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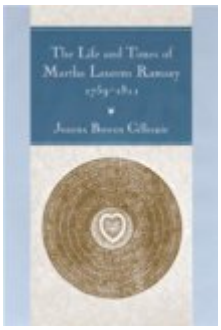

Joanna Bowen Gillespie. *The Life and Times of Martha Laurens Ramsay, 1759-1811.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001. xxviii + 315 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-373-5.

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Religious Introspection in a Changing World

Martha Laurens Ramsay, the title-subject of this historical biography, lived through the political upheaval of the American Revolution, the disruptions of occupation and war, and the material privations and insecurities of the Confederation and Early National era. Born into a distinguished South Carolina family, and afforded an exceptional education, this unique woman kept a diary that was published, at her request, posthumously by her husband Dr. David Ramsay in 1811. [1]

At first glance, these memoirs appear a mouth-watering prospect for any student of Revolutionary America. Martha Laurens Ramsay was the daughter of statesman Henry Laurens, captured by the British and imprisoned in London, while her brother John fought for and eventually became a martyr-hero of the Patriot cause. She was well-read, intelligent, single-minded and had seen the wonders of Paris and London as well as the kaleidoscopic attractions and detractions of Charleston. Martha fulfilled the roles of dutiful daughter and domestic manager, submissive and reproductive wife (bearing eleven children), caring mother and spiritual educator. She was in a unique position to present a southern woman's account of a changing world.

Deeper acquaintance with Martha Laurens Ramsay's writings may disappoint those in search of sensationalist revelations, for such external incidents only provided punctuation to her life. What Joanna Bowen Gillespie's invaluable analysis brings out most clearly is the internal, spiritual framework through which Martha Laurens Ramsay sought to understand her experiences. In Gillespie's capable hands, we are shown how Martha's actions and reactions, her feelings and words were all filtered through the strainer of her Protestant Christian mindset. By contextualising one woman's writing within her diverse religious and social influences, Gillespie offers something far subtler than a new perspective on revolutionary events: insight into the interpretative processes applied by elite Anglo-American women to the events around them.

Gillespie's book adopts a flexible but largely chronological approach to chart her title-subject's life, arranged intelligently around the constraints

of sources and a number of resurfacing themes. The Anglo-American Christian worldview that shaped Martha's writings stands at the forefront, with the more indirect and inferred influences of slavery, patriarchy and patriotism receiving extensive consideration.

In the opening chapters, we are introduced to the young Martha Laurens Ramsay in the context of late colonial Charleston. The importance of personal spirituality was inculcated early through her Huguenot ancestry, her regular attendance at St. Philip's Episcopal Church, and her active absorption of a religiously-structured education. In some senses, Martha's childhood was typical of elite lowcountry girls, and bore all the hallmarks of southern society. She learnt familiarity with the institution of slavery, and experienced the loss of close relatives to disease. Painful lessons were drawn from scandals in her distant family, including a cousin's exploitation by a step-father and a resultant childbirth. And although Martha was indulged by her wealthy father, the limits of her education were always delineated by the invisible edifice of southern patriarchy. Henry Laurens, having agreed to buy his daughter a set of globes to assist her study of geography, remarked that all she need do by way of thanking him was to remember "when you measure the surface of this world . . . that you are to act a part on it, and think of a plumb pudding and other domestic duties" (p. 33).

Any individuality that was partly proscribed in the social world found expression in the introspective, spiritual world. At the age of fourteen years and seven weeks, Martha Laurens Ramsay made a solemn covenant with God, written by herself and adapted from reading the work of Anglican theologian Philip Doddridge. [2] This document became Martha's physical expression of her yearning for religious self-improvement, something she kept close throughout her life, referred back to, and rededicated. The spiritual fortitude which her religiosity upheld would provide Martha with armour against the geographic and emotional displacements she suffered in the coming years.

As a young adult, Martha was somewhat withdrawn, and descriptions by her brother and father paint a portrait of a shy, quiet, tentative girl, who made up in intelligence for what she lacked in 'poise and charm' (p. 83). Having spent her late teens and early twenties looking after the household of her uncle in England (1775-1777) and later France (1777-1785), Martha was spatially distant from the traumatic events in her homeland, although through Gillespie's astute use of extant correspondence, she was undeniably emotionally involved. This ten year sojourn -- at an age when the vast majority of southern women would normally participate in courtship and marriage -- hinted at signs of a growing independence of spirit in the young woman. Martha set up a school to teach French children in Vigan, she petitioned Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to help secure her father's release from prison in England, and at the age of twenty-two she even broached the subject of a proposed marriage with her proud and suspicious father.

Two years after her return to South Carolina, Martha Laurens Ramsay married at last (at the relatively advanced age of twenty-eight), becoming the third wife of the portly, long-nosed, smallpox-scarred Pennsylvania-born Dr. David Ramsay. This marriage occupies the second half of the biography, as Gillespie outlines how submission to one patriarchal authority, Martha's father, transferred to another, her husband. In some respects, this transferral of submission is reflected in the sources available to the author. Much of the information about young Martha is derived from the papers of her father Henry Laurens, whilst the editing and publication of her memoirs was an undertaking pursued by her husband. She was an intense and private character, with few female friends, and an assiduous loyalty to male relatives in her role as 'kin-keeper.' It is no surprise, then,

that Martha appears encapsulated in a patriarchal world.

