

“History is not the province of the ladies”: Adams, Jefferson, and Histories of Revolution

Martha J. King

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Thomas Jefferson’s correspondents frequently inquired of the Virginia statesman about his reading and asked for his recommendations and book preferences. Individual citizens often wrote him for inexpensive or useful titles to include in their personal libraries.<sup>1</sup> Jefferson carefully compiled now well-known booklists for young gentlemen scholars including Robert Skipwith, Thomas Mann Randolph, and Joseph Cabell.<sup>2</sup> Some budding bibliophiles even asked Jefferson’s advice on the sequence for a plan of reading and the proper method for acquiring “sound political knowledge” or a familiarity in a wide range of subjects. One such writer, John Norvell of Kentucky, noted the good fortune of a person who had an instructor to direct him to the books that ought and ought not to be read and the manner in which they should be read. He additionally asked the third president in 1807, “Is it essential that much history should be read?” and if so, which authors should be read to the greatest advantage.<sup>3</sup>

Nascent readers wrote to John Adams as well, asking for his advice on recommended history books. We know from the letters of the Adams family, that John and Abigail frequently inquired and corresponded with their children about their reading practices and literary appetites.<sup>4</sup> Abigail reminded her teen-aged son John Quincy then living in St. Petersburg in 1782 to “Attend to the Historians you read, and carefully observe the springs and causes that have produced the rise and fall of Empires. And give me your own reflections in your own Language.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Samuel R. Demaree to TJ, 6 Jan. 1802; Julian P. Boyd et al., eds., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 35 vols. to date [Princeton, 1950- ], 36:304-305 (forthcoming 2009) (hereafter *PTJ*); and also Demaree to TJ, 22 Aug. 1809, J. Jefferson Looney et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Retirement Series*, 5 vols. to date [Princeton, 2004- ] 1:455-457 (hereafter *TJRS*).

<sup>2</sup> TJ to Robert Skipwith, 3 Aug. 1771 (*PTJ*, 1:76-81); TJ to Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., 27 Aug. 1786 (*PTJ*, 10:305-309); A Course of Reading for Joseph C. Cabell, Sept. 1800 (*PTJ*, 32:176-181).

<sup>3</sup> See John Norvell to TJ, 9 May 1807 (MoSHi) and TJ’s reply, 11 June 1807 (MWA).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, John Quincy Adams to JA, 21 February/4 March 1782 from St. Petersburg: “I have lately finished Hume’s history of England and am at present reading Mrs. Macaulay’s.” He wrote to his father on 20/31 March 1782, “I have finished three of Cicero’s Orations against Catiline and have begun the fourth. And I have finished reading Mrs. Macaulay’s history of England” (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-04-04-02-0201> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]).

<sup>5</sup> Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, 13 Nov. 1782 (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-04-05-02-0020> [accessed 18 May 2009]).

Throughout their lives, Adams and Jefferson read history--both ancient and modern. As consumers and creators of history, they were intrigued by how the past would and could be recorded for posterity. As bibliophiles, they lined their shelves with books of all types including cherished classic tomes they read, re-read, and recommended to others. Their collections also included more ephemeral works they occasionally dipped into, some unsolicited presentation copies from ingratiating authors, and even works with which they completely disagreed. The mere presence of a book in either man's library does not necessarily mean it had a long-lasting effect though and may be a reflection of individual taste or circumstances that do not necessarily equate with a book's temporal popularity.<sup>6</sup> Carl Becker observed that men are influenced by books that clarify their own thought, express their own motives, or suggest ideas which they are already predisposed to accept. Trevor Colbourn offered a more cautious assessment that for Jefferson, "the most that can be claimed is that the character of Jefferson's reading habits, his peculiar preferences and comments on them, can and do inform powerfully on his own thinking."<sup>7</sup>

As elder statesmen, reconciled correspondents, and avid readers, it is not surprising that Adams and Jefferson, in their retirement, periodically asked and offered their individual reflections and informed thinking on their own historical reading. One such exchange between the men in the summer of 1815 ensued over who was best able to write a history of the American Revolution, the important epoch in the nation's history in which they had each invested their sacred honors and much political capital. How did they see the history of the Revolution being written and whom did they deem worthy to write it? Was such history the domain of its firsthand participants and actors, those heroes of the battlefield and politicians of the chamber, or was history within the purview of more distant observers and spectators? Who, they pondered, had the right to carry the mantle of the Revolution?

Jefferson replied from Monticello to Adams's query: "On the subject of the history of the American revolution, you ask Who shall write it? Who can write it? And who ever will be able to write it? Nobody; except merely it's external facts. All it's councils, designs and discussions, having been conducted by Congress with closed doors, and no member, as far as I know, having even made notes of them, these, which are the life and soul of history must be forever unknown."<sup>8</sup> From Quincy,

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<sup>6</sup> See David Lundberg and Henry F. May, "The Enlightened Reader in America," *American Quarterly*, 28 (Summer 1976), 262-293, esp. 263, 279; H. Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1965), esp. chap. 9; and Cathy N. Davidson, "Towards a History of Books and Readers," *American Quarterly*, 40 (March 1988), 7-17. Davidson summarizes a theory of readers reading intensively (reading the same few books over during the course of a lifetime and incorporating them into life's activities) vs. extensively (rapidly consuming more books while placing less significance on the books read). She also demonstrates how there can be many and overlapping reading communities with different reading strategies and purposes within the same society. Janice A. Radway and others consider consumption as a false metaphor for reading because it reduces it to passive ingestion. She contends that the scholar should look at what people do with the text and objects and how they remake it into something useable.

<sup>7</sup> H. Trevor Colbourn, "Thomas Jefferson's Use of the Past," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 15 (1958), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Jefferson replied to Adams's query of 30 July on 10-11 Aug. 1815 (Lester Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* [Chapel Hill, 1959], 452-453; hereafter Cappon, *Letters*).

