The Last Lincoln

He lived well into the 20th century. Yet a country that reveres his father's every word has nearly forgotten the strange, tragic story of this remarkable man

BY JOSEPH N. BELL

THE ONLY SON of Abraham Lincoln to reach maturity died on July 25, 1926—within the lifetime of a majority of Americans living today. Yet, it is a strange commentary on this stocky, withdrawn, self-effacing man that people who still devour everything written or spoken about Abraham Lincoln are almost totally unaware of his son Robert.

Robert Todd Lincoln died at the age of 83 in his summer home in Manchester, Vermont, after a lifetime of tragedy: He witnessed the death of his father, the untimely deaths of his three brothers, the mental deterioration of his mother, and the passing of his own 17-year-old son, who was the last hope for carrying on the Lincoln name.

Small wonder that after a brief and, to him, painful interlude

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Lincoln was on hand each time. Although he wasn't in Ford's Theater when his father was shot, Robert was summoned from the White House and kept vigil at his father's bedside during the tragic hours that Abraham Lincoln's life flickered out.

Sixteen years later, as Secretary of War to President James Garfield, Robert Lincoln had to decline an invitation to accompany his chief on a trip. He hurried to the railroad station to explain to the President his urgent business. He arrived just in time to see Garfield gunned down by Charles J. Guiteau, a rejected office seeker.

On September 5, 1901, Robert Lincoln made one of his rare public appearances when he accepted an invitation to attend the opening of the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. At a reception following the opening, Lincoln witnessed the assassination of President William McKinley by an anarchist named Leon Czolgosz.

From that moment until his death, Robert Lincoln refused to meet, in person, any President of the United States.

THE HEAVIEST burden he carried was his troubled association with his mother. For the greater part of his lifetime, Lincoln refused to talk about his mother. The reasons were painfully evident.

After the Civil War and the death of his father, Bob Lincoln married the daughter of Sen. James Harlan of Iowa and moved to Chicago where he began a highly successful

law practice. When Robert was 28, his mother—who had been traveling in Europe with 18-year-old Tad Lincoln—came home to see her first grandchild. On the ocean voyage home, Tad caught a cold that hung on after he reached Chicago in May 1871. Breathing became steadily more difficult for him, and he had to sleep sitting up. The best medical care could not help him and—after a pitifully brief illness—he died on July 15, 1871.

THIS WAS more than the high-strung Mary Lincoln could bear. She had buried two sons and seen her husband murdered at her side. Now her favorite, Tad, had been taken from her, too.

Her actions became highly irrational, and for many months a distraught Robert Lincoln did little else than rescue his mother from difficulties of her own making. She spent money wildly, collecting possessions she could neither afford nor use. She convinced herself that Bob was constantly in danger, and—although she refused to live or even visit in his home—she wired him almost daily to find out if he were safe. She even auctioned some of her personal belongings in a public sale in New York, which embarrassed Robert almost to the point of desperation. When he found her carrying $56,000 in negotiable securities on her person, he knew something had to be done.

He consulted his parents' oldest and closest friends. They all offered the same advice: He had no other recourse than to request a sanity hearing to declare his mother incompetent so she might be given proper protection. This was done in Chicago in 1875 after as emotional a scene as has ever taken place in a courtroom.

Weeping as he talked, Bob Lincoln had to describe to the court some of the recent actions of his mother. To the beleaguered Mary Lincoln, this was the end of everything. Her only remaining child—her last tie with her husband—had turned against her. She blamed Robert entirely for her humiliation and never forgave him, either dur-

ing the 13 months she was under private care in an expensive sanitarium in Illinois, or for the remaining years of her life after she won her release in 1876.

To the end of Mary Lincoln's days, Robert made constant efforts to placate his mother and share his family with her, but she never relented. No one can assess the pain this caused both mother and son.

AFTER HIS mother's death in 1882, Robert Lincoln became one of the nation's leading corporation lawyers and a trustee of the Illinois Central Railroad. He had carefully avoided national politics, and only his intense loyalty to an old and trusted friend—Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, under whom Bob had served as captain in the last days of the Civil War—drew him in. In 1880 he supported Grant, who was seeking the Republican nomination for a third term, but James Garfield won the nomination and the presidency.

Garfield then paid an unusual tribute to Robert Lincoln by selecting his former opponent as Secretary of War, a position Lincoln retained when Chester A. Arthur succeeded Garfield. (Lincoln was the only Garfield cabinet appointee whom Arthur didn't replace.)

In 1884 a number of influential Republicans urged Robert Lincoln to run for the presidency. There is

little doubt he would have been able to win the nomination and the election, but he refused to run against his political chief, President Arthur. He was also convinced, especially in later life, that he was being sought not for his own virtues but because he was the son of a beloved and martyred President.

In 1889 Robert Lincoln accepted his last public office, Minister to Great Britain. He served there, quietly and without particular distinction, until 1893 when he retired, heartsick, from public life after his only son died while attending school in France.

