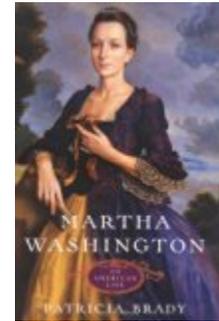


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Patricia Brady. *Martha Washington: An American Life*. New York: Viking, 2005. iii + 272 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-303713-2; \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-03430-7.

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A Second Look at a First Lady

The cover illustration and subsequent pages of the latest biography of Martha Washington challenge our stereotyped image, frozen in time, of America's first "first lady" as an elderly, timid matron. Historian Patricia Brady invites us to take a closer look at a significant, though sparsely documented, figure in American history. Brady's approach to the biography is not unlike the technique the book's cover artist, Michael Deas, uses to portray a very feminine and graceful Martha Custis based on a forensic imaging and age regression of a Charles Wilson Peale miniature. Brady's own fresh portrait of the Virginia gentlewoman uses the limited direct documentary source material that exists to situate her in a contextualized historical narrative that challenges some of our static preconceptions. Brady fleshes out the facts recorded in the brief sketch of Washington's life written by Ellen McCallister Clark (*Martha Washington: A Brief Biography* [2002]) and provides some details of the times and relationships in which the first lady was immersed, especially her marriage to George Washington. With a paucity of only five known extant documents exchanged between George and Martha Washington, including one at the Virginia Historical Society that the author identified, Brady and other biographers must grapple with the lacunae of source material. Martha Washington supposedly burned her correspondence with her famous second husband before her death, to keep their relationship private. The lack of documentary evidence makes it difficult to interpret their almost forty-one-year partnership. Yet, Brady makes extensive use of George Washington's correspondence and letters written by others that mention his wife.

"Based almost entirely on published manuscripts," Brady's book is indebted to the modern documentary editions of *The Papers of George Washington*, edited by W. W. Abbott and others, and published in multiple series at the University of Virginia since 1976, and the single-volume collection "*Worthy Partner*": *The Papers of Martha Washington* (1994), compiled and published by Joseph E. Fields (p. 255). Following the lead of such historians as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who have teased out life details from women who left more of a trace in pins and needles than pens and papers, Brady also makes good use of material culture to interpret the life of Martha Washington.[1] An author who has previously written on southern women and domestic life, Brady describes the modest bathing attire her subject wore, the blue cloth-lined chair in which she rode, the stockings she knit for her husband, and the handkerchiefs she stitched for grandchildren, as well as the domestic purchases made and recorded in her account books as a new wife and plantation mistress. Brady masterfully draws a great deal from her limited sources, but, just as a painter often takes artistic license to interpret a subject, she sometimes tries to read Martha Washington's intent and feelings without more than a hunch or a modern sensibility to inform her conjectures.

Martha Washington emerges as a woman of her time and place, the eldest daughter of eight children in a long-rooted Virginia lineage. Brady rightly acknowledges that to understand her we need to understand the customs of eighteenth-century Virginia and of southern women in particular. As women's historians have long realized, the nodal points in women's lives are often different from

those of the men whose lives they shared. This account of Martha Washington bears witness to that insight. The fateful battle of Yorktown with its heralding of the British surrender and end of the American Revolution pale in significance for the commanding general's wife with another key event of 1781, the death of her beloved son John Parke (Jacky) Custis. The famous farewell address of her husband in 1796 merits only a passing paragraph and is noted not for its form and content but to indicate her delight that her husband would soon return to private life.

Family was of primary concern to Martha Washington, and her understanding of family was both expansive and changing across her lifespan. As a woman who experienced great and frequent loss, she outlived her parents, siblings, first husband, children, some of her great grandchildren, and her famous second spouse. Brady's biography is rooted in role analysis, and her family charts are helpful in untangling some of the "genealogical snarls" that plague Virginia families (p. 20).

Brady assigns more determination to Martha Dandridge than heretofore appreciated, especially in standing up to, and winning the approval of, her future father-in-law John Custis. She also reexamines the initial meeting of George Washington and the young widow Martha Custis, dismissing the notion that the young colonel married her only for her money and diminishing the love-at-first-sight romantic myth made popular by nineteenth-century family descendants. While her first marriage to Daniel Parke Custis had made her wealthy and George Washington stood to gain social and financial prominence as a result of marrying her, she also considered other suitors. Brady makes the case that the older widower-with-children Charles Carter was a serious marriage prospect, as was the eight-month younger and unencumbered bachelor who ultimately won her hand.

Brady credits Martha Washington with much agency in deciding to please herself in her second marriage. Likewise, she contends that George Washington was an attractive man who suffered from an unrequited love with Sally Fairfax yet ultimately realized that his friend's wife was off limits to him. The Washingtons, Brady argues, were able to enjoy a deeply companionate marriage as well as an unstrained mutual friendship with the Fairfax couple for the remainder of their lives. Brady credits Washington with being secure in her own worth by rising above any petty jealousies of her husband's female friends. She downplays and does not directly mention a letter from George Washington to Fairfax written later in

life.[2]

Martha Washington was a woman of her time, albeit a very wealthy woman. Whereas her husband's passion was building, her passion was how many relatives she could welcome to fill their home. Brady describes a woman who always enjoyed the company of young people and even adopted grandchildren and took numerous nieces and nephews under her wing. The rhythm of Washington's days included managing a growing domestic household and seeing to the education of children and grandchildren, as well as sewing, reading, dancing, theater-going, and other socially proscribed behavior for a woman of her station. She had an almost obsessive worry about family, travel by water, and smallpox inoculation, but overcame her fears for the sake of her family.