Gillespie devotes an entire chapter to the crisis year (1795) in which Martha Laurens Ramsay's conviction in her world, her life and herself was violently shaken. Indeed, this breakdown constitutes the largest portion printed from her diary by David Ramsay, who reasoned that in itself his wife's heartfelt journal offered some important and comforting advice on the reaffirmation of faith to those seeking a paragon of womanhood in the new nation. On Gillespie's couch, Martha's pietistic introspection is placed within an historical framework -- a combination of financial concerns, life cycle events (i.e. the birth of a first son), and above all the perception of failure in the religious domain of her own household. The underlying implication is that Martha's intellectual world was confined to religion by the patriarchal society she inhabited, and therefore that when Faith and Providence came under serious scrutiny, a mental collapse of some sort was liable to occur.

Martha Laurens Ramsay came through what she described as 'the Dark Night of the Soul,' and participated in the shaping of her marriage and her children according to republican ideals. Gillespie argues that the Ramsay marriage (as recounted in the 'Memoirs') was "an analogue of the shifting order in the new republic" (p. 107), something about which both partners were acutely aware and concerned to convey in their different spheres. As explored by contemporaries and historians, the new republic brought new ideals for American women -- or at the very least cloaked traditional paragons in a new language. [3] Virtue and disinterestedness characterised the Ramsays' portrayal of Martha's experience of marriage. But her evident religious devotion, more than anything else, best cast her in the mould of republican mother, and was a fundamental motivational factor in prompting David Ramsay to publish her 'Memoirs' when his dying wife wanted them preserved "as a common book" for the family.

Arguably the book's greatest strength -- that of contextualising Martha's life despite the difficulties and inconsistencies of her own voice within the historical record -- is on occasion, inevitably, one of its few weaknesses. The camera, as it were, remains admirably fixed upon Martha, and her aging appearance fades in and out of focus according to the writings of her male influences. Particularly in the chapter aptly entitled "Slavery and Silence," Gillespie is forced to deal often in potentialities -- of Martha's likely experiences and perceptions of the institution that was so fundamental to her southern society and more specifically to her familial prosperity. She concludes that "a mature, ethical mind like Martha's couldn't help but recoil at realizing that 'her' system, slaveowning, treated human beings as commodities. While she found ways to live within the cognitive dissonance thus created, maintaining the social charade must have increasingly affronted her spiritual intelligence" (p. 180). It is intensely frustrating that an absence of detailed sources on this issue have denied us the opportunity of acquiring a more verifiable understanding of a southern elite woman's views.

Indeed, Martha Laurens Ramsay -- despite her firm southern roots --appears to lack many traits that we might customarily ascribe to her peers. As Gillespie notes in her preface, the 'Memoirs' are more reminiscent of New England pious tracts than a genuinely southern account (p. xv). We may question how far she could be deemed representative not only of southern white women but even southern white elite women, such as loyalist Mrs. Elizabeth Lichtenstein Johnston of Savannah, who also lost a mother when aged ten, was well-educated and described as "deeply religious," but was more willing in her 'Recollections' to engage with unseemly issues, including slavery ("My father had a sensible, plausible black man, who had been brought up as a pet in my grandfather's house, and who was greatly attached to the family") and revolution ("Our teachers became officers in the rebel army, and everywhere the scum rose

to the top"). [4] Even within Martha Laurens Ramsay's own extended family, those strong patriarchal influences that structured her actions were not always reflected in the behaviour of her peers --for instance the sexual 'misdemeanours' of her cousin, her brother and her niece.

The somewhat dry personality of the title-subject ("Martha was not a rebel, nor did her preserved record allow much humor or winsomeness to shine through," [p. 139]), makes it imperative for the author to elaborate around her main character, and here Gillespie is exemplary. Her portrayal of the forces and relationships which influenced the world of Martha Laurens Ramsay is subtle, perceptive, and underscored by comprehensive, meticulous research into both the limited world of the Laurens and the Ramsays, and the wider context of Anglo-American literary publications.

Of course, the incomplete nature of Martha's correspondence -- and the abridgement of her diary by her husband-editor -- necessarily leave us yearning for more direct insight into her world. But longing for the greener pastures, for the full text original diary, as Gillespie does herself (xxvii), is the prerogative of researchers of late colonial southern (and especially non-elite) women. Martha Laurens Ramsay's historical biography as it stands provides a richly detailed insight into the experience of elite Anglo-American Protestant womanhood in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As contextualised by Joanna Gillespie, Martha's life provides the field with another "personal window into our [America's] national beginnings" (p. xxiii). Martha's window may be double glazed and is certainly stained with religious imagery, but undoubtedly enlightens our understanding of women's perceived and real position within Revolutionary and Early National America.

Notes:

[1]. David Ramsay (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay* (Charleston, 1811).

[2]. Rev. Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1744).

[3]. See, for instance, Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

[4]. Arthur Wentworth Eaton (ed.), *Recollections of a Georgia Loyalist* (New York, 1901).

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