

Jeanne E. Abrams. *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation of an Iconic American Role.* New York: New York University Press, 2018. 328 pp. \$28.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-8653-1.

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In *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation of an Iconic American Role* Jeanne E. Abrams presents an in-depth social and political history of three of the First Ladies of the Revolutionary generation. Through this history, the author fills in gaps in our understanding of these three women and their positions as consorts, advisors, caretakers, and protectors of the first presidents. In these roles they “stood at the center of America’s political world through their husbands” (p. 7). Ultimately the book is an examination of the “marital partnerships of America’s first three presidential couples but especially focuses on the prominent roles of Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison in their years as the nation’s earliest First Ladies” (p. 6). Abrams’s goal is to place the stories of these women “into a larger personal and political context,” as each woman, but especially Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison, “forged deep marital *and* political partnerships with their presidential spouses” (p. 43). Owing to a seemingly deep interest in American Revolutionary history, the author provides a contemplative look into the new American government and its citizens and their relationship to one another through the lens of the presidency and the three First Ladies.

Abrams separates the lives of the three First Ladies into four chapters and within these chapters she further delineates their pre-Revolutionary lives and the post-Revolutionary presidencies through which they lived. The first three chapters detail Martha Washington as the first First Lady, Abigail Adams as the second First Lady, and Dolley Madison and her position of “Queen of America.” Then an additional chapter focuses on Abigail and John Adams. Within these chapters the author discusses the backgrounds of these three women, including their regional identity, socialization, and family life, as well as their views on the female role in society. Abrams also discusses their marriages prior to the presidency in order to relate their preparation for their roles as First Lady.

At the heart of the book is Abrams’s implied contention that the lives of these women in many ways prepared them for their positions as First Lady. Lady Washington, as Martha was known, was socialized in her early life in the presence of the politically active men in her family and was well versed in the social manners of the time for a woman of her economic status. She was engaging and accomplished and able to stay abreast of political issues and discuss a variety of intellectual subjects. When her first husband died in 1757, she wrote to a London constituent that she was taking

over management of his affairs and his estate, a hefty challenge for any woman of the period. Similarly, Abigail Adams “was educated in a manner superior to most New England females of the era. John recognized and appreciated Abigail’s keen intelligence, strong character, resilience, and generally cheerful disposition” (p. 105). She wrote to John not long after the Declaration of Independence was ratified, “If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen, and Philosophers, we should have learned women” (p. 126). And Dolley Madison’s strength of character grew even prior to her time as First Lady. She “suffered many personal losses that often left her bereft, but at the same time she became more publicly visible as a social and political force” (p. 219).

The narrative of the “iconic role” often focuses on details of the First Ladies duties, their interaction with their husbands, and their image as it was portrayed to the public. Martha, as the first First Lady, initiated protocol and became the example for others to emulate. The primary challenge was to communicate dignity and political and social equality to the public. This was often done through the levees (formal receptions) or at the presidential residence. Abrams cites historian Catherine Allgor suggestion that Martha’s role as wife of the leader of the Revolutionary army would prove to be of great benefit to her as First Lady (p. 35). Abigail, while only spending one-and-a-half years as First Lady due to health and family responsibilities, was keenly aware of the status of women in Europe versus the new United States after her extended time in Great Britain, when John was the US ambassador during the mid 1780s. The “iconic role” for her would truly be unique because she “clearly understood the social hierarchy of the English royal court and the highly complex and inflexible rules and the calibrations of rank that were exhibited there” (p. 135). Dolley began her apprenticeship as First Lady in Jefferson’s administration since his wife had died during the Revolutionary War and then she neatly transferred her skills to her husband’s administration. “She

brought comparative youth, significant energy and optimism, and especially more enthusiasm to her position than her two predecessors” (p. 221).

For Abrams, an important part of the story is the way that the First Ladies learned from one another in a uniquely American setting as republican ideals took root in the country under the new Constitution. All three women became more socially savvy through the political salons and more respected as elites of the new nation. As historian Mary Beth Norton has argued, “public political roles more closely reflected and were tied to social status rather than gender” (quoted, p. 21). As Abrams puts it, “it was tacitly understood that elite women, who were part of the governing class and official society, took part in the conversation among friends and that they had a role in power brokering, sometimes working to expand or acquire influence for their own male family members” (p. 74).

The struggle to balance the past European social structure transplanted to the colonies and the egalitarian social structure of the new American culture is also a theme woven throughout the book. This is particularly evident in the accusations by both citizens and politicians of royal behavior by all three First Families. Abrams observes how the Washingtons “merged monarchical rituals with republican ideas” but received criticism from the Jeffersonians via such newspapers as the Philadelphia *National Gazette*. In an attempt to deflect criticism, Abigail stated in a letter to a family member about George’s Tuesday levees and Martha’s Friday evening levees that “nothing [was demonstrated] which wears the least appearance of royal occasions” (p. 74).

Wars and the possibility of war are addressed in the coverage of the Washington, Adams, and Madison administrations, but they are not the primary focus. There are, however, many domestic and international events mentioned as affecting not only the new United States but also the lives of the First Ladies, including the ratification of the

Constitution, the Whiskey Rebellion, the French Revolution, the XYZ Affair, and the War of 1812. The history presented here is as much about the first four American presidents as it is about these First Ladies and as such details the reactions and policies of the presidents rather than the First Ladies. All of these events tested the resolve of the first presidents to ensure that contentious domestic developments and international affairs in particular did not disintegrate the new and fragile American state.

