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Washington's Writings: Review of The Writings of George Washington

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WASHINGTON'S WRITINGS.*

The eleventh and twelfth volumes of this work have now made their appearance. These, which complete the series of the writings of Washington, are accompanied by the long expected first volume which contains his life. We have already taken notice of the first five volumes which appeared, and we are happy to say that the high praise then bestowed on them, is, in great measure due to the rest of the series. We acknowledge, however, that, in some instances we have been disappointed. From some specimens of Mr. Sparks's judgment in selecting and his skill in arranging the documents in his hands, we had, perhaps, been led to expect too much in other instances. We cannot better illustrate the character and value of this work, than by giving somewhat in detail, the papers relating to a particular transaction. The reader will thus be enabled to see the sort of light which it sheds on the history of the past, and the insight which it affords into the character of Washington, and of some of those with whom he had to do. We allude particularly to the papers relating to an affair popularly known as the "Conway cabal." Of this (though the volume containing it has already passed under our

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review) we beg leave to speak with some particularity. The public has heard much of this transaction, but has never been permitted to look so closely into its details. That the general result was honorable to General Washington and disgraceful to his enemies, has often been proclaimed. The confidence of his countrymen in his virtues prepared them to receive this announcement as just and true, but in doing this they rather acquiesced in the judgment of others than judged for themselves. The opportunity of thus judging is now afforded them. Unfortunately the number of those who have the means of acquiring the costly publication before us and the leisure to turn over its numerous pages is necessarily limited. There are thousands capable of investigating and understanding the subject who will not enjoy this advantage and we trust that we may find favor with our readers, when we avail ourselves of this occasion to give them a nearer view of the transaction.

There was perhaps no event which conduced more to the successful conclusion of the revolutionary war, than the victory at Saratoga, and the consequent capture of Burgoyne. There had certainly been no affair before that time comparable to it for brilliancy, or for the importance of its results. Not only was the army which had so long hung on the northern frontier annihilated, but it was clearly shown that all attempts at invasion from that quarter must be fatal to the invaders. The attention of congress was no longer distracted by the necessity of resisting the efforts of the enemy to penetrate at once from the north and the south along the valley of the Hudson, and thus to effect a junction in the heart of the continent, and to cut off all communication between its eastern and western sections. Relieved from this double danger, men began to breathe more freely. In this event the achievement they saw a glorious prelude of ultimate success, and hailed it as the morning star of a day of triumphant liberty. The intelligence of this important event was the spontaneous movement of thought at once from the north and the south along the valley of the Hudson, and thus to effect a junction in the heart of the continent, and to cut off all communication between its eastern and western sections. Relieved from this double danger, men began to breathe more freely. In this event the achievement they saw a glorious prelude of ultimate success, and hailed it as the morning star of a day of triumphant liberty.

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The news of the result preceded any knowledge of the causes which led to it, and its announcement procured for General Gates a sudden burst of popularity which might have turned a sorrowful head. At the same time the situation of General Washington was most unfortunate. His unsuccessful attack on Germantown had just been made. The unfortunate affair of Brandywine had not long preceded it, and baffled and disheartened, he was preparing to withdraw his shattered and ineffective army to their inglorious winter-quarters at Valley Forge. Twelve months might be supposed to have nearly obliterated the recollection of his brilliant but brief career of victory in the winter of '76-'7, and men might have been excused for believing that nothing but the success of Gates saved him from destruction.

It was while he thus lay, incapable of doing anything to claim the favorable notice of the public, that the intrigue known by the name of the "Conway cabal" was set on foot. Its object was to dislodge him from his place in the confidence and service of the people, and to place General Gates at the head of the army. That officer was a soldier by profession, who had carried arms with honor to himself for more than twenty years. Beyond this, little was known of him besides his late brilliant achievement. Of the advantages and disadvantages of his situation when opposed to Burgoyne no mention was made, but in judging everything was naturally presumed in his favor. It was not until the disastrous and disgraceful battle of Camden had stripped him of his laurels, that men began to reflect on the arduous character of the enterprise in which Burgoyne had been baffled. It was no less than an attempt to penetrate through the heart of a continent inhabited by a hardy and hostile yeomanry with arms in their hands. It was the spontaneous movement of these that cut off his retreat and hedged him around with difficulties, and drove him on his fate. He was caught in the cleft of the oak, and had no choice but to perish by famine, or to surrender at discretion.