Adams responded: “As to the history of the Revolution, my Ideas may be peculiar, perhaps singular. What do we Mean by the Revolution? The War? That was no part of the Revolution. It was only an Effect and Consequence of it. The Revolution was in the Minds of the People, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen Years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington. The Records of thirteen Legislatures, the Pamphlets, Newspapers in all the Colonies ought to be consulted, during that Period to ascertain the Steps by which the Public Opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the Authority of Parliament over the Colonies.”<sup>9</sup>

Both Jefferson and Adams were concerned that the younger generation of the early nineteenth century who had not lived through the events of the Revolution perceived its history far differently than those of its participants. They were also troubled that the “external facts” that were the chief concern of many of their inquirers did not adequately tell the whole story. Despite their political differences, both men believed that Americans would benefit from a complete knowledge of the Revolution that could help them to appreciate the merit of republican government. Neither Adams nor Jefferson could precisely date the beginning or end of the Revolution or agree on whether its goals had been attained. Yet both men were greatly concerned with the authenticity of the sources to be used in the writing of its history, in no small part because this could shape their own legacies long after they were gone.<sup>10</sup> As a result, both men had their own ideas about who should write history.

Indeed both statesmen frequently received requests from aspiring historians for their firsthand accounts or memories of events of the War for Independence as well as permission to peruse their papers. Englishman William Gordon decided to write a history of the Revolution as early as 1776 and solicited the aid of many of its leading figures including John Adams and George Washington.<sup>11</sup> In 1777, Gordon wrote Adams that he was collecting materials for a history, acknowledged Washington’s promised assistance as well as that of others and was hopeful that other congressmen would provide the help and “certain intelligence that may not easily be gained in any other way.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Adams to TJ, 24 Aug. 1815 (Cappon, *Letters*, 455).

<sup>10</sup> Cappon, *Letters*, 419.

<sup>11</sup> George Washington, in a letter to William Gordon of 8 May 1784, concluded that “no Historian can be possessed of sufficient materials to compile a *perfect* history of the revolution” who did not have free access to congressional archives, state papers, and papers of the commander-in-chief and his officers. Washington was enough of a realist to accept that “Some things probably will never be known.” (*The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=GEWN-print-04-01-02-0247> [accessed 6 Jan. 2009]).

<sup>12</sup> William Gordon to JA, 27 March, 1777 (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-06-05-02-0014-0074> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]).

In June 1784 Gordon visited George Washington at Mount Vernon and examined the general’s revolutionary correspondence, made copies of 33 folio volumes of Washington’s copied letters as well as 3 volumes of private letters, 7 volumes of general orders and bundles of other letters. Gordon’s published history was widely criticized in the United States for errors and omissions and had copied long passages verbatim from the British Whig journal, the *Annual Register* (*The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville:

Gordon later asked Adams for an introduction to Jefferson as well as a recommendation for the patronage of his history. Jefferson cautioned Gordon not to expect much profit, especially in a French translation, but endorsed his efforts, praised his talents, and professed “sanguine expectations” for the “valuable addition to historical science” since so little on the subject merited respect.<sup>13</sup> Gordon’s four-volume *History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America* appeared in London in 1788 with American editions published in 1789, 1794, and 1801.

Several of the authors of the revolutionary histories either came of age during the Revolution or actively participated in it. David Ramsay, a longstanding member of the South Carolina legislature and a delegate to Congress during the Revolution, published his *History of the American Revolution* in two volumes from Philadelphia in 1789, with a London reprint edition in 1793, and many foreign translations.<sup>14</sup> Jefferson, who had helped Ramsay get his two-volume history of South Carolina published and translated in France in 1787, received a copy of his revolutionary history in June 1790 and looked forward to the pleasure of reading it.<sup>15</sup> Ramsay referred to Jefferson several times in his text in connection to official acts and appointments and listed both Adams and Jefferson among the “most distinguished writers in favour of the rights of America.”<sup>16</sup>

To be sure, several histories of the period were in print and available in the libraries of politicians and the literate populous. Authors such as John Lendrum and Jedidiah Morse tried their hands at histories of the American Revolution as well.<sup>17</sup> Many historians of the Revolution claimed to present a distinctively American yet impartial history grounded in truth. In reality, many of their histories served a dual purpose as propaganda to extend their ideological agendas and instill virtues.

While many American authors used their histories for nationalist purposes, even foreigners wrote histories of the conflict for American independence. Carlos Botta, the Italian historian who became a

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University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.

<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=GEWN-print-05-01-02-0001> [accessed 06 Jan. 2009]; Eileen Ka-May Cheng, *The Plain and Noble Garb of Truth: Nationalism and Impartiality in American Historical Writing, 1784-1860* (Athens, Ga., 2008), 107).

<sup>13</sup> William Gordon to TJ, 20 Feb. 1787 and TJ to William Gordon, 2 July 1787 (*PTJ*, 11:172-173, 525).

<sup>14</sup> Cheng, *Plain and Noble Garb of Truth*, 14, 107; E. Millicent Sowerby, comp., *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson*, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C.: 1952-1959; hereafter cited as Sowerby), No. 490. For Ramsay’s history of South Carolina, see Sowerby No. 488 and No. 489. Ramsay also copied or appropriated text from Gordon as well as the *Annual Register*.

<sup>15</sup> David Ramsay to TJ, 12 April 1790 (*PTJ*, 16:332-333); TJ to David Ramsay, 27 June 1790 (*PTJ*, 16:577).

<sup>16</sup> David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1782), 2:319.

<sup>17</sup> John Lendrum, *A Concise and Impartial History of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1795). Jedidiah Morse, *Annals of the American Revolution* (Hartford, 1824). For a revealing discussion of plagiarism, originality, and revolutionary historical writing, see Eileen Ka-May Cheng, *The Plain and Noble Garb of Truth: Nationalism and Impartiality in American Historical Writing, 1784-1860* (Athens, Ga., 2008), 100-120. See also Lester H. Cohen, *The Revolutionary Histories: Contemporary Narratives of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), esp. chap. 7 “The Historian of the Revolution as a Revolutionary Historian,” 185-211.

