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Book Review of Jared Sparks' The Writings of George Washington, vols. II-VI

N. Beverley Tucker

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THE WRITINGS OF GEORGE WASHINGTON ; being his Correspondence, Addresses, Messages, and other Papers, official and private, selected and published from the original manuscripts ; with a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations ; Vols. II, III, IV, V and VI ; by Jared Sparks.— Boston : Russell, Odiorne & Co.

We regret that we deferred our notice of the second and third volumes of this interesting and valuable work, until the appearance of the other three. *It has now so* grown on our hands, that it is impossible to do justice to it in an article of any reasonable compass. Yet we know few works that we would more strongly recommend to the public.

We have little curiosity to peep into dead men's port-folios, and perhaps the world has seen few that would not suffer in reputation by being tracked, through all their walk in life, by daily memoranda and documentary evidence. The man whose history, under this searching scrutiny, shows "no variableness nor shadow

of turning," must differ very much from the multitude, even of those we call the great and good. Nothing certainly can show a fuller and firmer consciousness of rectitude of intention, than to begin life with a purpose of leaving behind a full and fair account of it. Such memorials carefully written out and preserved, like the books of a tradesman, bespeak a steadiness of honesty, that never for a moment distrusts itself. Which of us, commencing a diary, would feel sure that he might not do something to-morrow that he would not choose to set down? Which of us opening a letter book, which should exhibit his whole correspondence, would not be tempted to leave out something?

Here is a man who chooses that his steps shall all be in the light. He begins life, by laying down to himself rules of action and deportment. He commits these to paper, and hands them down to posterity, with a full register of all his acts and words and thoughts. The remarkable modesty of General Washington, would alone prevent us from understanding this as a challenge to the whole world, to compare his principles, professions and actions throughout, defying any imputation of inconsistency.

There is nothing more remarkable in this, than the evidence it affords of the early consciousness of a something distinguishing him from other men, which seems, most unaccountably, to have found its way into his humble mind. It is the most striking instance on record of the *instinct of greatness*. It is a study for the metaphysician and philosopher. From the beginning, the work is done as if for posterity, and executed as if intended for the eyes of the world. This in a boy, who never made any ostentation of himself, his endowments, or his actions; who formed a very humble estimate of his own powers, and seemed through life to seek no reward but his own approbation, is one of those strange phenomena which we refer to the influence of a peculiar nature, acting by inscrutable impulses, of which the subject of them is hardly conscious.

Did it occur to General Washington, even at that early age, that he might be a father, and that his children might find an humble pride in looking over the unspotted page of his unpretending life? Perhaps so. Perhaps this thought was all that his young ambition (that passion which humility itself cannot extinguish in the breast of greatness) ventured to whisper to his heart. If so, the anticipation has been nobly and mysteriously accomplished. Like the patriarch of old, childish though he was, God has made him the father of nations; and it should indeed be the pride of us his children, to read the history of his life; to trace his steps; to study the system of moral discipline by which he trained himself to greatness and virtue; to know him as he was; and to mould ourselves by his precepts and example. No man ever left to his posterity so rich a legacy as the extraordinary work before us; and we owe many thanks to Mr. Sparks for the labor which has prepared it for the public eye.

We really think that it is in this point of view that this work is most interesting and valuable. Its importance as affording authentic materials for what is commonly called history, strikes us less forcibly; though in this respect it must be highly useful. It certainly affords the historian more satisfactory materials for his work, than can be supplied from any other source, or

for any other portion of history. But what is that? What is history, for the most part, but a narrative of events, the results of which cannot be effected by our right or wrong apprehensions of them. What matters it at this day, whether we believe that Cæsar killed Brutus, or Brutus Cæsar? What will it concern posterity whether the glory of the field of Waterloo belongs to Wellington or Blucher? But when will it be otherwise than important and profitable to study the process by which Washington became what he was? When will it cease to be a lesson of wisdom, to look narrowly into the private and public history of the most fortunate man that the world has ever seen, and observe that the quality which most eminently distinguished him from other men, the quality to which his success, his prosperity, his usefulness, and his imperishable glory are mainly attributable, was VIRTUE? Since the day when the important truth was first proclaimed, that "in keeping God's commandments there is great reward," when was it so illustrated as in this instance? Had there been a flaw in the character of General Washington, could the most malignant scrutiny have detected in his history anything dishonorable, anything unjust, anything selfish, anything on which reproach could fasten, he could not have accomplished what he did. No man could, be his talents what they might, who did not bring to his task such a character for virtue as would secure the confidence of the well-intentioned, and shame the artful and designing from their purposes. A vicious and corrupt people who fight for conquest; a lawless banditti who fight for spoil, may be led to victory by talent, enterprise, courage and energy; but the triumphs of Freedom can only be achieved under the auspices of Virtue. When men are in a mood to rally to the banner of one whose life is stained with crime, they do but deceive themselves if they think they are contending for freedom. *When they are prepared to take such a one as "A SECOND WASHINGTON," they are only fit to contend for a choice of masters.* This is eternal truth; but it will not be truth to them.