But of all this, at the time, the world at large knew nothing. The whole merit of the achievement was attributed to the commander. He was the lion of the day; the theme of all eulogy, the object of universal admiration. Nothing was more natural than to suppose that the fickle voices of the multitude might claim for this new favorite the first place in the service of the public. The idea was caught at with aversity by many. This was especially the case with men whose aspiring and presumptuous ambition steeled the untoward modesty of Washington, and with others whose loose morality quailed before his stern, uncompromising virtue. In each of these descriptions General Conway stood prominent. An Irishman by birth, and an adventurer by profession, he had in early life sought his fortunes in France, and devoted the prime of his manhood to the service of his country's enemies. The same spirit of adventure and quest of advancement led him to America, and thither he brought with him the taste and turn of heart for intrigue which promotion so much depends in those ancient monarchies.

"Where ladies interpose, and slaves debate."

He was not slow to discover the unmeasured and vain-glorious ambition of General Gates, and anticipating his speedy advancement, determined
to secure his favor by being among the first to hail
the dawn of his greatness, and to prognosticate its
meridian splendor. His letters to Gates seem cal-
culated to answer the double purpose of gaining
his favor and stimulating his ambition. In con­
sciousness with others of the same views, a party
was formed in congress who contrived to procure
the appointment of a board of war suited to their
purposes, and anonymous letters were addressed to
influential men everywhere, lauding the exploits
of Gates, and arraigning the conduct of Wash­ing­
ton. But the popularity of that extraordinary
man was not of a nature to be dissipated by a puff
of caprice, or a blast of adverse fortune. It rested
on the universal conviction of his disinterested­
ness, his magnanimity, and his law-abiding devot­
tion to the authority of congress, and to all the
duties of his important trust. It rested too on the
personal acquaintance of nearly all the leading
men of the country, who had known him for more
than twenty years as a model, not only of virtue,
but of wisdom, sobriety, judgment, fortitude and
firmness; in short, of all those great qualities from
which alone success in great affairs can be confident­
ly expected. The anonymous defamations addressed
to these men were not merely thrown away;
they were in several instances communi­
cated directly to Washington himself, who was
thus apprised of the intrigue which was going on.
In all this there was nothing to indicate the parties
to the conspiracy, but there was enough to rouse
the sagacious vigilance of the commander-in-chief,
and to enable him to draw conclusions from cir­
cumstances which might otherwise have demanded
no notice.

It happened that about this time General Wil­
kinson mentioned, in a way which brought the fact
to Washington, that Conway had written to Gates
a letter containing these words: "Heaven has
been determined to save your country, or a weak
general and bad counsellors would have ruined it."

This was enough for Washington. He perfectly
understood the characters of the men, and was at
once au fait to the whole intrigue. His sagacity in
detecting, and his address in exposing it, the dex­
terity with which he turned on General Gates his
own arts and devices, convicting him on his own
showing, of prevarication and falsehood, the with­
ering sarcasm which is employed in the perfor­
mance of this task, along with the delicate and
self-respecting courtesy of his phraseology, and
finally the calm magnanimity with which he for­
bears to press a disgraced and humbled adversary,
present a study, of which they who would learn
must deprive me of the usefulness of the worthiest
men. For this reason, sir, I beg your excellency will
favor me with the proof you can procure to that effect.

Sir: A letter which I received last night contained
the following paragraph:

Sir: A letter which I received last night contained
the following paragraph:

"But we are getting ahead of our story. Imme­
diately on receiving the information abovementioned,
Washington addressed a letter to Conway, apprising
him that it had been received. This letter contained only these words:

Sir: A letter which I received last night contained
the following paragraph:

Sir: A letter which I received last night contained
the following paragraph:

"Sir: A letter which I received last night contained
the following paragraph:

"I have now determined to save your country, or a weak
general and bad counsellors would have ruined it."