French citizen, published his *Storia della guerra dell' Indipendenza degli Stati Uniti d'America* in Paris in 1809. Jefferson received the book the following year and looked forward to perusing it although it was not until 1817, in his retirement, that he reported doing so. Jefferson wrote to Adams that aside from Botta's adoption of the ancient practice of putting speeches into the mouths of those who never made them and ascribing motives where they were never felt, he found the Italian's history had more "detail, precision, and candor than any writer I have yet met with."<sup>18</sup>

The vast majority of histories of the American Revolution were written by ardent Federalists such as John Marshall, who was Jefferson's second cousin, as well as secretary of state under Adams and later Supreme Court chief justice. Marshall had been an officer in the Virginia Continental line and had served under Washington at Valley Forge and in several other important campaigns of the Revolution. In 1804 he published the first of a five-volume history of the United States that was organized as a partisan biography of its first president.<sup>19</sup> Marshall claimed to have compiled his work from Washington's correspondence but admitted that he relied on other histories of the day as well. For him, the historical enterprise was rooted in accumulating facts in pursuit of an impartial truth. But neither Adams nor Jefferson found his history completely impartial. Jefferson wrote in the margins of Marshall's history, correcting information (such as "this is a mistake" next to a passage about the Massachusetts plan for colonial committees) or inserting himself back into the account (such as "drawn by T. Jefferson" or his initials written next to a passage to indicate he was the member who drew up a resolution or asked a question on the subject at hand).<sup>20</sup>

Jefferson was concerned about the accuracy of history as written and history as lived and, along with James Madison in 1802, invited Joel Barlow, the epic poet and diplomat then in Paris, to work on a history of the United States "from the close of the war downwards." He promised Barlow, "we are rich ourselves in materials, and can open all the public archives to you" and added that much knowledge was "not on paper but only within ourselves, for verbal communication" thus necessitating the author to be in residence. Jefferson was especially eager for a new history. He was well aware that Marshall's life of Washington was written for electioneering purposes "to come out just in time to influence the next presidential election." Jefferson suggested to Barlow that Marshall's history could be an aid in information as well as "to point out the perversions of truth necessary to be rectified."<sup>21</sup> After Barlow's return to the United States, Jefferson reminded him again in 1809 about this proposal. Upon reading Marshall's fifth volume of the *Life of George Washington*, Jefferson intended to correct what was wrong in the overly partisan biography and to add facts and annotations to it that would help Barlow counter with his own history. Pleasant seasonal weather enticed the master of Monticello to spend more time outdoors and away from his

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<sup>18</sup> See TJ to JA, 5 May 1817, Cappon, *Letters*, 512-514; Sowerby, No. 509.

<sup>19</sup> John Marshall, *The Life of George Washington, Commander in Chief of the American Forces, During the war which Established the Independence of his Country, and First President of the United States*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia, 1804-1807).

<sup>20</sup> Cheng, *Plain and Noble Garb of Truth*, 109-111; Sowerby, No. 496.

<sup>21</sup> TJ to Joel Barlow, 3 May 1802 (*PTJ*, Vol. 37, forthcoming).

writing desk to complete the task. Likewise Barlow's own affairs prevented him from ever writing the Republican history Jefferson had in mind to counter Marshall's Federalist interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

Upon the thirty-seventh anniversary of American independence in 1813, Adams wrote to Jefferson reflecting on the available histories and those yet to be written and the impact they would have on each man's legacy. The usefulness of these histories, he argued, depended in large measure upon whether the authors had access to "thousands of Letters, now in being, but still concealed, (from their Party to their Friends,) which will, one day see the light. I have wondered for more than thirty Years that so few have appeared: and have constantly expected that a Tory History of the Rise and progress of the Revolution would appear. And wished it. I would give more for it than for Marshall, Gordon, Ramsay and all the rest." He judged that "Gordon's and Marshall's Histories were written to make money: and fashioned and finished, to sell high in the London Market. I should expect to find more Truth in a History written by Hutchinson, Oliver or Sewell. And I doubt not, such Histories will one day appear. Marshall's is a Mausoleum, 100 feet square at the base, and 200 feet high. It will be durable, as the monuments of the Washington benevolent Societies. Your Character in History may be easily foreseen. Your Administration, will be quoted by philosophers, as a model, of profound Wisdom; by Politicians, as weak, superficial and short sighted. Mine, like Popes Woman will have no Character at all."<sup>23</sup>

For the most part, these histories were not blockbusting bestsellers but they did influence the next generation of historians who would revise the history of the Revolution for their own times. While the histories were overwhelmingly Federalist in tone and most all written by men, Mercy Otis Warren's work is unique in being the only multi-volume Anti-Federalist history of the Revolution written by an eye witness and a woman.<sup>24</sup>

A larger though often un verbalized question over who should write history concerned matters of gender and genre. Should women write history? Historical truth had been viewed as a male domain, rooted in the rational and reasonable while the female sphere catered to the emotional and more subjective as was often found in fiction and especially the novel. To be sure, both Adams and Jefferson expressed definite ideas about women's education and intellectual capacities in their epistolary exchanges with their female relatives and confidantes.

While Jefferson and Adams reacted to histories by Gordon, Ramsay, and Marshall, and sometimes carped at the impact on their reputations, they had extolled the merits of a British woman historian of another revolution more remote in time. The celebrated Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay (1731-

<sup>22</sup> TJ to Joel Barlow, 8 Oct. 1809 (*TJRS*, 1:588-590; Sowerby, No. 496). For Barlow's failed efforts to write a history of the United States and for his communication with Mercy Otis Warren on the topic, see David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America 1607-1884* [Chicago, 1960], 82-83.

<sup>23</sup> JA to TJ, 3 July 1813 (Cappon, *Letters*, 349). Adams, likening his administration to Pope's Woman was a reference to "Most Women have no Characters at all," in Alexander Pope's "Of the Characters of Women: an Epistle to a Lady."

<sup>24</sup> Cheng, *Plain and Noble Garb of Truth*, 17; Cohen, *Revolutionary Histories*, 186-187, 273; Joan Hoff Wilson and Sharon L. Bollinger, "Mercy Otis Warren: Playwright, Poet and Historian of the American Revolution," in J.R. Brink, ed., *Female Scholars: A Tradition of Learned Women Before 1800* (Montreal, 1980), 161-182.