The three First Ladies did take political sides during these events and thereby became supporters of their husbands during particular crises. This support was what the true “iconic role” mentioned by Abrams was about, the public political support of a president by the First Lady. The author relates that the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion among western farmers resulted in partisan conflict between the Republicans and Federalists, with Martha openly siding with the Federalists while George managed to avert a political disaster by refusing to accept the “defiance of federal authority and calling up several state militias.”[4] During the XYZ Affair Abigail Adams’s feelings of aversion toward France became evident after she learned of its discreet diplomatic dealings with the Adams administration. As negotiations broke down and US diplomats in France were unsuccessful in achieving a settlement, an undeclared naval war broke out. Due to the contentiousness of impressment of American seamen among other things, the declaration of war by the United States in the War of 1812 was expected months before June 18, when it was officially made, but “through all the strains of war, Dolley managed to serve as a vivacious hostess in the evenings, consciously working to boost morale and encourage support based on patriotic sentiment” (p. 236). In an August 23, 1814, letter to her sister about her legendary saving of George Washington’s portrait, she relates that she insisted on remaining in the White House until “the large picture of General Washington is secured.... the frame [had] to be broken ... and the precious por-

trait placed in the hands of two gentlemen from New York, for safe keeping.... I must leave this house or the retreating [British] army will make me a prisoner in it.”[5]

My primary critique of the book has to do with format and structure. In a book of 261 pages, the introduction takes up 40, which is long. It could have been separated into at least two chapters as preliminary to the substantive chapters or dispersed to the beginnings of those chapters. Moreover, the subtitle leaves the reader to figure out how each chapter relates to that “iconic role,” for which there is no clear definition. Only at the end of one chapter does the author tie the phrase to its content. And, the use of the word “iconic” elevates the discussion to another level. Perhaps a different word or phrase would have been better.

Regarding structure, the two chapters on Abigail Adams—“John and Abigail Adams” and “Abigail Adams”—are repetitive and have a lot of overlapping information. Ultimately, much of this material is well-covered ground. Also, the author mentions George Washington’s tour of the New England states and what Martha did in New York City while he was there, but she does not mention his Long Island tour and how Martha conducted herself in New York City while he was there. In fact, he did three tours in the first three years of his presidency—New England in 1789, Long Island in 1790, and the southern states in 1791. Whether the author is using the New England states tour as representative history or whether she arbitrarily selected one historic event is not clear.

The assumption is that the reader understands what “iconic” means and that it signifies a brand new role for the wife of a national leader. However, there is also the issue that readers’ understanding of that role is from a twenty-first-century mentality. So, the reader must instead divest themselves of their knowledge of the contemporary role of the First Lady and use their historical imagination to understand this new role in the eighteenth century. The author’s explanation of the iconic

role of the First Ladies is more a description of their duties interwoven with some explanatory context rather than a detailed analysis of what made the new role iconic.

The author contributes to the intellectual discussion about First Ladies in the public arena but does not break new ground. There are occasional phrases that relate to the iconic role but as a whole, much more could have been done with this book. Generally Abrams gathers the iconic thoughts about these three women from a range of sources and collects them into a single source. This is the book's primary contribution.

It might have been easier to understand the iconic role if a comparison had been drawn to what the life of a national leader's wife would have been like prior to the role of First Lady. This could have been done with the wives of (British) colonial governors, (American) colonial assemblymen, or members of the Virginia House of Burgesses, or even the wives of the delegates to the Continental Congress, for instance. There are references to women's roles and Abrams does mention briefly Abigail Adams's perceptions of the British queen when she was in London. And, again, there are occasional phrases to describe what could be part of the new iconic role, but if I were not a regular reader of Revolutionary or Early Republic history, I would want more information.

Additionally, and most importantly, the Revolutionary generation ends with the fifth president James Monroe (1817-25), the last of the "Virginia Dynasty" and the fourth of the first five presidents from Virginia. It is not clear why the comparison of the three First Ladies mentioned ends with Dolley Madison. Some historians even include Louisa Adams, the wife of the sixth president, John Quincy Adams (1825-29), son of John Adams, in their list of Revolutionary-era presidents.[6] And, finally, Thomas Jefferson, the third president (1801-09) did not have an official First Lady because his wife died in 1782 and his administration hostess was at times Dolley Madison or his niece.

On other occasions he presided over events or proceedings by himself. Thus, given that this book is presented largely through the office of the presidency, there are large gaps between administrations that leave the reader feeling a bit chronologically disoriented.

Overall, *First Ladies of the Republic* makes a useful contribution to early American history in its portrayal of these First Ladies and can be enjoyed by the general reader as well as the scholar. This book does much to keep early American political and social history alive by delving into the public and private lives of the Washington, Adams, and Madison families and their administrations.

Notes

[1]. James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1969), 134.

[2]. Phyllis Lee Levin, *Abigail Adams: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 95.

[3]. Richard N. Cote, *Strength and Honor: The Life of Dolley Madison* (Mt. Pleasant, SC: Corinthian Books, 2005), 149.

[4]. Patricia Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005), 205.

[5]. Katherine Anthony, *Dolly Madison: Her Life and Times* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.), 225.

[6]. Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies from Martha Washington to Barbara Bush: The Fascinating Lives of the Women in the Influential Role of America's First Lady* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 308-09.

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