I am, sir, your humble servant."

Having despatched this letter, Washington cool­
ly awaited the result. It came in due time. No
sooner does Gates hear of the affair than he writes
a letter to Conway, (of whom Washington takes no far­
ther notice,) telling him he had learned that one
of Conway's letters to himself had been copied,
and begging to know which. To this inquiry
Conway could give no answer, and Gates, with a
shaking eagerness to know the worst, addresses
a letter to Washington himself. The latter knew
his man. His enemy had ventured from his covert,
and he was resolved not to permit him to escape
without something decisive. It happened that
General Gates, wishing to make a parade of open­
ness and sincerity, had sent a copy of his letter to
congress, in consequence of which he received the
reply through that body. These letters we beg
leave to lay before the reader, as being more inter­
esting and satisfactory than any abstract that we
can give of them.

HORATIO GATES TO GEORGE WASHINGTON.

"Albany, 8th December, 1777.

"Sir: I shall not attempt to describe what, as a pri­
ivate gentleman, I cannot help feeling, on representing to
my mind the disgraceful situation in which confidential
writers, when exposed to public inspection, may place
an unsuspecting correspondent; but, as a public officer,
I conjure your excellency to give me all the assistance
you can, in tracing out the author of the infidelity,
which put extracts from General Conway's letters to
me into your hands. Those letters have been stolenly
copied; but which of them, when, and by whom, is to
me as yet an unfathomable secret. There is not one
officer in my suite, nor amongst those who have free
acces to me, upon whom I could, with the least justifi­
cation to myself, fix the suspicion; and yet my un­
awareness may deprive me of the usefulness of the weakest
men. It is, I believe, in your excellency's power to do
me and the United States a very important service, by
detecting a wretch who may betray me, and capably
injure the very operations under your immediate direc­
tions. For this reason, sir, I beg your excellency will
favor me with the proof you can procure to that effect.
But the crime being essentially so important, that
the least loss of time may be attended with the worst con­
sequences, and it being unknown to me, whether the

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letter came to you from a member of congress or from an officer, I shall do the honor of transmitting a copy of this to the president, that the congress may, in concert with your excellency, obtain as soon as possible a discovery, which so deeply affects the safety of the state. Crimes of that magnitude ought not to remain unpunished. I have the honor to be, &c.

George Washington to the President of Congress.

"Valley Forge, 4th January, 1778."

"Sir: Unwilling as I am to add anything to the multiplicity of business, that necessarily engages the attention of congress, I am compelled by unavoidable necessity to pass my answer to General Gates through their hands. What could induce General Gates to communicate to that honorable body a copy of his letter to me is beyond the depth of my comprehension, upon any fair ground; but the fact being so, must stand as an apology for the liberty of giving you this trouble, which no other consideration would have induced me to take. With the greatest respect, sir, I am, &c.

George Washington to Horatio Gates.

"Valley Forge, 4th January, 1778."

"Sir: Your letter of the 8th ultimo came to my hands a few days ago, and to my great surprise informed me that a copy of it had been sent to congress, for what reason I find myself unable to account; but as some end doubtless was intended to be answered by it, I am laid under the disagreeable necessity of returning my answer through the same channel, lest any member of that honorable body should harbor an unfavorable suspicion of my having practiced some indirect means to come to the contents of the confidential letters between you and General Conway.

"I am to inform you, then, that Colonel Wilkinson, on his way to congress in the month of October last, fell in with Lord Stirling at Reading, and, not in confidence that I ever understood, informed his aide-de-camp, Major McWilliams, that General Conway had written to you: 'Heaven has been determined to save your country, or a weak general and bad counsellors would have ruined it.' Lord Stirling, from motives of friendship, transmitted the account with this remark: 'The enclosed was communicated by Colonel Wilkinson to Major McWilliams; such wicked duplicity of conduct I shall always think it my duty to detect.' In consequence of this information, and without having anything more in view than merely to show that gentleman, that I was not unprepared of his intriguing disposition, I wrote to him a letter in these words:

"Sir: A letter which I received last night, contained the following paragraph: 'In a letter from General Conway to General Gates he says, 'There has been determined to save your country, or a weak general and bad counsellors would have ruined it.' I am, sir, &c.'"

