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REVIEW

A Great Lady:
The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison

Beverly Wilson Palmer


Why is Dolley Madison considered one of the most important nineteenth-century American women and the greatest First Lady until Eleanor Roosevelt assumed the position in 1933? In their introduction to Chapter Three, editors Mattern and Shulman pose this question as the thesis of The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison (92). The editors’ question is a provocative one. Who remembers Sarah Childress Polk? Ida Saxton McKinley? Others, such as Abigail Smith Adams or Edith Bolling Wilson, come to mind but their roles were not like the ones Dolley Madison fashioned for herself as First Lady. In this volume we see how Dolley Payne Madison [hereafter DPM] created a position as the consummate hostess and conversationalist, filling the expected role of women in public life at that time. This edition ably documents the prominence of DPM as a First Lady.¹

DPM supported but did not advise James Madison in his posts as secretary of state (1801–09) and U.S. president (1809–17). She did not see herself as a “politician,” writing James Madison (hereafter JM) in 1805 that “I beleive you would not desire your wife the active partizan ... nor will there be the slightest danger whilst she is conscious of her want of talents, and her diffidence in expressing her opinions always imperfectly understood by her sex” (70). The editors emphasize DPM’s “generosity and sociability,” citing various sources from journalists to diplomats who praised DPM’s feminine,

¹A personal experience may illustrate the widespread reputation of Dolley Madison. As children, my friend and I wrote a skit for a local women’s club. I chose to be Dolley Madison, who, as the incoming First Lady, would pay a social call on Martha Washington as the Washingtons prepared to leave the presidency. When my mother corrected this historical inaccuracy, I was chagrined to have to become Abigail Adams instead. What nine-year-old child in my southern Ohio town had ever heard of Abigail Adams?
winning ways (96–97). Much of her charm stemmed from her resolve to remove herself from domestic and foreign policy issues alike, viz. the Federalist/Republican disputes and Madison’s controversial decision in 1812 to ask Congress to declare war against Great Britain. “In politicks you know, I was never an Adept” she wrote Christopher Hughes (20 March 1828, p. 274) and seven years later, reflecting upon her years in Washington, she wrote her niece, “Our sex are ever loosers, when they stem the torrent of public opinion” (to Mary E. E. Cutts, 10 March 1835, p. 310).

Despite these protestations, DPM filled her letters during JM’s presidency with Washington news and gossip. Yet she refrained from analyzing these events. To her sister Anna Cutts she wrote in December 1811, “I believe there will be War as M see’s no end to our perplexities without it—they are going on with the preperations to [g]reat extent” (154). In May 1813 she described extended “preperations” to her cousin Edward Coles: “We are makeing considerable efforts for defence.... The 20 Tents, allready look well, in My eyes as I have allways been an advocate for fighting when assailed, tho a Quaker, I therefore keep the old Tunesian Sabre within my reach” (176).

The volume’s five chapters reflect the important stages in DPM’s life: “Quaker Beginnings, 1768–1801”; “A Washington Education, 1801–1809”; “The Politics of War, 1809–1817”; “A Well-Deserved Retirement, 1817–1836”; “Washington Widow, 1836–1849.” The lengthy and informative introductions preceding each chapter invite the reader toward the letters to come. Chapter Three, “The Politics of War,” when DPM was First Lady, begins and ends effectively with letters from DPM’s closest friend, Eliza Collins Lee. Writing DPM on 4 March 1817, Lee congratulated her on a successful term of office: “You will retire from the tumult and fatigue of public life to your favorite retreat in Orange, and will carry with you principles and manners not to be put off with the robe of state” (214).

The editors write that the letters have been selected to “represent all aspects of her correspondence” (xii). Although the volume is titled The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison, about fifteen percent of the letters are to DPM. Most of these incoming letters complement the ones she wrote, creating the picture of DPM as beloved wife, devoted sister, and center of the social network in Philadelphia, Washington, and Montpelier, the Madisons’ plantation in Orange County, Virginia. The editors helpfully include other documents, such as DPM’s will and her agreement with Henry Moncure for the sale of Montpelier. Other letters to DPM begging favors or appointments in 1809, soon after JM assumed the presidency, indicate the pressures to
which she was subjected in her new situation.

The twenty-four letters from JM written during the few separations in their forty-one year marriage tell of his devotion: “let me know that I shall soon have you with me, which is most anxiously desired by your ever affectionate James Madison” he wrote his wife in 1805 (67). Only occasionally and briefly did JM touch on politics, describing in 1809, for example, the improved tone in French diplomatic correspondence and the intransigence of British foreign secretary George Canning (122).

Letters from and about slaves illustrate the Madisons’ complex attitude toward slavery. DPM wrote Eliza Law in 1804, “Mr. Madison is willing to take David for 400 dolrs. … it being understood that at the expiration of five years he is to become free” (60). Still, as the editors write, JM willed his slaves, along with other property, to DPM (323). DPM’s own will gave several slaves to relatives but freed a long-time servant, Paul Jennings (356). A letter from Jennings in 1844 conveys his devotion to his mistress (369–70). DPM hesitated to sell slaves from the Montpelier plantation “owing to their reluctance to leave this place or its neighborhood” (to George A. Waggamam, 10 October 1839, p. 349) and wrote her son in 1842 “no whipper of Negros shd ever have our people or any others, to tirenize over” (359–60). We see here that DPM accepted the institution of slavery, but showed compassion for individual slaves.

