

## A Fictionized Biography of Mrs. Lincoln

*MR. LINCOLN'S WIFE.* By Anne Colver. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1943. 406 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHILIP VAN DOREN STERN

**D**URING recent years the historical novel and the fictionized biography have come of age. Based on solid research, well written, and adult in their handling of psychological problems, they have grown far away from their naive predecessors of a generation ago. We have learned to expect of them the same careful scholarship that is put into a standard history or biography.

It is with something of a shock that one encounters this fictionized biography of Mrs. Lincoln, for it is filled with factual errors and is superficial and deliberately evasive in its interpretation. Few American families have been studied as minutely as Lincoln's; a day-by-day chronology records every move; letters, reminiscences, and elaborately documented biographies present a wealth of data. Three generations of scholarship have built up a vast Lincoln literature. It is reasonable to suppose that an author approaching the subject would make good use of it.

Miss Colver, wherever possible, avoids tying her narrative down to exact dates and facts, but when she does she is often wrong. She refers to Ninian Edwards's niece Matilda as a Maryland girl who returned home to marry a man named Ramsey. Actually, Matilda Edwards came from Alton, Illinois, and became Mrs. William Strong. Such statements as: "There was the birth of Willie to remember, and only a few weeks later, the terrible night when they had watched little Edward die," are indicative of the author's reckless handling of easily checked facts, for, as any chronology of Lincoln will show, little Edward had been dead for nearly a year when Willie was born. Stephen Douglas is made to appear at a White House party during the last week of April, 1861, when he was in Illinois on the mission for Lincoln that led to his death early in June.

There are many such errors, but they are admittedly less serious than Miss Colver's curiously evasive treatment of the major emotional crises in her subject's life. Mary Todd Lincoln was an exceedingly complex person who eventually became psychopathic. To understand her and to assay properly her influence upon her husband's career calls for an honest presentation of all the known evidence. "The fatal first of January, 1841" that

played such an important part in Lincoln's relationship to the woman who was to become his wife is glossed over and quickly disposed of. The Lincoln-Shields duel, which was largely instrumental in bringing about the reconciliation that led to marriage, is not even mentioned. The terrible scene when Lincoln pushed his wife out of the house and cursed her is ignored. When the Lincolns left Springfield for the last time, Mrs. Lincoln did not go to the train but joined the President-elect's party the next day at Indianapolis. Henry Villard says that she was left behind in the Chenery House in a fit of rage because her husband had refused to make a federal ap-

pointment that she demanded of him. Miss Colver says nothing: she has Mrs. Lincoln appear at Indianapolis and suppresses the whole revealing incident. Mrs. Lincoln's display of insane jealousy toward General Ord's wife at City Point in March, 1865, is similarly omitted.

These were events that were crucial in the life of the strange, mentally twisted woman who was Abraham Lincoln's wife. To ignore them is to touch only superficially on a career that requires deep understanding and great psychological insight. Fictionized biographies are still looked down upon by many people. The prejudice against them will not be lessened by the publication of a book that is undistinguished as fiction and unacceptable as fact.

## The Story of Isaac Thomas Hecker

*CELESTIAL HOMESPUN: The Life of Isaac Thomas Hecker.* By Katherine Burton. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1943. 393 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

**F**ATHER HECKER was, with Orestes A. Brownson, the most distinguished convert (at least on the intellectual plane) from transcendentalism to Roman Catholicism; and he is furthermore important as the founder of the Paulist Fathers, a wholly American missionary order. No thorough life of him has been written. The earliest biography, by Father Walter Elliott, was, in the wrong sense, a pious life; the official "documented" life by the Paulist order has not yet appeared; and the only biographical study that is both thorough and clear, so far as I know, is "The Early Years of Isaac Thomas Hecker (1819-1844)," by the Rev. Vincent F. Holden, C.S.P. (1939). There is ample room both among the devout reading public and among students of American cultural development for a brilliant book on a man customarily thought of as a leader in the heresy of "Americanism" condemned by Leo XIII in 1899 in a letter to Cardinal Gibbons. This biography Mrs. Burton seeks to supply.

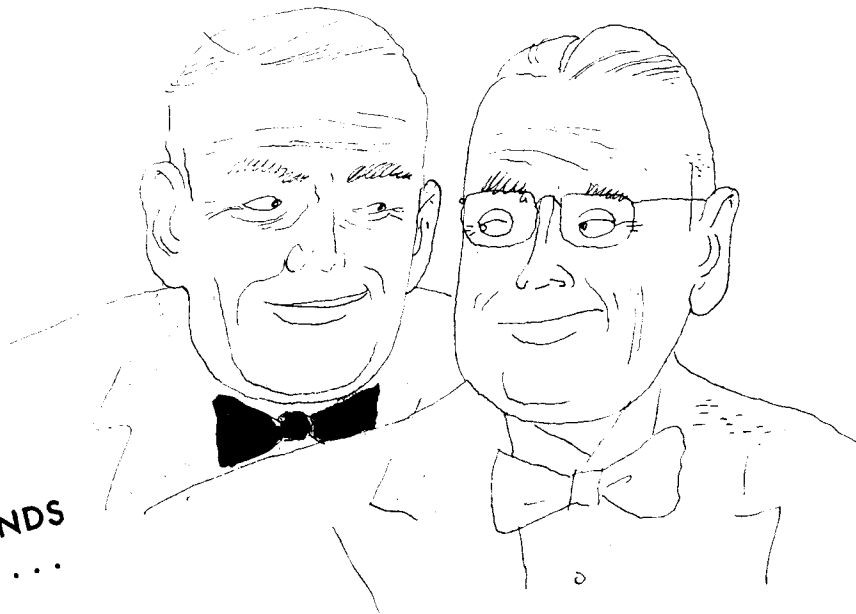
"Celestial Homespun" follows a biographical pattern that is always a little baffling to the critical. It is a book cast in the form of fiction, giving both thoughts attributed to the subject, and conversations that he held, or should have held, with important persons around him. These thoughts and this conversation are supposed to be based on a formidable degree of research, and to be as nearly "authentic" as a combination of artistic imagina-

tion and scholarly caution can make them. The difficulty seems to me this: if one is going to so much trouble, why not go one step farther and write a biography of real use to the student? As it is, we have to take Mrs. Burton's entire book on faith.

A second difficulty arises. The biographer is not necessarily expert as a novelist; yet the conversations, the situations, and the thoughts have to be managed with fictional adroitness and dramatic point. I cannot say that Mrs. Burton has quite mastered the trick. Her people all talk alike, whether they are Henry Thoreau, Cardinal Barnabo, Amos Bronson Alcott, or the Pope. And they are so bent on being conversational that they do not, as it were, exchange ideas. One learns more about Father Hecker's intellectual convictions from Father Holden's study of his early years than one does from all of Mrs. Burton's rather flat pages.

On the other hand, the book is pleasant reading; and in the struggle for Father Hecker at Rome against the authorities of the Redemptorist order, a struggle in depicting which Mrs. Burton tends to drop her conversational method for straight narrative, we have real conflict and a sense of important drama. Otherwise, the book seldom rises to real insight, either into crucial historical event or into personality and character. Her transcendentalists are mostly "confused" because they are not Catholics; and for her Catholics, life is always simple, clear, and devout. One may honor the generous altruism of Father Hecker and the Paulist order, and yet find in their founder a more complex and troubled nature than this author permits us to see.

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