"Neither this letter, nor the information which occasioned it, was ever directly or indirectly communicated by me to a single officer in this army out of my own family, excepting the Marquis de Lafayette, who, having been spoken to on the subject by Gen. Conway, applied for and saw, under injunctions of secrecy, the letter which contained Wilkinson's information; so desirous was I of concealing every matter that could, in its consequences, give the smallest interruption to the tranquility of this army, or afford a gleam of hope to the enemy by disquisitions therein.

"Thus, sir, with an openness and candor, which I hope will ever characterize and mark my conduct, have I complied with your request. The only concern I feel upon the occasion, finding how matters stand, is, that in doing this I have necessarily been obliged to name a gentleman, who, I am persuaded, although I never exchanged a word with him upon the subject, thought he was rather doing an act of justice, than committing an act of infidelity; and sure I am, that, till Lord Stirling's letter came to my hands, I never knew that General Conway, whom I viewed in the light of a stranger to you, was a correspondent of yours; much less did I suspect that I was the subject of your confidential letters. Pardon me then for adding, that, so far from conceiving that the safety of the states can be affected, or in the smallest degree injured, by a discovery of this kind, or that I should be called upon in such solemn terms to point out the author, I considered the information as coming from yourself, and given with a friendly view to forewarn, and consequently to forearm me against a secret enemy, or in other words, a dangerous incendiarism; in which character, sooner or later, this country will know General Conway. But in this, as in other matters of state, I have found myself mistaken.

"I am, sir, your most obedient servant."

Horatio Gates to George Washington.

"Yorktown, 23d January, 1778."

"Sir: The letter of the 4th instant which I had the honor to receive yesterday from your excellency, has relieved me from unspeakable unquietness. I now anticipate the pleasure it will give you, when you discover that what has been conveyed to you for an extract of General Conway's letter to me was not an information, which friendly motives induced a man of honor to give, that injured virtue might be forearmed against secret enemies. The paragraph, which your excellency has confided to transcribe, is apocryphal. It was certainly fabricated to answer the most seditious and wicked purposes. I cannot avoid scrutinizing into your excellency the history of General Conway's letter, from the time that it came to my hands by Lieutenant-Colonel Troup, my aide-de-camp, to whom General Conway delivered it at Reading on the 11th of October, to this time, as far as it has affected me and the officers of my family.

"That letter contained very judicious remarks upon that want of discipline, which has often alarmed your excellency and, I believe, all deserving patriots. The reasons which, in his judgment, deprived us of the success we could reasonably expect, were methodically explained by him; but neither the 'weakness' of any of our generals, nor bad counsellors, were mentioned; and consequently cannot be assigned or imagined as part of those reasons to which General Conway attributed some of our losses. He wrote to me as a candid observer, as other officers in every service freely write to each other, for obtaining better intelligence than that of newspapers, and that freedom renders such letters thus far confidential in some measure. The judgment of the person who receives them points out to him, according to time and circumstances, the propriety or
impropriety attending their being communicated, when
no particular injunction of secrecy was requested.

"Particular actions rather than persons were blamed,
but with impartiality; and I am convinced that he did
not aim at lessening in my opinion the merit of any
person. His letter was perfectly harmless; however,
now that various reports have been circulated concern-
ing its contents, they ought not to be submitted to the
solemn inspection of even those who stand most high
in the public esteem. Anxiety and jealousy would
rise in the breast of very respectable officers, who,
rendered sensible of faults, which inexpérience, and
that alone, may have led them into, would be unneces-
sarily disgusted, if they perceived a probability of such
errors being recorded. Honor forbids it, and patriotism
demands that I should return the letter into the hands
of the writer. I will do it; but at the same time I
declare, that the paragraph conveyed to your excel-
lency as a genuine part of it, was in words as well as
in substance a wicked forgery.

