H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John F. Marszalek. *The Petticoat Affair: Manners Mutiny and Sex in Andrew Jackson's White House.* New York and London: The Free Press, 1997. viii + 296 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-82801-5.

Reviewed by Daniel Feller (University of New Mexico)

Published on H-SHEAR (October, 1998)

The renowned "Eaton Affair" of Andrew Jackson's first presidential term is one of the most fascinating episodes in American political history. Jackson invited into his first Cabinet his Tennessee comrade and biographer John Henry Eaton, to serve as Secretary of War and confidential counselor. Just before the inauguration, Eaton married Margaret O'Neale (Peggy) Timberlake, the daughter of a Washington hotelkeeper. Mrs. Eaton was vivacious, beautiful, and rumored to be sexually promiscuous. Her first husband, a naval purser, had died mysteriously overseas only a few months before, reportedly by suicide in despair over his wife's infidelities.

The women of Washington's tight-knit social circle, including the wives of the other Cabinet officers and of Vice-President John C. Calhoun, shunned the new Mrs. Eaton. Even Jackson's own niece and official hostess, wife of his nephew and private secretary Andrew Jackson Donelson, joined in the communal snubbing. Jackson himself, believing Margaret innocent and likening the charges against her to the slanders that had dogged his late wife Rachel, came charging to her defense. Interpreting the opposition to Mrs. Eaton as a covert attack on him, he made her cause a test of personal and political fealty. The resulting imbroglio dragged on for two years. It scandalized the country, paralyzed Jackson's administration, disrupted his household, drove him from his church, and finally forced him to clear out the whole Cabinet. The affair ended with a blizzard of public recriminations on all sides, while armed high government officers stalked each other in dead of night through the Washington streets.

Historians have found this delightfully lurid episode to be highly revealing of Jackson's personality and significant for his administration. Politically, the chief beneficiary of the affair was Secretary of State Martin Van Buren (a widower with no wife to contend with) who sided with Jackson, paid calls on Mrs. Eaton, and was rewarded with the ministry to England, the vice-presidency, and finally the presidential succession. The chief loser was Calhoun, whom Jackson came to see as the master orchestrater of Margaret Eaton's torment. Thus the affair appears as the jewel upon which turned Jackson's fateful choice between Van Buren and Calhoun, and thereby between the two broad branches of the electoral coalition which had made him President. As Jackson's biographer James Parton famously wrote in 1860, "the political history of the United States, for the last thirty years, dates from the moment when the soft hand of Mr. Van Buren touched Mrs. Eaton's knocker."

On the other hand, one can also read the Eaton affair as a distracting incident which revealed, but did not determine, the direction of Jackson's developing views on policy. Arguably the dispute over Margaret Eaton's morals was only the pretext, not the cause, of a break between Jackson and Calhoun which fundamental philosophical differences made all but inevitable. It is possible to see, alongside Jackson's undeniable emotional embroilment in the Eaton affair, a shrewd political calculation of its effects and a determination to turn them to his purposes. The Eaton affair thus strikes to the heart of an enduring historians' controversy over Jackson's character: whether he was master or servant of his moods, and the extent to which petty personal motives governed his political choices.

John F. Marszalek's *The Petticoat Affair*, the first book-length retelling of the story in several decades, finds still another significance in what the affair reveals about Jacksonian society and culture and especially about gender norms. The Eaton affair, says Marszalek, was really "the most famous debate over the meaning of womanhood in American history (p. 21)." Not only the question of a single woman's virtue, but "the very relationship between men and women was on trial (p. 99)." In Marszalek's sympathetic account, Margaret Eaton (he avoids the

condescending "Peggy") emerges guiltless of sexual impropriety. Her real offense was her forwardness, her flouting of genteel social conventions. She openly sought pleasure and attention, voiced opinions on politics and business, and acted and spoke with unwomanly boldness. For all of this polite society condemned her, interpreting her uninhibited conduct as proof of licentiousness. Marszalek makes Margaret Eaton, not Andrew Jackson, the center of his story, and turns her into something of a proto-feminist: "Hardly a crusader for women's rights, she was, nevertheless, an aggressive proponent of her cause, the same cause of many others in later days: the right of women to go beyond the barriers that society has built to enclose them and vociferously uses to keep them in their place." Her story thus exemplifies "the struggle of women in all periods of history, including the late twentieth century, to escape from societal perceptions of the limited roles that society considers proper for them (p. viii)."

