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Washington" with George Washington's "Remarks."*
Edited by Rosemarie Zagarri.

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A Review

In Search of the Private George Washington

PHILANDER D. CHASE

David Humphreys' "Life of General Washington" with George Washington's "Remarks." Edited by Rosemarie Zagarrri. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1991. Pp. lvii, 129. \$24.95.

Did anybody ever see Washington naked?" Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote in 1858. "It is inconceivable. He had no nakedness, but, I imagine, was born with his clothes on and his hair powdered, and made a stately bow on his first appearance in the world."¹ Generations of Americans have viewed "the father of their country" in much the same light. So monumental is the figure of George Washington on the stage of American history, so stoic are the virtues commonly attributed to him, and so stiff and dignified is his persona in death as in life that one can scarcely conceive of him as human. Yet, knowing that flesh and blood must lie beneath the facade of the public Washington, his fellow citizens from the Revolution to date have longed for a glimpse of the private man, Washington in dishabile emotionally and mentally if not physically. In the early nineteenth century Parson Weems sought to satisfy that desire for a pious and patriotic public with fictional stories about Washington's youth. In the early twentieth century debunkers, addressing a more cynical and critical audience, tried to undermine the monumental Washington or at least to knock off enough chips to get at the "real" man inside. More recently a number of scholars have simply focused on Washington's image, producing works filled with valuable insights about the American character and Washington's public functions but shedding relatively little light on the inner life and thoughts of the "great man."

Now Rosemarie Zagarrri has taken us back to square one by rescuing from the trash heap of history the earliest and only authorized biography of Washington, a work that previously was thought to be lost. Written by David Humphreys, a much trusted aide-de-camp

who remained one of the general's confidants after the Revolutionary War, this unfinished biography is not definitive or exhaustive in any sense, but it does contain remarkably intimate vignettes of Washington the young soldier in the French and Indian War, Washington the middle-aged planter at home at Mount Vernon in the 1780s, and Washington the anguished and reluctant president-to-be of 1788. It humanizes the man more accurately and concisely than any biographical work has ever done simply because of the unique direct personal access that Humphreys had to Washington and his memories. It is history written from the inside by a biographer in residence.

Zagarrri's achievement in recovering this important biographical sketch involved some good old-fashioned historical detective work, but more to the point, it is the sort of task that only could be accomplished by a competent documentary editor making full use of modern editing techniques and insights. The jumble of documents that have survived David Humphreys' failed endeavor to be Washington's Boswell are scattered among three repositories, and some of the biographical material is interspersed among Humphreys' other writings including speeches, letters, essays, and book summaries. Although Humphreys' outlines indicate that he intended the finished biography to be arranged in chronological order, he did not work chronologically on it, and he often rewrote portions of the text several times without indicating which version he preferred. No single existing manuscript is complete by itself. Each one overlaps the others in some respects, and each one contains numerous deletions, insertions, and interlinations. Constructing "a coherent and readable" edition of Humphreys' biography from such a complex body of documents while "remaining true to what Humphreys actually wrote" (liii) is obviously no simple matter, but Zagarrri has succeeded in her purpose by exercising great care in transcribing and collating all of the relevant manuscript material and by making well-

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The French and Italian Notebooks*, ed. Thomas Woodson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), 281.

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considered choices among the variant readings of the text based on a close examination of Humphreys' surviving outlines and an acute understanding of his evolving intentions regarding the work.

When Washington in July 1785 gave Humphreys permission to write a biography of him, Humphreys envisaged producing an exhaustive account of the general's life incorporating many of the documents at Mount Vernon, which Washington offered to make available to him. Upon arriving at Mount Vernon a year later to begin work on the biography, however, Humphreys found himself "deterred by the magnitude of the enterprise" (xix), and he made little progress during the few weeks that he was there. The drudgery of doing documentary research among Washington's voluminous and only partly organized papers apparently prompted the would-be biographer to rethink the whole project. After Humphreys returned to Mount Vernon as "a permanent member of Washington's domestic circle" in November 1787, he scaled down his proposed biography from a definitive study to a thumbnail sketch written as much "for his own amusement" as for "the information of posterity" (xx, xxx, 59). Omitting any detailed treatment of Washington's military role in the Revolutionary War because "the impression which he made is yet fresh in every mind," Humphreys concentrated on the less known aspects of the general's youth and private life (xlv, 30). To supplement his limited documentary research, Humphreys elicited written remarks from Washington particularly about his activities in the French and Indian War, and of course, he made use of his own observations and conversations as a member of the Mount Vernon household.

