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Philip Levy. *George Washington Written Upon the Land: Nature, Memory, Myth, and Landscape.* Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2015. 224 pp. \$22.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-940425-90-0.

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There are as many versions of the Founding Fathers trotted out to support a specific cause as there have been political movements in the United States. As the first president and the symbolic father of the nation, George Washington has always been a particularly attractive figure to have on one's side. His famous restraint, his practice for concealing his true emotions, and his efforts to lead in a nonpartisan manner make it easy for politicians, activists, and scholars to adopt Washington as their figurehead. Using archaeological evidence and an exhaustive survey of secondary literature, Philip Levy's *George Washington: Written Upon the Land* examines how Washington's childhood in particular has played a unique role in American memory.

Levy weaves together two distinct themes throughout the book. First, he engages with the extensive literature on Washington's life and the various arguments put forth on his childhood. Levy demonstrates how scholars and laymen alike have used Ferry Farm—Washington's childhood home—to support their own political arguments, professional goals, and pocketbooks. He analyzes numerous biographies written about Washington, summarizes their arguments, critiques their sources, and then continually interacts with them throughout the book. For example, Levy cites Douglas Southall Freeman's seven-volume biography as the first to work with Washington's private correspondence and papers (1948-57). Yet, Levy notes that Freeman still included the old mythological stories, although he "tempered [them] with hedging phrases such as 'tradition says'" (p. 42). Later, Levy returns to Freeman's work and argues that Freeman emphasizes Washington's surveying background because it

made the young George appear to fit the rich, western values that appealed to Freeman.

Second, to help flesh out life at Ferry Farm, Levy presents archaeological evidence that he uncovered as part of the George Washington Foundation's archeological team. Levy weaves together the literature and his own findings throughout the book to tell the experience of Ferry Farm from the early eighteenth century to the present. Levy argues that Washington's childhood is subject to intense scrutiny from scholars because there is so *little* remaining evidence. Unlike Washington's adult years, in which he produced an extensive written record, his childhood years leave much open to interpretation. Furthermore, as the symbolic father of the nation, scholars have used Washington's childhood as a model for future generations.

Levy's first chapter introduces the reader to the extensive body of scholarship on Washington and analyzes the themes promoted by each biographer. Preoccupied with middle-class values, nineteenth-century authors emphasized that Washington was a self-made man. They focused on his relatively humble origins, especially after the death of his father Augustine, and his limited formal education. Early twentieth-century biographers painted Mary Washington as controlling and abrasive. Works by Paul Leicester Ford, Samuel Eliot Morison, and Southall Freeman reassured readers that Washington's manly character and physical prowess remained untainted by Mary's femininity. Levy ends the chapter by noting that recent biographers prefer to skip over Washington's childhood; for example, Joseph Ellis wrote

that “history first noticed Washington in 1753” (p. 58).

In chapter 2, Levy explores the three-page survey of Ferry Farm that Washington drafted in the fall of 1771. Washington surveyed his property before putting the land up for sale, a fact that Levy argues is itself significant. Washington hardly ever sold land—especially a good plot along a major road with good river access, let alone the property where he spent his childhood and where his mother lived for most of her adult life. Washington also completed the survey for his own personal use. He never shared it with anyone, even when it would have been helpful to completing the sale of the land. Levy analyzes the survey for clues to Washington’s feelings about his childhood home. For example, Washington began his assessment with the “little gate by the tombstone” (p. 79, rather than the house as standard surveying practice would suggest. Levy argues that the tombstone may have reminded Washington of his deceased sister, Mildred, or the losses of his brother and father he endured while at Ferry Farm.