1791) wrote an eight-volume *History of England, from the Accession of James I to That of the Brunswick Line*, published between 1763 and 1783, that was generally regarded as a counter or Whig corrective to David Hume's *History*.<sup>25</sup> Her account of the Glorious Revolution appeared in libraries and bookstores on both sides of the Atlantic with much acclaim.

Mrs. Macaulay's celebrity--and scandalous personal life--was often discussed in the homes of the statesmen and among friends and correspondents.<sup>26</sup> Popularly referred to as the "historian in petticoats," the widow of George Macaulay and protégé and beneficiary of Rev. Dr. Thomas Wilson married for a second time in 1778 at the age of forty-seven to a twenty-one-year-old surgeon's mate, William Graham, the brother of her quack doctor, with whom she was rumored to have had a sexual liaison.<sup>27</sup>

Amidst the gossip about the woman, the prodigious research of Mrs. Macaulay the historian was almost legendary. Gender seemed to matter less in the telling of history than the ability of the historian to use reliable sources in crafting an accurate historical narrative. Familiar with the work of other historians, Catharine Macaulay also relied on printed sources such as the *Parliamentary History* as well as manuscripts. She was among the first to work in what became the British Museum and Library. Her history began to appear the year after David Hume's history and she engaged much of his work. Hume took her seriously as did others. First and foremost, argues J.G.A. Pocock, Macaulay was a historian whose main function was both exemplary and exhortatory, that is to provide examples of public virtue. Hers was a history of the English republic written by one sympathetic to

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<sup>25</sup> Bridget Hill, *The Republican Virago: The Life and Times of Catharine Macaulay, Historian* (Oxford, 1992), 24-51. Macaulay's *History of England* appeared in eight volumes between 1763 and 1771 and, after an interval of ten years, in 1781. During the interval she started a history of England from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to her own time as a series of letters written to a friend but only published one volume of this in 1778.

Macaulay's *History of England* was often on Jefferson's recommended list of readings. His own copy of the work was obtained after 4 June 1811. According to Sowerby, the work is twice entered in TJ's manuscript catalogue, both in its chronological sequence and at the end of the entries on English history (Sowerby, No. 386).

<sup>26</sup> When they returned to Britain, Catharine Macaulay, her daughter, and her husband dined with the Adams family in London. Abigail Adams reported: "I am pleas'd with mrs Graham, whose manners are much more feminine than I expected to find them. Why why did she tarnish her lawrels by so Youthfull a connection. The Gentleman looks rather young to have been the Husband of her daughter... Mrs Graham expresses herself much satisfied with her reception in Boston, and indeed throughout America. She would have found more respect I conceive if she had visited as Mrs Macauley." Abigail then reminded herself not to pass judgment on others' actions (Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, 4 July 1786, *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-04-07-02-0088> [accessed 04 Dec 2008].

<sup>27</sup> See Claire Gilbride Fox, "Catharine Macaulay, An Eighteenth-Century Clio," *Winterthur Portfolio* 4 (1968), 129-142. Fox provides an excellent treatment of Macaulay's celebrity and representation in prints, portraits, and sculpture.

republican principles and one that viewed the corrupting influences of parliament in the time ever since the Glorious Revolution.<sup>28</sup>

In 1770, John Adams began a correspondence with Macaulay upon learning of her favorable reaction to his “Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law,” originally composed in 1765 but expanded for newspaper publication in the wake of the Stamp Act.<sup>29</sup> He expressed admiration for her history and its judicious plan, which he hoped to see adopted by other historians, of stripping off the “gilding and false lustre” from characters who did not merit the praise. Despite what he and others might have thought about the British historian’s personal life and morality, Adams had a high opinion of her as a historian and deemed the author “one of the brightest ornaments not only of her Sex but of her Age and Country.”<sup>30</sup> Adams knew that Macaulay intended to write a history of the present affairs of America and practically fawned over her, relishing the chance to help by any means in his power, including by providing letters. Abigail Adams even maintained her own correspondence with the celebrated Mrs. Macaulay and responded to the British historian’s “desire to become acquainted with our American Ladies.”<sup>31</sup>

It was John Adams who provided the mutually beneficial introduction of the noted British female historian to an aspiring American woman historian, Mercy Otis Warren, in 1773. For two decades Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren cultivated a rich transatlantic correspondence, much of it long before they ever met in person.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the growing rift with England and the fight for

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<sup>28</sup>DNB; J.G.A. Pocock, “Catharine Macaulay: patriot historian,” in Hilda L. Smith, ed., *Women writers and the early modern British political tradition* (Cambridge, 1998), 243-258. Pocock contends that Macaulay crashed her way into writing history not merely because she was a woman, but because she was good at it and readers respected her for it not because it was specifically female but because her history was politically outspoken.

<sup>29</sup> For Sarah Prince Gill’s role in the introduction of John Adams to Catharine Macaulay, see Monica Letzring, “Sarah Prince Gill and the John Adams-Catharine Macaulay Correspondence,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 88 (1976), 107-111.

<sup>30</sup> JA to Catharine Macaulay, 9 Aug. 1770 (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-01-01-02-0014-0005-0001> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]).

Yet Adams was less laudatory in his letter to Richard Price of 20 May 1789 in which he suggested that his countrymen were “running wild, and into danger, from a too ardent and inconsiderate pursuit of erroneous opinions of government, which had been propagated among them by some of their ill informed favorites, and by various writings which were very popular among them. . . particularly Mrs. Macaulay’s History.”

<sup>31</sup> Abigail Adams to Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay, [1774], *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-04-01-02-0119> [accessed 04 Dec 2008].