"About the beginning of December I was informed
that letter had occasioned an explanation between your
excellency and that gentleman. Not knowing whether
the whole letter or a part of it had been stealingly
copied, but fearing malice had interfered its original tex-
ture, I own, sir, that a dread of the mischief, which
might attend the forgery, I suspected would be made,
put me for some time, in a most painful situation.
When I communicated to the officers in my family the
intelligence I had received, they all entreated me to
rescue their character from the suspicions they justly
conceived themselves liable to, until the guilty person
should be known. To facilitate the discovery, I wrote
to your excellency; but, unable to learn whether Gene-
ral Conway's letter had been transmitted to you by a
member of congress or a gentleman in the army, I was
afraid much time would be lost in the course of the
inquiry, and that the states might receive some capitol
injury from the infidelity of the person who I thought
had stolen a copy of the obnoxious letter. Was it not
probable that the secrets of the army might be obtained
and betrayed through the same means to the enemy?
For this reason, sir, not doubting the congress would
most cheerfully concur with you in trncing out the
offenders, I wrote to the president, and enclosed to him
a copy of my letter to your excellency.

"About the close letters I was forwarding those letters,
Brigadier-General Wilkinson returned to Albany.
I informed him of the treachery which had been com-
mitted, but I concealed from him the measure I was
pursuing to unmask the author. Wilkinson answered,
he was assured it never would come to light, and
efforted to fix my suspicions on Lieutenant-Colonel
Troup, who, he said, he might have insinuated con-
versely on the substance of General Conway's letter
with Colonel Hamilton, whom you had sent not long
before to Albany. I did not listen to this insinuation
against your all-de-camp and mine.

"Would that your excellency's prediction relative
to General Conway had not been inserted in your let-
ter, which came to me unseen through the channel of
congress, I hope always to find that gentleman a
firm and constant friend to America. I never wrote to
him in my life, but to satisfy his doubts concerning the
exposure of his private letter; nor had any sort of
intimacy, nor hardly the smallest acquaintance with
him, before our meeting in this town. With great
respect, I am, &c."

In reading this last letter of General Gates the
reader is requested to observe that he speaks of
Conway's letter as if there had been but one,
and that he further favors this idea by declaring that
he had no sort of intimacy with Conway, and had
never written to him but to satisfy his mind con-
cerning the exposure of his own letter. Of course,
the inference is that Conway had written to him
one letter which he never answered, and that the
letter in question was written by Gates with no
other view but to satisfy him on the subject. It
is painful to think that a vice so contemptible as
falsification should be found in one who had won such
proud distinction in the cause of freedom and of
our country. But we find it impossible to read
the following letter without impugning this paltry
and disgraceful crime to General Gates:

Horatio Gates to Thomas Conway.

"Albany, 3d December, 1777.

"Dear General: Your excellent letter has given me
pain; for, at the same time that I am indebted to you
for a just idea of the cause of our misfortunes, your
judicious observations make me sensible of the difficulty
there is in remedying the evils, which retard our suc-
cess. The perfect establishment of military discipline,
consistent with the honor and principles, which ought
to be cherished amongst a free people, is not only the
work of genius, but time. But, dear General, you have
sent your resignation; and I assure you, I fondly hope
it will not be accepted; it ought not.

"The suspicion, which has long subsisted between
the French and English nations, will continue until
they cease to be neighbors. Such is the unhappy lot
of mankind. The separation occasioned by the decla-
ration of independence has removed the cause of that
hated which the political connexion of the British
colonists has implanted in their breasts against the
French, and those who were attached to their interest.
Now that Machiavelism can be no longer attempted to
keep up those prejudices in the minds of the unthink-
 ing amongst us, the French and the people of the
United States will become friends; and I am assured
that men, in the station you mention, should have
been so impolitic, or have possessed so little of the phi-
osophic spirit, as to provoke a gentleman of your
acknowledged merits, by bilibreral reflections; however,
I must declare to you, that I firmly believe there would
be more greatness in continuing to serve the state,
notwithstanding the provocation you think you have
received from one of their principal members, than in
resigning the commission you hold. Capricious or dis-
greced warriors so often leave the army, that I do not
wish to see the name of Conway on the list of officers
who have withdrawn from the service of our republic.
I hope the result of your considerations on this subject,
will retain in our service an excellent officer, who has
already exposed his life in our defence; and that you
will believe I am, with the purest esteem, dear General,
your most humble and most obedient servant."