But we wander from the work before us; though we trust what we have said will dispose those "who have ears to hear" to set a high value on the book of which we proceed to give a short account.

The first of these volumes contains all the papers and private and public letters of General Washington, which could illustrate either his character, or the history of the country, up to the commencement of the revolution. It is a portion of history highly interesting, especially to Virginians, and on which none but a doubtful light is shed from any other source. Here we have an authentic account of Braddock's war; a sort of war of which the readers of history have, in general, no idea but that which is drawn from romances and tales. It is a warfare which does not recommend itself to the imagination, by the "pride, pomp and circumstance" so interesting to those who "kiss my Lady Peace at home." But since the invention of gun-powder, there is no fighting which gives so much room for the display of prowess, courage, coolness and address, and in which victory is so sure to be the prize of these qualities. "Many a brave man," says Don Quixotte, "has lost his life by the hand of a wretch who was frightened at the flash of his own gun." Not so in Indian warfare. The man who is scared never escapes

but by flight. How should he? There he stands behind his tree, while at the distance of a few yards stands his enemy, watching with the eye of a lynx, with his rifle to his cheek, and ready to put a ball through any part that is exposed for a moment. To anticipate him; to get a shot at him; to draw his fire, and then drive him from his shelter, is a business in which success depends on steadiness, self-possession, and presence of mind, as well as dexterity and skill. He who *thus* kills his man, is a brave man; and hence, among the Indians, a display of scalps is a proof of courage never questioned. It was in this sort of warfare that Washington served his apprenticeship. It was there he learned to look danger steadily in the face, and to possess his soul in calmness amid the fiercest storm of battle. There is no such school. The *art* of war is what a Martinet may learn. But the faculty of carrying that art into practice, of applying its rules in the crisis which shakes the nerves, and unsettles the mind, is only acquired by the "taste of danger." To him who possesses that, the rest is a school-boy's task.

The other four volumes of the work contain the papers relating to the war of the revolution. Such a body of evidence, so completely above all exception, can hardly be found on the subject of any other war. We are not sure that any historian has ever yet taken the time and pains to collate and digest the whole, and to deduce all the essential results. The means of doing so are here put in the hands of the public, and we may hope that some one qualified and disposed for the task will address himself to it, and furnish the world with a history at once succinct and accurate, in which references to authorities may stand in place of discussions. It is a fault of contemporary history that it is almost always given on partial and imperfect evidence, which is liable to be afterwards explained away, contradicted and falsified. It is not until some time after the event, that all the testimony is in the hands of the historian. That time has now come as to the American Revolution. A concise history may be now written with references to this work, which taken in connexion with it, will be more satisfactory and conclusive than any now in existence. But every one who pretends to acquaint himself with all that is most interesting, especially to Virginians, should secure a copy of this book.

Mr. Sparks has given us some interesting specimens of the sort of history that we contemplate. In his appendices he presents succinct narratives of the principal actions of the war, the accuracy of which, the reader has it in his power to test by the evidence in the body of the work. This is judicious and in good taste.

But after all, the great charm and value of this work is, that it is a cast from living nature, of the mind of "the noblest man that ever lived in the tide of time." We cannot dwell too much on the contemplation of his peculiar character. His high sense of moral worth, and the lofty aspirations of conscious greatness, looking out from behind the veil of genuine modesty and humility with which he delighted to shroud himself: the chivalrous and daring spirit ever champing on the curb of prudence, but never impatiently straining against it: the native fierceness of his temper, occasionally flashing through his habitual moderation and self-command; the promptitude and clearness of his conceptions, so modestly suggested, so patiently revised, so calmly re-

considered in all the intervals of action; all these qualities combined and harmonized by honor, integrity, and a scrupulous regard to all the duties of public and private life; all made "to drink into one spirit" all "members, every one of them in the same body," all working to the same end; *diverse yet congruous*. What is there in the history of human nature, so grand, so majestic, so elevating to the heart and hopes of man?

That virtue, which is never selfish in its ends, and ever scrupulous in its choice of means, can rarely rise to a high place among the great ones of the earth, unless associated with a strength of wing which shall enable it to soar above those whose flight is unencumbered by the clog of self-denial. Virtue in high places is thus so rare a sight, that when we find it there, it so much engrosses our attention, that we are apt to overlook the faculties by which it rose. Men like, too, to delude themselves with the belief that their admiration is a tribute to virtue; that the honors and emoluments they bestow are given as the reward of virtue. Thinking thus, they think the better of themselves, and are ready to take at his word the man who disclaims any pretension to those more showy endowments which we reward for *our own* sakes. So we cheat ourselves; and so we cheat our benefactors; not indeed of the fame they prize most highly, but of that which glitters brightest in the eyes of the world. Look at that wonderful man, the blaze of whose glory pales even the "Julian Star" itself; before whose power all Europe trembled, and America crouched; and let us ask ourselves how far the extent of his achievements might have been curtailed, had he ever permitted himself for a moment to "forget the expedient in considering of the right;" and submitted to have his choice of means limited by any regard to the laws of war or peace, of man or God? His great maxim, that "in War, time is every thing," was well illustrated by the success of one, who never lost a moment in working the complex problem of right and expediency. Compare the rushing, desolating tempest of his career, with the cautious march of Washington, picking his way with an anxious regard to duty, and ever watchful of his steps, lest he might tread upon a worm. Compare his abounding resources, all used without scruple, without reserve, with the scanty means of the champion of our freedom, rendered yet more scanty by his uniform care to do wrong to none, and never to soil his hand, his name or his conscience with any thing unclean.

