted his father’s friends for advice and all agreed she should be institutionalized. The reader is witness to this entire episode which focuses in part on the state of mental health treatment in the United States at the time. After a short stay, under pressure from Mary and fearing publicity Robert approves of his mother’s release and he comes to terms in dealing with his her sickness as best he can.

Robert Lincoln emerges as a remarkable man. One can hardly imagine what it must have been like to bury two brothers, a father and mother, and witness three presidential assassinations. In addition, Robert Lincoln was not a well man who probably suffered from Bright’s Disease in addition to experiencing repeated bouts of depression. Despite these obstacles Robert Lincoln became an exceptional corporate lawyer, a wise business man who amassed a fortune, ambassador to England, was appointed Secretary of War, served as the CEO of The Pullman Palace Car Company, among his many achievements to the point that he was seriously thought of as a presidential candidate in the 1880s. Emerson takes the reader through all of these aspects of Robert’s life and pulls no punches in evaluating his subject. The key dichotomy is how the son differed from his father and Emerson concludes that despite the son’s anti-labor (Pullman Strike) and pro-business stances he was not that different in outlook from his father.

A key theme that is followed throughout the book is Robert Lincoln’s concern for his father’s place in history. Robert refused to allow historians, except for John G. Nicolay and John Hay, his father’s former secretaries during the Civil War access to presidential papers and other documents until twenty one years after his death. He reasoned that there was too much information that could impact people in a negative way that were still alive. There was nothing too small for Robert Lincoln to become involved with if it related to his father. Whether it was the creation of monuments, paintings, museums and documents Robert was the prime decision maker. Robert Lincoln lived a remarkable life that Jason Emerson captures very nicely. I am

certain this book will become the standard treatment of its subject for years to come and though it may be an esoteric subject for some, it is lively and well worth the time to read.

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### **Anup Sinha says**

This an outstanding biography by Jason Emerson on a fascinating background figure of American history. Emerson did excellent research and found a way to write a readable narrative that wasn't overly dry.

I came away with a good feel on Bob Lincoln and a real appreciation for how he lived his life and all he did to protect the legacy of his father, our 16th president. Robert Lincoln was a bright guy, successful in almost every endeavor in law, business, and politics. He also comes off as highly ethical and highly family oriented.

I find it remarkable how he was able to simultaneously be his own man and have his own success while also protecting the Lincoln legend.

There are some little things I would have liked expounded upon, like Bob's relationship with Ulysses Grant who he served with as a captain in the Civil War and was even present with at the Appomattox Court House surrender.

Lots of great ancillary information, plenty of Abe stories, more information of Mary Todd and all the Lincolns than I have ever encountered.

Despite Bob Lincoln's attempts at a private life, he was around for many historical events. He was quite close to the first three presidential assassinations in American history; the son of Lincoln waiting for him at the White House, the Secretary of War for Garfield, and he was visiting McKinley in Buffalo when he was murdered.

He was also the last living witness to the Civil War surrender, not passing until 1926.

Anyway, this is a professionally done biography and I recommend for anybody interested in the man and the era.

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### **Nancy says**

This book is much better written and researched than Emerson's book on Mary Lincoln. Through examining the life of Robert Lincoln, Emerson also gives a different picture of our country in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. Robert was a tenacious guardian of his father's legacy, which at times, caused him much duress. His children and grandchildren continued the protection of Pres. Lincoln's papers, but were less willing to participate in public celebrations honoring the president. Robert was involved in politics, but he resisted the efforts to draft him for a presidential candidate. I read this because I'm a Lincoln geek, but this is an interesting book for anyone who enjoys history.

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## **Herb says**

This was a very well-researched and interestingly written biography of the sole surviving son of President Abraham Lincoln. There are many things to like about this book, but the book's editor must have been asleep while editing this. There are too many examples of missing connective words like "and, of, etc.", plus my personal pet peeve: the word "forbade." Authors nowadays use "forbid" for present tense as well as past tense. This was a mistake used in this book, too. The past tense of "forbid" is "forbade", pronounced (FOR-Bad), the final "e" is silent. This is enough to send me to the looney bin. Again, the editor should be the final authority on grammatical mistakes like this, but apparently this editor either didn't care or didn't know any better than the author!

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## **Gary Schantz says**

I purposely chose to read this book after I had read *The Patriarch*. My reason being that *The Patriarch* was about the success story of a man who became the father of an assassinated president and *Giant in the Shadows* was about the success story of a man who was the son of an assassinated president. One success story bore out a president and the other success story was borne out of a president.

So much has been written about the similarities between Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy but when you read both of these books you will find how similar both Joseph Kennedy and Robert Lincoln were as well. Both men despised Washington politics; both men were ambassadors to England; both men suffered the loss of numerous family members; both had to deal with a family member that had to be committed, etc. Quite strange are the coincidences.

The most similar quality that both men had was that they were not very much like their respective presidential relative.

As for this book itself, I liked it a lot. At 421 pages, I found that the chapters were achievable at 3-4 chapters per reading. None of them were long-winded and the details seemed to be limited to what needed to be written without over-analyzing the subject of a given chapter.

I recommend this book to anyone that is an Abraham Lincoln fan or historian.

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