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"P. S. This moment I received a letter from our worthy friend, General Mifflin, who informs me, that extracts from your letters to me had been conveyed to General Washington, and that it occasioned an embarrassment, in which you acted with all the dignity of a virtuous soldier. I interest you, dear General, to let me know which of the letters was copied off. It is of the greatest importance that I should detect the person, who has been guilty of that act of infidelity. I cannot trace him out unless I have your assistance."

It has been said that he who would discover the subject nearest a man's heart when she sits down to write a letter, must look for it in the postscript. A favorable judge might interpret General Gates in the same way; but unfortunately we have a letter of the next day to General Mifflin, in which he tells him that the letter to Conway had been written and sealed before Mifflin's letter, above referred to, was received. But let the matter and manner of this letter be carefully observed. What is there about it that betokens a first and only letter to a stranger in answer to an unexpected letter from that stranger? Who can believe that such a letter as Conway's appears to have been, was written to any but an intimate? The subject appears to have been, in good measure, that of the writer's private griefs, and Gates's eager inquiry as to which of the letters had been copied, shows that there had been several. The same methodous tone appears also in his first letter to Washington, and contrasts amusingly with the cool nonchalance with which he treats the whole affair, as soon as he received Washington's answer. He seems to have been completely set at ease by the discovery that no letter had been copied, and that only a short sentence had been detailed from the middle of it. Nothing more was wanting than to protest that there was no such language in some one letter, which he might hold himself ready to produce, if called for; and there he doubtless supposed the matter would end. But he had to do with one who penetrated to the thoughts and intentions of his heart, and who, with no other light than that afforded by Gates's artful letter, saw the whole matter as it really was, and as plainly as we who are admitted behind the scenes. The following letter is an evidence of fact and sagacity without parallel:

George Washington to Horatio Gates.

"Valley Forge, 9th February, 1778.

"Sir: I was duly favored with your letter of the 23d of last month, to which I should have replied sooner, had I not been delayed by business that required my immediate attention. It is my wish to give implicit credit to the assurances of every gentleman; but, in the subject of our present correspondence, I am sorry to confess, there is a probability to be some unholy circumstances, which involuntarily compel me to consider the discovery you mention, not so satisfactory and conclusive, as you seem to think it. I am no unshapen spectator to find no small difficulty in reconciling the spirit and import of your different letters, and sometimes of the different parts of the same letter with each other. It is not unreasonable to presume, that your first information of my having noticed of General Conway's letter, came from himself; there were very few in the secret, and it is natural to suppose that he, being immediately concerned, would be most interested to convey the intelligence to you. It is also far from improbable that he acquainted you with the substance of the passage communicated to me; one would expect this, if he believed it to be spurious, in order to ascertain the imposition and evince his innocence; especially as he seemed to be under some uncertainty as to the precise contents of what he had written, when I signified my knowledge of the matter to him. If he neglected doing it, the omission cannot easily be interpreted into anything else than a consciousness of the reality of the extract, if not literally, at least substantially. If he did not neglect it, it must appear somewhat strange that the forgery remained so long undetected, and that your first letter to me from Albany, of the 8th of December, should tacitly recognize the genuineness of the passage in question; while your only concern at that time seemed to be the tracing out the 'author of the infidelity, which put extracts from General Conway's letter into my hands.'