Humphreys' failure to finish even his scaled-down biography can be attributed to the advent of Washington's presidency which not only distracted both men from more mundane tasks but also rendered Humphreys' biographical efforts incomplete and somewhat premature because, contrary to what both he and Washington had thought previously, it became increasingly evident during 1787 that the general's public life would not end with his retirement to Mount Vernon after the war. In addition, Washington undoubtedly changed his mind about the proposed biography after the Constitutional Convention and probably discouraged its publication directly or indirectly to avoid any semblance of dishonorable political ambition that might reflect adversely on his cherished personal reputation or the new federal government. As important as preserving the historical record of his life for posterity was to him, Washington would have nothing to do with any work that remotely resembled a campaign biography.

Humphreys, nevertheless, allowed part of his sketch of Washington's life to be published anonymously in

Jedidiah Morse's *American Geography* in 1789, and it subsequently was reprinted in a few periodicals and pamphlets. Zagarri's discovery of this previously unknown publication history, important as it is, does not lessen the need in any way for a modern edition of Humphreys' biography, because the published sketch omits large and interesting portions of the manuscript material, and as an anonymous contribution to a larger work, it lacks the historical and literary context essential for a proper appreciation of Humphreys' contribution to our understanding of the private Washington. Zagarri rectifies matters with a sure professional hand.

Zagarri's edition of Humphreys' biography, as she observes in her introduction, is necessarily a "critical" or "eclectic" text because of the absence of any single comprehensive version of the work (liii). She accordingly incorporates four different manuscript sources in this volume: Humphreys' biographical writings at the Rosenbach Library, another part of those writings at Yale University, Washington's annotations of the Rosenbach manuscript which are in the *Forbes Magazine* Collection at New York, and Humphreys' previously unpublished prose epilogue to his "Poem on the Death of General Washington," also at Yale, which although it was never intended to be part of the biography, provides an appropriate conclusion to the unfinished work.

In collating the various versions of Humphreys' biography proper, Zagarri has "tried to provide a smooth chronological rendering of Washington's life," a process that she describes a bit "like doing an elaborate puzzle" (liv-lv). So readable is the final product that one only realizes how much editing went into it by looking at the numerous endnotes in which Zagarri precisely documents the manuscript source of each piece of her puzzle no matter how small it might be. To aid interested users in finding the correct page in the loose unnumbered manuscript pages at Yale, she includes an appendix which correlates her page numbers to the first words on each page. More importantly, Zagarri provides alternate readings of the text in the endnotes enabling readers to second guess her choices although few will find reason to do so. Because she is focusing on providing an accessible version of the biography more than on the thought processes behind it, Zagarri omits all deletions and silently incorporates insertions and interlineations except when there is some question about placement in the text, which cases are explained in the endnotes.

Washington's autobiographical "Remarks" are also incorporated into the text at the proper places but are set off by angle brackets. Written at Humphreys' request to correct and expand portions of the biography dealing with Washington's early life, these "Remarks" according to the general's instructions were to be used and then destroyed. For some reason they were not,

and they were published in John C. Fitzpatrick's *Writings of Washington* in the 1930s. Appearing there without Humphreys' draft that occasioned them, these revealing comments were not so revealing as they otherwise may have been and in some places were virtually meaningless. It is not the least of Zagarri's accomplishments to restore these important "Remarks" to their original context and meaning.

Zagarri utilizes a mostly literal transcription style throughout the volume. Although contractions and abbreviations are consistently expanded, the authors' spelling, capitalization, paragraphing, and punctuation are generally retained as are ampersands. Zagarri wisely disregards Humphreys' habit of frequently underlining passages for reasons not now readily apparent, but she recognizes that Washington used underlining for emphasis and properly italicizes underlined words in his "Remarks."

Use of the volume is facilitated by a long and well written introduction that discusses at length the history of Humphreys' biographical efforts and his relations with Washington, the provenance of the manuscripts as far as it is known, the limited publication history, and the literary and historical significance of Humphreys' work. The editorial statement is clear and precise, and the index is appropriately simple and straightforward. Although the endnotes concern mostly technical matters relating to the text, Zagarri includes brief historical annotations where necessary. The appendix contains Humphreys' outlines and miscellaneous notes for the proposed biography as well as the nonbiographical material that remained in the manuscripts after the biographical passages were extracted, omitting only the long book summaries. The "Select Bibliography" is fully adequate for this volume.