<sup>32</sup>For the role of Warren and Macaulay’s correspondence in creating a shared political identity that blended assertions of women’s intellectual and moral worth with civic republicanism, see Kate Davies, “Revolutionary Correspondence: Reading Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren,” *Women’s Writing*, 13 (March 2006), 73-97, esp. 78 and Kate Davies, *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender* (New York, 2005).

independence from the mother country, Warren wrote to Macaulay on the Continental Army, military maneuvers in Boston, her thoughts on contemporary political actions, and happenings in New England and Macaulay responded with news and reflections from her side of the pond.<sup>33</sup> Known more for the accomplishments of her mind than the beauties of her person, Mrs. Macaulay's celebrity status in America meant that her epistolary exchanges with many individuals were treasured as prize political possessions and she found a welcome following among a circle of open-minded women in America.<sup>34</sup>

Eventually Mrs. Macaulay (as she continued to be known) and her new husband, William Graham, came to the United States to see firsthand what their correspondents had reported about the changed political climate in post-Revolutionary America. They visited the United States from 1784 to 1785 and spent much of their time in New England and visited with Mercy Otis Warren and her circle. Armed with letters of introduction from Revolutionary notables such as Benjamin Lincoln, Henry Knox, and Sam Adams, the couple ventured south in June 1785 for a visit of ten days as guests of the Washingtons at Mount Vernon. George Washington was deeply impressed by Catharine Macaulay and heaped plaudits on the woman who approved of his own conduct during the war.<sup>35</sup>

At one point, it seemed likely that Mrs. Macaulay would write her own history of the American Revolution but later abandoned the scheme as she grew interested in writing about education. Macaulay wrote to Warren in 1787, "the History of your late and glorious revolution is what I should certainly undertake were I again young, yet as things are I must for many reasons decline the task."<sup>36</sup> No doubt Macaulay's visit to America had encouraged Mercy Warren to continue to work on her history and collect materials for it. Warren wrote her friend and mentor, "Are you madam writing the history of American affairs for the last twenty years as is reported? If you are I shall be happy to see it; —if you are not you shall have the annals in two or three volumes collected, if life is spared by your friend."<sup>37</sup> Macaulay seemed happy for Warren to assume those historical laurels and looked impatiently for her history of the American Revolution predicting it would be "the most authentic

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Mercy Otis Warren to Catharine Macaulay, 24 Aug. 1775 (Jeffrey H. Richards and Sharon M. Harris, eds., *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters* [Athens, Ga., 2009], 58-61.

<sup>34</sup> Isaac Smith, Jr. to JA, 21 Feb. 1771 (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-04-01-02-0056> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]). Mary Wollstonecraft described Catharine Macaulay as "the woman of greatest abilities whom England has yet produced" quoted in Lucy Martin Donnelly, "The Celebrated Mrs. Macaulay," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 6 (1949), 177.

<sup>35</sup> George Washington to Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay Graham, 10 Jan. 1786 (*The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2007. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/pgwde/search-Con03d389> [accessed 06 Jan. 2009].

<sup>36</sup> Catharine Macaulay Graham to Mercy Otis Warren, 6 Mar. 1787 (*Warren-Adams Letters: Being chiefly a correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren*, Vol. II, 1778-1814 [Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1925], 284).

<sup>37</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay Graham, July 1789 (Richards and Harris, *Selected Letters*, 223).

account of that grand event with sagacious reflections on the subject of genuine liberty.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed Macaulay contributed indirectly to the history for the epistolary exchange between the two women over the years became the raw material for Warren’s *History*. With her death in 1791 before the work was published, Macaulay never had the chance to read the finished *History*.

Early American leaders like Washington, Jefferson, and Adams held Catharine Macaulay in high esteem, as the historian of the English Glorious Revolution. Another contemporary female British historian, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), was not nearly as celebrated for her history of the French Revolution. We have no mention of Wollstonecraft in Jefferson’s book lists or library catalogues. But while Adams heaped accolades on the work of Catharine Macaulay (especially after she commented favorably on his own work), he vilified and targeted criticism against the author of *An historical and moral view of the origin and progress of the French Revolution: and the effect it has produced in Europe*.<sup>39</sup> In his personal copy of Wollstonecraft’s 1794 history, the most heavily annotated of his entire book collection, Adams recorded his marginal notes and thoughts on the author. Adams had already written his own reaction to the French Revolution in his *Discourses on Davila* published in 1790. He first read Wollstonecraft’s treatment of the topic in 1796 and returned to it again in 1812 and his comments are essentially an updated account of his own version of the French Revolution.

Although Wollstonecraft’s history only covered up to the fall of 1789, its purpose was not to be a complete narrative of the French Revolution but a philosophizing view of its origins and progress. Wollstonecraft, often identified with radicals like Thomas Paine, was known for her earlier work considered to be a rebuttal to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution*. Admittedly, her work was a sometimes contradictory condemnation of the leadership of the French Revolution. Adams remarked in his comments: “This is a lady of masculine, masterly understanding. Her style is nervous and clear, often elegant: though sometimes too verbose. With a little experience in public affairs and the reading and reflection which would result from it, she would have produced a history without the defects and blemishes pointed out with too much severity perhaps and too little gallantry in the notes.” He later clarified what she meant, judged her words “indelicate,” or at times faulted her for not providing evidence or for writing things false. From his pen flowed such comments as “The opinions in this page are those of a weak woman,” or “There is much more wit and point than sense in this,” or “Poor eloquence,” or “This is youthful and female enthusiasm,” and “splendid nonsense.” He labeled her weak and mad and charged her with not understanding her subject. Perhaps less well acknowledged than his criticisms are Adams’s occasional nods of agreement: “Thank you, miss!” or “Vigor indeed!” or “Honest words!” or “Very good.” He thanked her or praised her as a deep reasoner both moderate and sagacious or admitted the wisdom and weight in what she had written. Adams’s

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Davies, “Revolutionary Correspondence,” 87.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Lyndon Shanley, “Mary Wollstonecraft on sensibility, women’s rights, and patriarchal power,” in Hilda Smith, ed., *Women writers and the early modern British political tradition* (Cambridge, 1998), 148-167. After Catharine Macaulay’s publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), she and Mary Wollstonecraft engaged in a brief correspondence. Wollstonecraft, a supporter of the French Revolution, traveled to France to observe its aftermath for herself. While there she had a love affair and gave birth to a child out of wedlock. In 1796 she became pregnant by English philosopher William Godwin, whom she later married. She died in August 1797 eleven days after giving birth. Wollstonecraft’s personal reputation may have been as much the source of Adams’s disapproval as her politics.