"Throughout the whole of that letter, the reality of the extracts is by the fairest implication allowed, and your only solicitude is to find out the person that brought them to light. After making the most earnest pursuit of the author of the supposed treachery, without saying a word about the truth or falsehood of the passage, your letter of the 23d ultimo, to my great surprise, proclaims it 'in words, as well as in substance, a wicked forgery.' It is not my intention to contradict this assertion, but only to intimate some considerations, which tend to induce a suspicion that, though none of General Conway's letters to you contained the offensive passage mentioned, there might have been something in them too nearly related to it, that could give such an extraordinary alarm. It may be said, if this were not the case, how easy in the first instance to have declared there was nothing exceptional in them, and to have produced the letters themselves in support of it. This might be thought the most proper and effectual way of refuting misrepresentation and removing all suspicion. The propriety of the objections suggested against submitting them to inspection may very well be questioned. 'The various reports circulated concerning their contents,' were perhaps so many arguments for making them speak for themselves, to place the matter upon the footing of certainty. Concealment in an affair, which had made so much noise, though not by my means, will naturally lead men to conjecture the worst; and it will be a subject of speculation even to condemn itself. The anxiety and jealousy you apprehended from revealing the letter, will be very apt to be increased by suppressing it.

"It may be asked, Why not submit to inspection a performance perfectly harmless, and of course conceived in terms of proper caution and delicacy? Why suppose that anxiety and jealousy would have arisen in the breasts of very respectable officers, or that they would have been unnecessarily disgusted at being made men-
able of their faults, when related with judgment and impartiality by a candid observer? Surely they could not have been unreasonable enough to take offence at a performance so perfectly insinuating, 'blaming actions rather than persons,' which have evidently no connexion with one another, and indulgently 'recording the errors of inexperience.'

"You are pleased to consider General Conway's letters as of a confidential nature; observing 'that time and circumstances must point out the propriety or impropriety of communicating such letters.' Permit me to inquire whether, when there is an impropriety in communicating, it is only applicable with respect to the parties, who are the subjects of them? One might be led to imagine this to be the case, from your having admitted others into the secret of your confidential correspondence, at the same time that you thought it ineligible it should be trusted to those 'officers, whose actions underwent its scrutiny.' Your not knowing whether the letter under consideration 'came to me from a member of congress, or from an officer,' plainly indicates that you originally communicated it to at least one of that honourable body; and I learn from General Conway, that before his late arrival at Yorktown, it had been committed to the perusal of several of its members, and was afterwards shown by himself to three more. It is somewhat difficult to conceive a reason, founded in generosity, for imparting the free and confidential strictures of that ingenious censor on the operations of the army under my command, to a member of congress; but perhaps 'time and circumstances pointed it out.' It must indeed be acknowledged, that the faults of very respectable officers, not less injurious for being the result of inexperience, were not improper topics to engage the attention of members of congress.

"It is, however, greatly to be lamented, that this adept in military science did not employ his abilities in the progress of the campaign, in pointing out those wise measures, which were calculated to give us 'that degree of success we could reasonably expect.' The United States have lost much from that unreasonable diffusion, which prevented his embracing the numerous opportunities he had in council of displaying those rich treasures of knowledge and experience he has since so freely held open to you. I will not do him the injustice to impute the penurious reserve, which ever appeared in him upon such occasions, to any other cause than an excess of modesty; neither will I suppose, that he possesses no other merit than that after kind of sagacity, which qualifies a man better for profound discoveries of errors that have been committed, and advantages that have been lost, than for the exercise of that foresight and provident discernment, which enable him to avoid the one and anticipate the other. But, willing as I am to subordinate all his pretensions, and to believe that his remarks on the operations of the campaign were very judicious, and that he has sagaciously descanted on many things that might have been done, I cannot help being a little sceptical as to his ability to have found out the means of accomplishing them, or to prove the sufficiency of those in our possession. Those minutes, I suspect, he did not think worth his attention, particularly as they might not be within the compass of his views.

"Notwithstanding the hopeful premones you are pleased to figure to yourself of General Conway's firm and constant friendship to America, I cannot persuade myself to retract the prediction concerning him, which you so emphatically wished had not been inserted in my last. A better acquaintance with him, than I have reason to think you have had, from what you say, and a concurrence of circumstances, oblige me to give him but little credit for the qualifications of his heart; of which, at least, I beg leave to assume the privilege of being a tolerable judge. Were it necessary, more instances than one might be adduced, from his behavior and conversation, to manifest that he is capable of all the malignity of destruction, and all the meannesses of intrigue, to gratify the absurd resentment of disappointed vanity, or to answer the purposes of personal advancement, and promote the interest of faction. I am with respect, sir, your most obedient servant."