At the heart of the book, of course, are Humphreys' "Life of Washington" and Washington's "Remarks." True to her purpose Zagarri lets nothing muddle their readability or dilute their essential usefulness. The reconstructed text justifies her efforts, for although Humphreys was a rather pompous young man of marginal literary talents, his biographical sketch of Washington is, as Zagarri observes, "relatively free of distortion, exaggeration, or outright falsehood" (xxxv). His close association with Washington undoubtedly led Humphreys to downplay the less praiseworthy aspects of Washington's life such as slaveholding, land speculation, and occasional military misjudgments. Yet it was that same closeness that enabled Humphreys to understand Washington the private citizen and to convey that understanding in rather straightforward narrative prose. "The virtuous simplicity which distinguishes the private life of General Washington, though less known than the dazzling splendor of his military achievements, is not less edifying in example & ought not to be less

interesting to his countrymen," Humphreys writes. At Mount Vernon, "He is more chearful than he was in the army. Notwithstanding his temper is rather of a serious cast & his countenance commonly carries the impression of thoughtfulness; he perfectly relishes a pleasant story, an unaffected sally of wit, or a burlesque description which surprises by its suddenness & incongruity with the ordinary appearance of the same object" (35-36).

The question of whether or not Washington should accept the presidency provoked much more serious discussions at Mount Vernon, and Humphreys reports much of his conversation with the general on that subject almost verbatim. Although Humphreys gives himself too much credit for convincing Washington to become president of the new federal government and the arguments both pro and con appear in Washington's correspondence for the period, Humphreys' account conveys the depth of the general's struggle with the dictates of honor and duty more vividly than any other source does. "God knows," Washington told Humphreys, "that I have but one wish myself, which is to live & die on my own plantation. It is said that every man has his portion of ambition. I may have mine I suppose as well as the rest; but if I know my own heart, my ambition would not lead me into public life; my only ambition is to do my duty in this world as well as I am capable of performing it, & to merit the good opinion of all good men" (47).

Washington is just as candid in his "Remarks," which comprise almost a fourth of the edited text. The closest thing to an autobiography that Washington ever wrote, the "Remarks" deal mostly with his experiences in the French and Indian War, events which despite his admission of a bad memory were so dramatic that they were vividly fixed in his mind even some thirty years later. Washington remembers his 1753 journey to the French fort near Lake Erie "in the depth of the winter when the whole face of the Earth was covered with snow and the waters covered with Ice," and he recalls "the shocking scenes which presented themselves" following General Braddock's bloody 1755 defeat at the Monongahela River: "The dead—the dying—the groans—lamentations—and crys along the Road of the wounded for help . . . were enough to pierce a heart of adamant" (9, 18). These confidential "Remarks," which Washington never expected to become public knowledge, also contain his only reflections on a tragic "friendly fire" incident near Loyalhanna, Pennsylvania, in November 1758 when a party of troops under his command and a detachment led by his friend Lt. Col. George Mercer mistakenly began shooting at each other in the dark woods and killed several of their comrades before they could be stopped. He "never was in more imminent danger," Washington writes, "by being between two

fires, knocking up with his sword the presented pieces” (22).

Although current and future scholars undoubtedly will wish that Washington had extended his comments to other aspects of his life and that Humphreys had asked more questions and more penetrating questions of him, the existing text tells us something very important. Washington, Zagarri concludes, “was a man of integrity. He expressed the same sentiments to his confidants as to his casual acquaintances; he was the same person in private as in public” (xlix). Both scholars and the general public can henceforth read Washington’s other writings with confidence that they are seeing the “real” man. “It is hard after reading Humphreys’ account,” Zagarri says, “to see the first president as either an aloof stick-figure or an earnest do-gooder” (l). Washington at last appears here as fully human, a man who liked to hunt foxes and to listen to friends’ jokes but also was frightened and sickened by the horrors of war and deeply tormented by the responsibilities of the presidency.

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Glenn W. LaFantasie, formerly Director of Publications at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, has been named Deputy Historian of the United States Department of State and General Editor of the *Foreign Relations of the United States*.

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