Letters in Chapter Five showing DPM’s financial difficulties as a widow and her struggles to publish Madison’s papers lend a poignancy to her last years. Heartbreaking are her letters to her profligate son John Payne Todd—her only child—wishing she could depend upon him for advice and financial support: “It has been too long since I was cheered with a line from you—what are you about, that prevents your communing with your Mother? You are taking special care of our mutual property of every sort, I trust—and my confidence in you to restore it to me is not diminished by the sad & tedious time in which I have been deprived of its use” (23 April 1846, p. 382).

The editors’ selection of letters depicts DPM’s concern for her reputation: “she stamped her own legend” they write (5). DPM took great pains to be sure that Margaret Bayard Smith included her letter of 23 August 1814 to her sister Lucy in Smith’s sketch of DPM in the National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans. This important letter [of which only a transcription survives] describes the First Lady’s heroic rescue of the Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington as the British forces loomed nearby (193–94). Despite DPM’s professed “reluctance” as she wrote Smith in 1835, “in being a judge
and witness, of incidents if existing, that might be worthy of the use to be made of them” (308), she later wrote Robert de Peyster to make sure he corrected the story that Charles Carroll had saved the Stuart portrait: “should there be a merit in remaining an hour in danger of life and liberty to save the likeness of anything, the merit in this case belongs to me” (11 February 1848, 387).

More information on the selection policy might explain why there are, for example, three letters in 1809 to nephew Samuel Todd, an otherwise unimportant figure, about a clerkship in the Madison administration (110–11, 114, 117–18). How many letters were there to choose from? Moreover, some of the incoming letters, especially when there is no answer from DPM (apparently because none exists), shed little light on her life. Catherine L. Eustis’s letter of 1816, for example, described only the diplomatic scene at the Hague, a place DPM never visited (213–14). Were letters like those to Todd and from Eustis chosen primarily because according to the editors’ selection policy, they “represent all aspects of her correspondence”?

The transcription appears to follow the editors’ policy of presenting the letters exactly as written, illustrating DPM’s frequent misspellings and erratic punctuation. The editors’ transcription of DPM’s letter of 20 March 1812 (157) is faithful to the image posted on the DPM Website. Unlike the letters published in the Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series, where periods replace dashes and all sentences begin with capital letters, letters here demonstrate DPM’s spontaneity by retaining her idiosyncratic punctuation and capitalization. Also remaining faithful to the text, the editors add brackets for omissions where they have had to guess at missing words. The editors note where no holograph letter exists and the text is thus provided by a transcription, frequently made by DPM’s niece Mary E. E. Cutts, who corrected spellings and occasionally merged two letters. It would have been helpful, however, had the editors included in brackets the place from which a letter was written. For example, one has to read further into the text of DPM’s letter of 12 January 1800 to Eliza Collins Lee to realize that DPM is in

2A tally of the letters from 1809 to 1811 posted on The Dolley Madison Digital Edition 1788–1836 reveals that forty-one letters out of a possible one hundred and five from these years were selected for this edition. The introduction there states that eventually nearly 2500 letters will be published in the digital edition, available at http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8100/dmde/default.xqy.

Richmond (35). So also, the reader may not always remember from the chapter introduction whether DPM was in Washington or Montpelier in, say May 1816, when she wrote her sister, “We got here quite well on the 3d. day to dinner” (209).

The editors state, “Persons referred to in these pages are identified whenever possible in the biographical directory (xii).” The directory is essential in sorting out the many relatives on both the Payne and Todd sides, along with recurring figures in the letters, such as the family of DPM’s sister Anna Cutts and Hannah Gallatin. But the rationale for persons included in the biographical directory is not clear. For example, Louis Labille, Aleksei Sverchkov, and Benjamin Wilcocks are included there, when they make only a single appearance in the Selected Letters. Wouldn’t identifying notes on page 125, 143, and 176 suffice, as was provided for Aaron Fontaine (249)?

The biographical directory, while necessary, is also cumbersome. The reader is frequently forced to use both the index and biographical directory to identify a figure like “Paul” whom we learn only after consulting both sources is Paul Jennings, the Madisons’ mulatto slave. The insertion in brackets of “Jennings” after “Paul” in the text would have aided the reader here. Similarly, such insertions would have enabled the reader to keep track of the many members of the Randolph, Cutts, and Todd families named in the letters. The reader should not have to flip back and forth to either the biographical directory or the index, or both, to identify these people.

The reader is also frustrated at times with the sparse annotation. One appreciates the editors’ desire to keep endnotes at a minimum, as well as the likelihood that some names or events simply cannot be identified, but there are numerous instances in which some of the events in the letters cry out for more explanation. It is essential to read the introductions to each chapter because background provided there is not always supplied in the notes. DPM wrote John Jacob Astor in 1842 acknowledging his “obliging loan” and described the history of a house, “Square 22.” We need the introduction to Chapter Five, however, to learn that Astor’s loan was secured by DPM’s President’s Square house in Washington (361, 323). Should the reader always have to turn back to these introductions for an explanation? In other cases, such as DPM’s writing Edward Coles in 1816 that the “choice of a Secy: of Legation to England, depends on Mr Adams,” there is no explanation that John Quincy Adams was then minister to Great Britain (211). Also, Louisa Adams is in the biographical directory but not her husband.

As noted above, the index is indispensable in identifying persons in the
letters and is very complete, with long entries for DPM and JM organized into various subentries. The excellent index also includes such topics as slavery, women, clothing, and the pertinent Congressional sessions during DPM's career.

Additional apparatus, such as a chronology and a more consistent policy for identifying persons and events, would have strengthened the volume. However, this edition succeeds in establishing the important and distinctive role DPM played in early nineteenth-century America. This volume shows why her reputation has endured.