Now here is the "lie by circumstance" instigated with a degree of distinctness to which nothing but conscious guilt, Christian forbearance, or abject cowardice could have been expected to submit. It was more provoking, too, because the whole of the argument drawn from the supposed communication of Washington's discovery by Conway himself, could have been shown to be destitute of any such foundation. Gates had got his information from Militi, who gave no indication of the terms of the supposed letter or extract. Under these circumstances, it is almost incredible that Gates should have designed to write the following reply:

"Honourable Gates to George Washington.

"Yorktown, 15th February, 1778.

"Sir: Yesterdy I had the honor to receive your excellency's letter of the 9th instant, and earnestly hope no more of that time, so precious to the public, may be lost upon the subject of General Conway's letter. Whether that gentleman does or does not deserve the suspicions you express, would be entirely indifferent to me, did he not possess an office of high rank in the army of the United States; for that reason solely I wish he may answer all the expectations of congress. As to the gentleman, I have no personal connexion with him, nor had I any correspondence, previous to his writing the letter which has given offence; nor have I since written to him, save to certify what I know to be the contents of the letter. He therefore must be responsible; as I heartily dislike controversy, even upon my own account, and much more in a matter wherein I was only accidentally concerned. In regard to the parts of your excellency's letter addressed particularly to me, I solemnly declare that I am of no faction; and if any of my letters taken aggregately or by paragraphs convey any meaning which in any construction is offensive to your excellency, that was not my meaning the intention of the writer. After this, I cannot believe your excellency will either suffer your suspicions or the prejudices of others to induce you to spend another moment upon this subject. With great respect, I am, sir, &c."

The reply of the commander-in-chief to this
sneaking letter, which is found at page 618, closes this remarkable correspondence:

George Washington to Horatio Gates.

"Valley Forge, 24th February, 1778.

"Sir: Yesterday received your favor of the 19th instant. I am as averse to controversy as any man; and, had I not been forced into it, you never would have had occasion to impute to me even the shadow of a disposition towards it. Your repeatedly and solemnly disclaiming any offensive views, in those matters which have been the subject of our past correspondence, makes me willing to close with the desire you express, of burying them hereafter in silence and, as far as future events will permit, oblivion. My temper leads me to peace and harmony with all men; and it is peculiarly my wish to avoid any personal feuds or dissensions with those who are embarked in the same great national interest with myself, as every difference of this kind must in its consequences be very injurious. I am, sir, your most obedient servant."

After all this it is due to General Gates to own that he was no ordinary man, and yet we may safely challenge a search into all the records of this sort of diplomacy, in which the superiority of one party over the other is more triumphantly established. That it was the triumph of truth and virtue, is made manifest, to all who might doubt it, (if such there could be) by the following letter from Conway, written, as he then believed, on his death bed.

Thomas Conway to George Washington.


"Sir: I find myself just able to hold the pen during a few minutes, and take this opportunity of expressing my sincere grief for having done, written, or said anything disagreeable to your excellency. My career will soon be over; therefore justice and truth prompt me to declare my last sentiments. You are in my eyes the great and good man. May you long enjoy the love, veneration and esteem of these states, whose liberties you have asserted by your virtues. I am, with the greatest respect, &c.

"THOMAS CONWAY."

We have given these letters at large, not only because they are more interesting than anything of our own, but because we can no otherwise so well convey to the reader a just idea of the work under review. It is only thus that the character of such a work can be displayed. When we say that this is but a fair sample of the sort of information it contains, and of the manner in which it is communicated and substantiated, we have said enough to satisfy the public that it has well fulfilled the high expectations awakened by its announcement.

We are not sure that in every instance the compiler’s task has been executed with the same skill and fidelity. In the papers relating to the interesting affair of Major André, there is a meagerness which leaves the reader unsatisfied, and dis-