comments, while they may seem exceptionally harsh and gender biased if viewed out of context, were not uncharacteristic of the man or his style of reading. They reflect an active engagement with an historical text as well as a reaction to a physical stimulus—activities Adams engaged in all his life.<sup>40</sup>

Lest we think Adams too harsh on women historians, both he and Jefferson actively supported the early literary talents of Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814), the third of thirteen children born to Col. James and Mary Allyne Otis of Barnstable, Massachusetts, and the sister of patriot orator James Otis. In 1754 Mercy Otis married the Plymouth merchant James Warren. By the 1760s, her husband, brother, and father were all involved in Massachusetts politics, providing her with important connections and access to information.<sup>41</sup>

A dramatist, poet, and historian, Mercy Warren was uniquely situated to correspond with many American leaders including John and Abigail Adams, Sam Adams, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson. As the mother of five sons, born between 1757 and 1766, she cared deeply about their fate and futures as Massachusetts joined the fight for independence from Britain. Throughout her life, Mercy Warren never traveled far from her Plymouth home but read widely and maintained an active epistolary network, including a lively correspondence with Abigail Adams using the classical pen names of Marcia and Portia.<sup>42</sup> Although James Warren became paymaster general of the

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<sup>40</sup> Adams's copy of Mary Wollstonecraft, *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794) contains about 12,000 words commenting on 500 passages and is in the Boston Public Library. See also Zoltán Haraszti, *John Adams & the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), 180-234; esp. 186-187.

Tony Grafton and Lisa Jardine have shown in the case of a sixteenth-century Elizabethan reader, that modern readers were not passive recipients but rather active reinterpreters of their texts. They suggest that this energy was more than just a reader interacting with his text or the mental effort required to absorb it, but quite a goal-directed activity intended to give rise to something else. Such reading was done not in private contemplation but almost in public performance or in the company of a student or associate and as such the activity had an anticipated outcome of more than just the accumulation of additional information. The authors suggest that one could be a skilled reader in much the way one could be a skilled artisan, with carefully honed skills ready to be applied in action. Such readers tried to master the world of learning and transform it into political action. Critical reading, skillful annotation, and active appropriation thus became central talents for the student of history and only proper, methodical reading, such as followed by a Harvey (or, I would argue in this case, a John Adams), would lead to action (Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, "'Studied for Action': How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy," *Past and Present*, 129 [1990], 30-78).

Connie Schulz has studied Adams's marginal commentaries and his customary practice of summarizing the contents of works, offering perceptive queries and impassioned or outraged pleas, and sometimes failing to understand the purpose of the author. She has shown how his reading of certain texts served as a springboard for his own ideas and how his notes can be seen as surface reactions to the immediate stimulus of a text as well as a litany of statements of testimony from the heart of his philosophical optimism (Constance B. Schulz, "John Adams on 'The Best of All Possible Worlds,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44 [1983], 561-577).

<sup>41</sup> Maud Macdonald Hutcheson, "Mercy Warren, 1728-1814," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 10 (1953), 381.

<sup>42</sup> Philip Hicks, "Portia and Marcia: Female Political Identity and the Historical Imagination, 1770-1800," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 62 (2005), 265-294. For the correspondence between Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, see Edith B. Gelles, *First Thoughts: Life and Letters of Abigail Adams* (New York, 1998), chapt. 3.

Continental Army in March 1776, he subsequently turned down several political posts. He grew embittered by political defeats in the late 1770s and pessimistic about the course of the Revolution.

Perhaps inspired by Catharine Macaulay's history, Mercy Otis Warren began collecting records for a history of the American Revolution early on in the conflict as a way to record her personal reminiscences and process her own thoughts on the meaning of the Revolution. Because of her husband's and friends' connections, she had at her disposal many official letters and documents and first-hand accounts of the war.

Before undertaking the history of the revolution, Mercy Warren's early literary efforts included plays and satires against the administration of Governor Thomas Hutchinson. She sought out John Adams's "Criticism or Countenance" his "Approbation or Censure" of "a Late Composition" she sent him in 1775.<sup>43</sup> Adams acted as literary agent and adviser for her satire, *The Group*, and guided her on how to proceed with her political publications.

Abigail Adams also encouraged Mercy Warren's historical writing and hoped "the Historick page will increase to a volume."<sup>44</sup> Later when Warren had seemed to have set down her pen, Abigail Adams chided that she had stopped writing her history just when "many memorable Events which ought to be handed down to posterity will be buried in oblivion."<sup>45</sup>

In some respects, it was the encouragement of John Adams that set Warren on the course to chronicle the war in the first place. Adams sent his compliments to Warren in a letter addressed to her husband shortly after the Boston Tea Party. Adams wanted "a poetical Genius" to "describe a late Frolic among the Sea Nymphs and Goddesses" and added "I wish to See a late glorious Event, celebrated, by a certain poetical Pen, which has no equal that I know of in this Country."<sup>46</sup> Mercy Warren's mock heroic poem on the Boston Tea Party, "The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs, or the Sacrifice of the Tuscaroroës" was later included in her *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous*, published in Boston in 1790. She actively encouraged John Adams's feedback to her work, asking him

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<sup>43</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to JA, 30 Jan. 1775 (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-06-02-02-0074> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]).

<sup>44</sup> Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, ca. 5 Nov. 1775 (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-04-01-02-0213> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]).

<sup>45</sup> Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 14 Aug. 1777 (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-04-02-02-0251> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]).