Given historians' current controlling interest in gender, the story of the Eaton affair was certainly ripe for retelling. Blessedly, Marszalek avoids the jargon that disfigures so much recent writing on this subject. Here nothing is constructed, deconstructed, centered, decentered, gendered, legitimized, valorized, or privileged. No identities are negotiated or contested, no "categories of analysis" invoked. Marszalek tells his story straight, seamlessly melding meticulous research with a conversational style. The book is a good read.

Whether it makes its case convincingly is another matter. On the issue of Margaret Eaton's promiscuity the verdict remains murkier than Marszalek allows. He credits her denials and Jackson's failure to uncover any proof in his own exhaustive inquiry. But the former were hardly disinterested, and, as Marszalek himself shows, Jackson did not so much disprove the accusations as bludgeon the accusers into silence. Indeed Jackson comes off here as not only mule-headed but nearly paranoiac, enmeshed in gigantic Calhounite conspiracies conjured out of his own imagination.

Of course, whether Margaret Eaton did or didn't isn't the main issue. Marszalek's larger claim is that the role of women itself was at stake in the controversy–that Margaret Eaton became the focus for debate over the very "meaning of womanhood." From such hints, one expects Marszalek to reveal that Mrs. Eaton's accusers and defenders held contrasting conceptions of proper femininity. Such a finding would reinforce recent scholarship suggesting partisan differences over sex roles, and in doing so would invest the Eaton affair with a profound significance indeed [1].

But Marszalek does not show this to be so. As it appears in his account, Jackson and his foes were not so much debating what was improper for women to do as arguing whether Mrs. Eaton had done it. The dispute was over facts and perceptions, not norms. Jackson never questioned that a loose woman should be put out of society; he merely denied that Margaret Eaton was such. The question whether her plebeian origins and unconventional behavior would or should have rendered her socially unacceptable in any case was never squarely framed. Thus the Eaton affair in Marszalek's telling does strikingly illustrate contemporary sexual mores. But the behavioral standards invoked in the controversy seem more consensual than contested. Far from being debated, the "meaning of womanhood" appears to have been similarly understood and taken for granted on both sides.

Whether or not womanhood itself was at issue, women played a central role in the affair. In fact, the position taken by Jackson's male adversaries was simply that they could not dictate to their spouses. They themselves would gladly work with Eaton and show courtesy to Margaret, but deciding who was fit to socialize with was an inviolable wifely prerogative. If these men were speaking truthfully, the whole affair would have collapsed without female persistence. Yet the actual part played by women in instigating and prolonging it goes curiously unexamined in Marszalek's account. He asserts often that "society" rejected Mrs. Eaton, yet it is clear that it was really other women who did so. On what motives did they act?

At times Marszalek suggests that Margaret Eaton's unconventionality somehow symbolized all the uncertainties and anxieties engendered by the era's great political, economic, and social upheaval. "Women's role as defenders of morality became, therefore, that much more important in this time of flux. If women failed in their task of preserving societal morality, there was little hope for the future, and change would bring disaster, not progress (p. 68)." Thus "the snubbing of Margaret Eaton was society's determined counterattack against the frightening changes abroad in the land (p. 74)." But Marszalek does not offer evidence to substantiate this overstretched hypothesis.

Grant it that teasing out women's initiative in this affair is not easy. It was men who carried on the controversy in public, who gave the speeches, editorialized for the newspapers, and wrote the letters intended for pub-

lication. The very gender conventions that propelled the affair helped conceal women's part in it from the documentary record. Still Marszalek could have done more. Though his copious bibliography lists many manuscript sources, these have not been fully utilized for what they reveal of female agency in the affair. Marszalek's sympathetic focus on Margaret Eaton has led him to slight the side of her detractors.

In sum, John F. Marszalek's *The Petticoat Affair* tells a good story thoroughly and engagingly. Those looking for a modern full-length account of the scandal should certainly start here. For scholars in the field the book adds little that is new, and in searching for a novel angle it puts forward a thesis that is at best oversold. This is the latest word on the Eaton affair, but it will not be the last.

Notes

[1]. One recent interpretation that takes this tack is Kirsten E. Wood, " 'One Woman So Dangerous to Public Morals': Gender and Power in the Eaton Affair," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Summer 1997): 237-275. Wood also has much more than Marszalek to say about the motives of Mrs. Eaton's female persecutors. This article apparently appeared too late for inclusion in Marszalek's account.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/

Citation: Daniel Feller. Review of Marszalek, John F., *The Petticoat Affair: Manners Mutiny and Sex in Andrew Jackson's White House.* H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. October, 1998.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2431

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.