The third chapter—in which he presents the archaeological discoveries at Ferry Farm—is Levy’s finest contribution in the book. Levy explains how the archaeological record provides nuance to previously worn tropes about Ferry Farm. For example, rather than proving the traditional theory that money and resources were scarce at Ferry Farm during the 1740s, the physical evidence tells a story of “adaptation and stretching” (p. 105). Early 1740s stoneware purchases at Ferry Farm were in line with fashionable taste. Yet, uncovered fragments suggest that the table settings were made to last longer than would be necessary if the family had significant liquid capital. A bone handle from a needlepoint tool, a fragment of an ornamental ceramic figurine, and remnants of tea sets indicate that Mary selected the cheapest possible items to showcase metropolitan taste while remaining within her limited budget. The archaeological record also sheds light on the lives of enslaved African Americans at Ferry Farm. The slaves used much of the same plateware as the white residents. Beads and cowry shells used as hair adornments “speak of African identity” (p. 116). Bones found in multiple cellars indicate that the Washingtons ate large quantities of venison and relied on hunting opportunities outside their front door to provide variety in their diet. Slaves at Ferry Farm ate similar quantities of venison, pork, and beef, but had less access to smaller animals such as “ducks, turkeys, pigeons, and rabbits” (p. 118). Instead, the slaves fleshed out their diet with turtles, possums, and foxes.

Chapters 4 and 5 evaluate how writers and owners of Ferry Farm after Washington’s death have interpreted his childhood home. In 1806, Mason Weems started this process when he published the largely invented *Life of Washington*. Weems’s interpretation created a “collective memory of a single national childhood” at a time when the future of the nation seemed in doubt (p. 138). Weems’s depiction of Ferry Farm highlighted the humble and run-down home, the lush and verdant grounds, and the presence of trees that came to symbolize Washington in American memory. As the eighteenth century progressed, Washington emerged from this glowing portrait as a self-made man, and Weems’s fanciful depiction of the farm served as a “shared American landscape vision” (p. 157). In 1909, James Beverly Colbert purchased the Ferry Farm land and marketed a nineteenth-century building as a Surveying Office used by Washington to attract tourists. This new round of “preservation” appealed to Virginians as they embraced a collective past that was easier to acknowledge than the recent Civil War. Colbert used the Surveying Office as a nod to Washington’s interest in western expansion and his professional experience. At the turn of the century, Americans worried that the western frontier had closed and no more landed existed to serve as a cradle for democracy. Washington’s interest in western expansion and his professionalism appealed to the American consciousness.

In the sixth chapter, Levy performs his own examination of Ferry Farm and Washington’s childhood, and draws three lessons for the reader to consider. First, Levy suggests that Washington served as an active player in the coming of the Anthropocene Age, the era in which “human activity has had an effect on the climatic and environmental condition of the planet” (p. 206). Levy posits that the rise of the British Empire and its industrialized economy proved to be a starting point of climate change in the Anthropocene Era. Many scholars, including Fred Anderson and J. Frederick Fausz, attribute the rise of the British Empire to its victory over the French in the Seven Years’ War and blame Washington’s ill-fated journey to the Ohio Country in 1754 for starting the conflict. Because of Washington’s role in the outbreak of the war, Levy argues that historians should evaluate Washington as an actor in climate change. Second, Levy shows how eighteenth-century home construction and land stewardship utilized local resources, rather than producing and shipping materials from overseas. Levy argues that the study of Ferry Farm may encourage a return to this approach as a gentler way to interact with the planet. Third, Levy compares the fable of Washington cutting down the

cherry tree to a section in the Book of Deuteronomy prohibiting the cutting down of fruit trees while conducting a siege. Levy traces how rabbis have interpreted this section over the last several generations. Recently, progressive rabbis have linked this concept to the modern teaching of “fixing the world.” Levy argues that, like these progressive Jewish teachings, the fable of Washington and Cherry Tree has much to offer about caring for the planet.

Overall, Levy contributes a valuable synthesis of the role the memory of Washington has played in the Amer-

ican imagination and offers unique insight into the archaeological discoveries at Ferry Farm. Unfortunately, the last chapter distracts from Levy’s otherwise solid contribution. In linking Washington and Ferry Farm to climate change, responsible building practices, and Jewish ethical teachings, Levy resorts to the same tactics that he criticized Weems and other scholars for using in his first chapter—he uses Washington to promote his own interests and values. Although these arguments are thought-provoking, they would have been better suited for a separate publication.

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