<sup>46</sup> JA to James Warren, 22 Dec. 1773, *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-06-02-02-0002> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]).

to point out faults so that they might be corrected and judging his silence to be a “certain Mark of disapprobation” that would prompt her to lay aside the pen of the poet.<sup>47</sup> In the preface to her poem, she acknowledged John Adams’s involvement: “The important political event of 1774, when several cargoes of teas were poured into the sea, has been replete with mighty consequences, and will never be forgotten in the history of American independence. But the author’s own opinion of the equity or policy of this measure is not to be collected from a political sally, written at the request of a particular friend, now in one of the highest grades of American rank.”<sup>48</sup>

In response to her request for his opinion, Adams reminded Mercy Warren that “The faithful Historian delineates Characters truly let the Censure fall where it will. The public is so interested in public Characters, that they have a Right to know them, and it becomes the Duty of every good Citizen who happens to be acquainted with them to communicate his Knowledge.”<sup>49</sup> In January 1776 he proposed that they exchange characterizations of important people whom they met and Mercy Warren agreed enthusiastically but predicted that she would gain more from the bargain than he. In return for her “imperfect characters and observations,” she expected to be “made Acquainted with the Genius, the taste, and Manners, not only of the Most Distinguished Characters in America, but of the Nobility of Britain. And perhaps before the Conflict is Ended, with some of those Dignified personages who have held the Regalia of Crowns And Scepters, and in the zenith of power are the Dancing puppets of other European Courts.”<sup>50</sup>

Adams prompted Mercy Warren with information and guidance in her historical writing. In a letter to James Warren, Adams expressed hope that Mrs. Warren would give his Dutch negotiations a place in her history.<sup>51</sup> She responded to Adams directly, “Depend upon it, a Blank shall be Left (in *Certain*

<sup>47</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Abigail Adams, 27 Feb. 1774, *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.  
<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-04-01-02-0072-0001> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin Franklin V, comp., *The Plays and Poems of Mercy Otis Warren: Facsimile Reproductions* (Delmar, N.Y., 1980), 202.

<sup>49</sup> JA to Mercy Otis Warren, 15 Mar. 1775, *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.  
<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-06-02-02-0081> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]

<sup>50</sup> JA to Mercy Otis Warren, 8 Jan. 1776 (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.  
<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-06-03-02-0202> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]); Mercy Otis Warren to JA, 10 Mar. 1776 (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.  
<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-06-04-02-0019>) [accessed 04 Dec 2008]).

<sup>51</sup> JA to James Warren, 19 Aug. 1782, *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.  
<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-06-13-02-0158> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]

annals) for Your *Dutch Negotiation*, unless you Condescend to furnish with your own Hand, a few more Authentic Documents to Adorn the Interesting page.”<sup>52</sup>

Mercy Warren had stopped and started her history for almost three decades by the time of its publication in 1805. She had completed most of her history by 1791 but as she recounted in her preface to the published work, local circumstances, declining health, poor eyesight and the death of her son Winslow sometimes prompted her to throw the pen aside in despair. But she never completely lost interest in events even in her opposition to the Constitution and sometime before Washington’s death in 1799, she continued her history through the end of the Adams administration. Upon Jefferson’s election in 1800 and her pleasure in the republican ascendancy, she began to write in earnest a more formal history intended for a wider audience.<sup>53</sup>

Her three-volume, almost 1,300 page *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations* was published in 1805 when she was seventy-seven years old and copies of it eventually found their way into the hands and libraries of both Adams and Jefferson.<sup>54</sup> Despite many delays in publication, her volumes reached booksellers and subscribers in 1806 and 1807. Hers is an impressive work chronicling forty years from 1761 to 1801 by someone who personally knew many of the principal actors. Her revolutionary history may not have been a publishing event as much as a political event but it is noteworthy for what it included as well as what it left out.

In the preface to her *History*, she conceded that it was a male prerogative (“the peculiar province of masculine strength”) to write about bloody battlefields and politics. By acknowledging her own “trembling heart” at the prospect of writing a history herself, she reaffirmed the link between emotion and the feminine that had often prevented women from writing history. She assured her readers that while she strived to achieve “the strictest veracity” and to let “the most exact impartiality be the guide of her pen,” she “never laid aside the tenderness of the sex.” By associating imagination with historical truth, she could thus maintain impartiality. She gave vivid portraits of her friends and analyzed them with candor, and not always to their liking. Warren believed her ability to

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<sup>52</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to JA, 25 Oct. 1782 (*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-print-06-13-02-0255> [accessed 04 Dec 2008]).

<sup>53</sup> Mrs. Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution. Interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1805); rpt. In 2 vols. (Indianapolis, 1988), 1: xli-xliv. See also Rosemarie Zagari, *A Woman’s Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Wheeling, Ill., 1995), 140.

Mercy Otis Warren to TJ, 31 May 1801, wishing congratulations and “the success of Mr Jefferson’s Administration” reported on the acrimony of faction in predominantly Federalist Massachusetts and affirmed that she was “united with a similarity of political opinion” with Jefferson’s other supporters (*PTJ*, 34:220).

<sup>54</sup> Mrs. Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution. Interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1805); rpt. In 2 vols. (Indianapolis, 1988).

sympathize with her subjects would elevate the level of impartiality. It was precisely because of her gender, she reasoned, that she was well positioned to write a history of the Revolution.<sup>55</sup>

Because women were largely excluded from some of the prime places of male self-display, such as the battlefield, assembly, and pulpit, they depended more heavily than men on epistolary and printing networks to display their political virtue. Engagement with the past had an ennobling function, expanding what Natalie Zemon Davis has called the “circumference of truth,” allowing them to see themselves as active participants in momentous events of history. For Mercy Otis Warren, it was absurd to think that women had no stake in politics because women’s lives depended on the kind of government they lived under and she had a vested interest in how that government should be run.<sup>56</sup>

Warren’s narrative is essentially a moral tale with examples suitable for posterity selected from characters of military or political significance. In Mercy Warren’s eyes, the American Revolution was a first step in a divine plan, a resolute movement toward freedom through revolutions against tyranny. She saw a constant struggle throughout history between virtue and corruption and thought a republic should maintain a balance between equality and freedom. The tone of her history, although moralistic, is essentially political. She feared that the object of the Revolution was being undermined by some of the very men who helped fight for it. For Warren, Americans in the 1780s and 1790s had betrayed republican principles by their pursuit of self-interest and she accused the Federalists as the chief culprits of this betrayal.<sup>57</sup>

Jefferson, the leader of the Republican party, applauded the publication of Mercy Otis Warren’s *History*, and helped with her subscription efforts. In early 1805, Warren wrote to the president and sent him the prospectus of a work of “bold ambition” for which she sought his opinion and approval.<sup>58</sup> Jefferson was not unfamiliar with her writing. In 1790, Warren sent him a volume of her *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous* published that year in Boston. Responding gratefully for the volume of poetry which he only had time to “dip but a little into,” Jefferson anticipated reading her

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<sup>55</sup> Eileen Ka-May Cheng sees Warren as maintaining the gender boundaries of her time between history and the novel and blurring them as she undermined the masculine association with historical truth (Cheng, *Plain and Noble Garb of Truth*, 61-64). Lester Cohen sees a feminist aspect of Warren’s *History* and finds she used political language especially the polarity between virtue and avarice and between liberty and arbitrary power for her own purposes (Cohen, “Explaining the Revolution: Ideology and Ethics in Mercy Otis Warren’s Historical Theory,” *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 37 [1980], 200-218).