After the death of his son (he also had two daughters), Robert Lincoln established a home in Chicago, gave himself over to private business, and simply withdrew from public view. With one exception—on the 38th anniversary of the Lincoln-Douglas debate celebrated at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois—Robert Lincoln refused to speak in public about his father, although it was requested literally thousands of times. His only contact with politics the last 30 years of his life was a single appearance on behalf of President McKinley in Danville, Illinois, and on this occasion he disappeared and was found, at the time he was supposed to be speaking, visiting an aged Negro woman who had once served as a cook for the Lincoln family in Springfield.

Robert Lincoln prospered in business. He became special counsel for the Pullman Company and in 1911 was appointed chairman of the company's board of directors. He later served as a director of both the Commonwealth Edison Company and the Commercial National Bank of Chicago.

From his self-imposed public exile, Robert Lincoln fiercely defended his father and opposed anything he felt distorted Abraham Lincoln's memory. He was bitterly critical of a book about his father that cast doubt on the legitimacy of President Lincoln's birth. He also objected strenuously to a statue erected in Cincinnati in memory of his father. Instead of using photographs of Abraham Lincoln, the

sculptor had chosen a six-foot-four, 40-year-old Kentucky rail-splitter as his model. "The result," wrote Robert to former President Taft, "is a monstrous figure which is grotesque as a likeness of President Lincoln and defamatory as an effigy."

ROBERT WROTE numerous—sometimes nit-picking—letters defending the martyred President, yet he refused to contribute to any biographies of him or to cooperate with noted historians who were seeking firsthand information.

This refusal led, indirectly, to the final act for which historians, if few others, remember Robert Lincoln. After the assassination several trunks full of private Lincoln papers were removed from the White House. These papers remained in Robert's possession all his life. Only the late President's secretaries, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, were permitted access to them when they wrote their ten-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln, and then only on the condition that they would not use any material not sanctioned by Robert Lincoln.

From the 1890 publication of the Hay-Nicolay biography until his death, Robert Lincoln was hounded by journalists and historians who wanted access to the Lincoln papers; he steadfastly refused. When Robert Lincoln was in his late seventies, Sen. Albert Beveridge made one last effort to see the papers, and his insistence so angered Robert Lincoln that Lincoln deeded the papers to the Library of Congress with the strange provision that they not be examined until 21 years after his death.

At the urging of scholars who feared some of the documents might be destroyed, Dr. Nicolas Murray Butler, president emeritus of Columbia University and a friend of Bob Lincoln, called on the old man to try to persuade him to release the papers. He said he found Lincoln burning some of them.

The story has been challenged by some historians, but Butler steadfastly insisted it was true, and his account has been substantiated by

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Robert Lincoln's doctor, who remembers Dr. Butler leaving the house and Lincoln saying angrily after him: "By God, he won't get them. I'll do something first."

When the Lincoln papers were opened in 1947, amid considerable fanfare, they were a great disappointment, throwing little new light on the President or on the Civil War period. There were few personal documents, nothing relating to Mary Todd Lincoln, and no indication of papers that might—as Bob Lincoln had hinted—cast doubt on the loyalty of some of Abraham Lincoln's close associates. It is known that Mary Lincoln had a trunk full of letters from her husband that have never come to light.

So the gnawing questions will always remain unanswered: How many papers did Robert Lincoln destroy and what was in them?

Probably the ultimate tragedy of Robert Lincoln was that he, the single survivor of the martyred President, was in many ways so unlike his father. The death of his three younger brothers served almost to lionize them in memory. Eddie, the second born, was little more than an infant when he died. Willie, who died in 1862, was profound, thoughtful, creative, imaginative, intellectually a carbon copy of his father. Willie was cherished by Mary Lincoln. And Tad—an irrepressible extrovert, bright, gay, and (to many White House visitors) incorrigibly spoiled—won the comradeship and close affection of his father that Robert never knew.

"Uncle Joe" Cannon, long-time Speaker of the House of Representatives, who knew Bob Lincoln as well as any man, said of him: "Robert Lincoln's position in the world was unique because of his birth. Able, well-educated, and trained for his life's work, he was constantly under the shadow of the great, immortal Lincoln. He was wholly different in views, actions, and physique from his father. Later, as I learned to know him, I loved him. He was intensely patriotic and accepted political posts at great sac-

rifice. He has been accused of being a sort of hermit and was very little seen in public in later years, but this was because of his abhorrence of things political and the fact that he was being eternally pointed out as Abe Lincoln's son."

On one of the few occasions Robert Lincoln ever discussed his relationship with his father, he wrote to a friend sadly: "During my childhood and early youth, my father was almost constantly away from me, attending courts or making political speeches. In 1859, when he was beginning to devote himself more to practice in his own neighborhood and when I would have had both the inclination and the means to gratify my desire to become better acquainted with the history of his early struggles, I went to New Hampshire to school and afterwards to Harvard College, and he became President. Thenceforth, any great intimacy between us became impossible. I scarcely ever had ten minutes quiet talk with him . . . on account of his constant devotion to business."

Today in the stately Lincoln tomb in Springfield there is a curious omission. Opposite the grilled enclosure holding the remains of Abraham Lincoln are the crypts of the rest of the Lincoln family—except Robert. There seems to be no explanation of why the President's oldest son, the last Lincoln, is buried in Arlington National Cemetery—separated in death, as he so often seemed to be in life, from the rest of his family.