Brady reminds us that Martha Washington's marriage to George Washington quite literally expanded her horizons, taking her much farther north than she had ever been before; indeed, at the time of her marriage, she had never been more than twenty miles from the house where she was born. Brady also attempts to explore Martha Washington's spiritual and intellectual horizons. Yet, without reflections on her reading or concrete evidence to prove or disprove inner devotion and beliefs, Brady recounts the titles of her library and also surmises that she likely read her Bible and prayer book as well as popular inspirational books by Anglican clerics.

Lady Washington achieved public fame from her loyal, annual visits to her husband's winter encampments during the American Revolution. These visits required extensive preparation and caused anguished separation from family at Mount Vernon, but they allowed her to be supportive of the partner in whose company she longed to dwell. Her brave, hospitable presence with her husband for nearly five of the eight and a half years he commanded the army was essential, even indispensable, to George Washington's emotional well being, Brady argues, enabling him to accomplish much and giving him a haven where he could let down his guard. Martha Washington's devotion to her husband during wartime made her "the secret weapon of the American Revolution," but that weapon was a double-edged sword for her because it tore her from the home that she much preferred and kept her in the public eye (p. 145).

Her husband's presidency was perhaps even more of a sacrifice for her and was akin to state imprisonment for the very same reasons, yet Brady places Martha Washington on a pedestal in filling the role of the nation's first lady with wit, charm, and gracious conversation, endear-

ing herself to many at her popular Friday evening receptions. If George Washington was conscious of the precedent he set in the execution of his roles as commander-in-chief and first president, one wonders if his wife was equally aware of her own precedent and the effect of her actions. Brady's chronological life account is slim on George Washington's second term, perhaps because the modern documentary edition of his papers has not yet completed these years. But Brady interprets the time in the federal city of Philadelphia as hell for Martha Washington, who suffered twice as much as her husband did from the slings and arrows of the brutal partisan attacks against him in the 1790s.

While her depiction of Lady Washington is more nuanced than those of earlier biographies, Brady perpetuates some stereotypes of other contemporaries, notably her subject's mother-in-law, Mary Washington, whom Brady derides as stern, acquisitive, and self-centered, and Thomas Jefferson, whom Brady portrays as a boorish and insensitive colleague who had wounded George Washington "so cruelly for political ends" (p. 227). A widower who empathetically reached out to others in their grief over the loss of children or spouse, Jefferson paid a visit to Mount Vernon in January 1801 to call on the widow Washington. Yet, this gesture, even if politically motivated, goes unmentioned by Brady. Slavery is the ever-present canvas on which the picture of any Virginia plantation family is painted, but especially one as prominent as the occupants of Mount Vernon with its large number of household and plantation slaves. Several of these slaves traveled with the Washingtons to their places of residence in New York City and Philadelphia. Brady notes that Martha Washington had great affection for some particular servants and treated them well, but she did not share her husband's enlightened views and repugnance of the fundamental immorality of slavery. She never could grasp why her maid Ona Judge would run to freedom, and Brady gives short shrift to her story as well as to that of Martha Washington's runaway cook Hercules.

Because so much of Martha Washington's dower estate contained slaves (at least 153 of the 317 slaves at Mount Vernon upon George Washington's retirement were "dower" slaves who had interbred with Washington's own slaves), it was difficult for her husband to manumit them, and he only pledged them their freedom upon the death of his wife. Brady claims that Martha Washington could not sell or liberate these slaves during her lifetime even if she wanted to do so, because they were legally entangled in part of the family es-

tate that would pass on to her grandchildren. Ironically, her Custis dower, the land and slaves that brought her wealth, were not hers to dispose of had she been so inclined. Martha Washington did free all 123 of Washington's slaves on New Year's Day 1801, on the advice of Bushrod Washington and not from a conviction of the evils of slavery.

Only in a bibliographical note does Brady mention recent modern interpretations of Martha Washington's views on slavery and the interracial world in which she lived, although she did not leave written documentation about these views. Unlike Helen Bryan, who has made much of Martha Washington's mulatto half-brother-in-law Jack Custis in the dispersal of the Custis estate in her *Martha Washington: First Lady of Liberty* (2002), Brady merely refers to the mixed-race Jack Custis as his father's "favourite boy" (pp. 31, 43). In his interpretation of incest and miscegenation in the case of Martha Washington's alleged half-sister of mixed race, Ann Dandridge, Henry Wiencek has suggested, in *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (2003), that Martha Washington was indifferent to slaves' feelings and intransigent about slavery. But Brady, in her note on the sources, dismisses the debate as lacking documentary evidence and patently deems the controversy false, claiming that it "simply isn't true" (p. 256).

As a popular biography, *Martha Washington* is an accessible, informative read that could work well as an introduction to themes in American women's history. The frustratingly brief citation style and the sometimes jarring transitions to new topics should not keep a reader from picking up this nuanced work by a historian well versed in the period and cleverly skilled at drawing loose threads and diverse family histories into a richer tapestry. Although the "search for the real Martha Washington" may always prove futile because of the dearth of documentation, Brady offers plausible insights into a woman's life that will always remain somewhat shrouded (p. 230).

Notes

[1]. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Of Pens and Needles: Sources in Early American Women's History," *Journal of American History* 77 (1990): 200-207.

[2]. George Washington to Sarah Cary Fairfax, May 16, 1798, in *The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series*, ed. W. W. Abbot, et al. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 2:272-275. Other historians

have made much of this letter to the widow Fairfax that Washington wrote late in life, fondly recalling that he had enjoyed the happiest moments of his life in her company. Yet, both George and Martha Washington made copies of the letter, and Martha added local as well as family news to her husband's draft of it.

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