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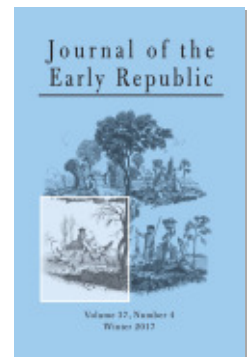
*The Washingtons: George and Martha, “Join’d by
Friendship, Crown’d by Love* by Flora Fraser (review)

Cassandra Good

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REVIEWS

EDITED BY SEAN P. HARVEY AND
LUCIA McMAHON

The Washingtons: George and Martha, “Join’d by Friendship, Crown’d by Love.” By Flora Fraser. (New York: Knopf, 2015. Pp. 448. Cloth, \$30.00.)

Reviewed by Cassandra Good

The latest trend in biographies of the founding fathers has been to tell the story of a married couple or a group, as in the many biographies of John and Abigail Adams. British biographer Flora Fraser has taken this approach before in her book on King George III’s six daughters, but now she has turned her attention to America. Her portrait of George and Martha Washington’s marriage is detailed and thoroughly documented, but like most popular histories, focuses on narrative rather than broader historical arguments and insights.

Writing about the Washingtons is far more challenging than the Adamses; unlike the copious correspondence John and Abigail Adams left, the Washingtons apparently burned their letters to one another. Only five letters between them survive. Telling the story of their relationship, then, requires careful digging through other sources and making inferences, which Fraser does skillfully. She uses George Washington’s financial records (now available online to be further mined by scholars at <http://financial.gwpapers.org>), writings by others who knew the pair, and letters that George and Martha sent to friends and family. With these sources, she reconstructs the story of their four-decades-long marriage.

Fraser’s overarching thesis is that “Washington’s marriage was, in more than one sense, the making of him” (xiv). Fraser argues that marrying Martha gave George Washington wealth, a family of children to raise and thus the civically significant role of father, and the self-assurance and

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emotional support required to sustain his military and political careers. With the exception of self-assurance, all of these benefits of the marriage are easy to see. The subtitle of the book provides another persistent theme: The pair married for friendship rather than romance, but came to deeply love one another.

Fraser begins by portraying George and Martha as young adults who met and married in their mid-twenties, much to George's advantage. Martha was a wealthy widow and had her choice of young suitors, while George was lovesick over his married neighbor Sally Fairfax. Fraser speculates that Martha must have married George for love, even if George was cooler in his affections. Martha had to leave her friends and family in New Kent, Virginia, and move with her two young children to a house under construction in northern Virginia with her new husband. But much of their marriage was ultimately spent away from the family circle at Mount Vernon.

With the coming of the American Revolution, George and Martha led a peripatetic life that Fraser chronicles in depth. She recounts the military events that kept the couple apart (in such detail that it can be distracting), then follows Martha as she traveled each year to join her husband at the winter encampment. Martha endured considerable discomfort, inconvenience, and even danger as she traveled north to live with the officers. George's role as commander-in-chief thrust Martha into a new public role, and while she never appears to have taken an interest in politics to the degree her successors Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison did, she was well aware of the importance of her activities. Martha carefully followed military developments, hosted officers and admirers, and embraced her role as a national symbol.

Despite their public prominence, both George and Martha always claimed to prefer family life at home. The couple supported numerous nieces and nephews in addition to Martha's children and later grandchildren, two of whom they adopted. It is clear that their marriage was a happy and loving one; Lafayette wrote that Martha "loves her husband madly," while George addressed her as "My Dearest" (173). Both were reluctant to leave Mount Vernon for George to assume the presidency, and Fraser races through the presidential years with greater focus on family developments than political ones. The book closes with George and Martha's deaths and their burial at Mount Vernon.

Fraser's approach is generally to allow the historical figures to speak for themselves rather than interpreting or making larger arguments. She

is particularly interested in illuminating Martha Washington, who has been the subject of limited scholarly attention. We learn from those who observed Martha that she was friendly, cheerful, dignified, domestic, devoted, agreeable, and intelligent, but not well-read. It's hard not to wonder how much of this picture of Martha was an image carefully crafted by a woman who knew she was in the public eye. Quotes from her letters addressing handling of her slaves, for instance, paint a picture of a shrewder and less amiable figure.

Many of the incidents in Fraser's story could have been drawn out and made more comprehensible with relevant historiography. Work on women's political involvement in particular would help illuminate to what extent Martha was a political being in her own right. The dynamics of Revolutionary War camp life, the political symbolism of social events, and Martha's duties running the Mount Vernon estate could all have been explored more fully and fruitfully with insights gleaned from the ample scholarship on these topics. Such context might also have led to more nuanced conclusions throughout the book.

Nonetheless, Fraser has crafted a readable, thorough tale worth telling. It will certainly be of interest to the general public, but scholars will also find much that is valuable. Fraser's synthesis of a wealth of primary sources can serve as a resource for Washington scholars and for those engaged in histories of women, marriage, the family, politics, and war in the late eighteenth century.

CASSANDRA GOOD is assistant professor of history at Marymount University. She is the author of *Founding Friendships: Friendships Between Men and Women in the Early American Republic* (New York, 2015) and is currently working on a biography of George and Martha Washington's family.

The Papers of George Washington: The Revolutionary War Series, Volume 23: 22 October–December 1779. Edited by William M. Ferraro. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015. Pp. 904. Cloth, \$95.00.)

Reviewed by David Head

The Papers of George Washington Project, begun in 1968, marches on, with the end now in sight. Sixty-three out of a planned ninety volumes