The fifth and last of *these* volumes brings down the war to March 1780. How many more there will be, Mr. Sparks himself does not know. He will go on with his selections until he shall have laid before the public all that he deems most valuable of the writings of General Washington. We trust that he will use discreetly and fairly his power over the purses of his subscribers, who have engaged to take the work for better for worse, be it more or less, at so much per volume. The price is so liberal as to afford a high temptation; but we hope Mr. Sparks will resist it. We should be sorry to see a work commencing so nobly, degenerate into a mere book-making job. We hope not to have the remains of the father of our country treated like those of an old horse, whose heartless owner never thinks he has got all the good of him, until his skin is sent to the tanner, his fat to the tallow-chandler,

and his bones to the soap-boiler. Such is the treatment which other great men have experienced at the hands of "their children after the flesh;" dishonored in their graves by the reckless and indecent publication of every thing to which their names could give a market value. Let us bespeak a more considerate and decorous use of the rich legacy left us by him whom we reverence as the "father of our liberties."

It is perhaps, beside the general purpose of our remarks, to extract a letter, illustrating a point in General Washington's character, of which we have said nothing. That he was stern, and that he seemed cold we know. It is equally certain that he was kind, courteous, and tender, and it is delightful to see how eagerly his benevolence catches at an opportunity to pour balm into the wounds of an enemy. The following letter is found at p. 266, vol. 5.

"To Lieutenant General Burgoyne.

Head Quarters, March 11th, 1778.

"Sir,—I was only two days since honored with your very obliging letter of the 11th of February. Your indulgent opinion of my character, and the polite terms in which you are pleased to express it, are peculiarly flattering; and I take pleasure in the opportunity you have afforded, of assuring you, that far from suffering the views of national opposition to be embittered and debased by personal animosity, I am ever ready to do justice to the merit of the man and soldier, and to esteem where esteem is due, however the idea of a public enemy may interpose. You will not think it the language of unmeaning ceremony, if I add, that sentiments of personal respect, in the present instance, are reciprocal.

"Viewing you in the light of an officer contending against what I conceive to be the rights of my country, the reverses of fortune you experienced in the field cannot be unacceptable to me; but, abstracted from considerations of national advantage, I can sincerely sympathize with your feelings, as a soldier, the unavoidable difficulties of whose situation forbade his success; and as a man, whose lot combines the calamity of ill health, the anxieties of captivity, and the painful sensibility for a reputation exposed, where he most values it, to the assaults of malice and detraction.

"As your aid-de-camp went directly to Congress, the business of your letter to me had been decided before it came to hand. I am happy that their cheerful acquiescence in your request, prevented the necessity of my intervention; and wishing you a safe and agreeable passage, with a perfect restoration to your health, I have the honor to be, very respectfully, &c. &c."

In General Burgoyne's reply, he says: "I beg you to accept my sincerest acknowledgments for your obliging letter. I find the character, which I before knew to be respectable, is also perfectly amiable; and I should have few greater private gratifications in seeing our melancholy contest at an end, than that of cultivating your friendship."

How beautiful! How delightful is this exhibition of the best feelings of the heart, under circumstances which the ferocious and brutish use as a pretext for giving free scope to the worst! How truly does the poet sing!

"Fair as the earliest beam of eastern light,
Whon first by the bewildered pilgrim spied,
It smiles upon the dreary brow of night,
And silvers o'er the torrents foaming tide,
And lights the fearful path by mountain side:
Fair as that beam, although the fairest far,
Giving to horror grace, to danger pride,
Shine martial faith, and courtesy's bright star,

Through all the wreckful storms that cloud the brow of war."*

* We implore the lenient judgment of our brethren of the

The Italian Sketch-Book. Philadelphia: Key & Biddle. This is a very handsome duodecimo, and presents more than ordinary claims to attention. It is the work of an American, and purports to be written during a sojourn at Venice, Florence, Naples, and Rome. The book is chiefly made up of sketches and descriptions of these world-renowned cities. It will be seen that there is nothing very novel in the subject, and the question naturally arises "Who has not already heard all that is worth knowing about Venice, Florence, Naples, and Rome?" But, notwithstanding the triteness of his theme, our American traveller has contrived to throw an uncommon interest over his pages. They are finely diversified with stories well-told, essays tending to illustrate points of local or social interest in Italy, and much descriptive writing which has all the force and fidelity of painting.