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence J. Friedman and Arthur H. Shaffer, “Mercy Otis Warren and the Politics of Historical Nationalism,” *New England Quarterly*, 48 (1975), 194-215; Nina Baym, “Mercy Otis Warren’s Gendered Melodrama of Revolution,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 90 (1991), 531-554; Natalie Zemon Davis, “Gender and Genre: Women as Historical Writers, 1400-1820,” in Patricia H. Labalme, ed. *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past* (New York, 1980), 153-182, esp. 157.

<sup>57</sup> Judith B. Markowitz, “Radical and Feminist: Mercy Otis Warren and the Historiographers,” *Peace and Change*, 4 (Spring 1977), 10-21.

<sup>58</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to TJ, 5 Jan. 1805 (DLC).

work and adding her “illustrious name to the roll of female worthies, made for the ornament as well as the vindication of their sex.”<sup>59</sup>

Jefferson coordinated subscriptions to Warren’s latest work among the members of his cabinet. In January 1805, he reminded his secretary of the Navy, “If you have not subscribed for Mrs. Warren’s book I must tax you for a subscription.”<sup>60</sup> Within a month, Jefferson returned the prospectus and enclosed his own subscription as well as that of his heads of department except for the secretary of war who had already subscribed. The president offered encouragement of the endeavor and was pleased that she had turned her talents toward a recording of late events. “The last thirty years will furnish a more instructive lesson to mankind than any equal period known in history,” Jefferson wrote and added his confidence that “the work she has prepared will be equally useful to our country and honourable to herself.”<sup>61</sup>

Upon the *History*’s publication, Warren sent Jefferson presentation copies of the first two volumes. Hoping that he might peruse them in his leisure hours, she was eager to receive the president’s approbation and if not that he would “cast a veil of candor” on her effort.<sup>62</sup> The *History* portrayed Jefferson in laudable terms and found favor in the hands of the third president who promised to read it. She wrote of the authorship of the Declaration of Independence by the “ingenious and philosophic pen of Thomas Jefferson, Esq.” referring to the “genius and heart of the gentleman who drew it” and recounted the later career of the “wise and patriotic statesman” who became minister to France, secretary of state, vice president and president.<sup>63</sup> Jefferson replied the day after he received Warren’s history with equal encomium “of a work which taking truth both of fact and principle for it’s general guide will furnish in addition original matter of value not before given to the public.”<sup>64</sup>

Upon publication of the *History*, responses were not quickly forthcoming from the Adams household in Quincy. But beginning on 11 July 1807, the former president wrote a series of ten letters to Mercy Warren attacking her skills as a historian, refuting her research, and challenging her family’s reputation. Maintaining a fine line of cordiality, Adams and Warren exchanged sixteen letters in the summer of 1807. His increasingly harsh words and her wounded pride resulted in a four-year hiatus in

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<sup>59</sup>Mercy Otis Warren to TJ, 23 Sept. 1790, has not been found but see TJ to Mercy Otis Warren, 25 Nov. 1790, *PTJ*, 18:77-78 and Sowerby, No. 4439. Contrast this with Alexander Hamilton’s delayed but appreciative response for a volume of Warren’s poetry: “I have not however been equally delinquent towards the work itself, which I have read, more than once, with great interest . . . in the career of dramatic composition at least, female genius in the United States has outstripped the Male.” (Alexander Hamilton to Mercy Warren, 1 July 1791 (Harold C. Syrett et al., eds., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 27 vols. [New York, 1961-1987], 8: 522-523).

<sup>60</sup>TJ to Robert Smith, 23 Jan. 1805 (CtHi).

<sup>61</sup>TJ to Mercy Otis Warren, 8 Feb. 1805 (DLC).

<sup>62</sup>Mercy Otis Warren to TJ, 14 Apr. 1806 (DLC). Sowerby, No. 508. Jefferson had Warren’s history bound in tree calf and marbled end papers, see *TJRS*, 1:35-37.

<sup>63</sup>Warren, *History* (1805; 1972 rpt.), 1: 169, 631. There is only one index entry under Jefferson in the entire history whereas there are seven entries for Adams.

<sup>64</sup>TJ to Mercy Otis Warren, 26 Apr. 1806 (MH).

their correspondence as she awaited an apology that was not forthcoming. Likened to “verbal ships that pass in the night,” the letters reveal a defensive and marginalized Adams and an obdurate Warren committed to historical veracity whatever the cost.

While Adams never responded directly to Mercy Warren’s attempts to answer her charges, he continued the written tirade against his former friend.<sup>65</sup> She castigated him for the rambling manner of his angry and indigested letters. Adams blasted Warren for what he deemed an unfair characterization of him and his self-acknowledged unwavering support for republican government. She had previously garnered his good opinion of her work. Now she seemed to ignore it and at times almost deliberately ruffled his feathers by asserting that he did not appear in political affairs before 1774, that he was too volatile to be sagacious and wise in his judgments, that he had lost his republicanism while in England, and that he favored monarchical principles and risked bringing the new nation to autocratic ruin. Adams also took offense that she did not fully appreciate his involvement in the negotiations over the Dutch loans and that she slighted his service by claiming he was retired when home between foreign trips. While she praised Adams for his speech in favor of the Declaration of Independence, she compared it to John Dickinson’s speech which she described as having “equal pathos of express, and more brilliance of epithet” than Adams’s.

Adams also knew that Warren remembered his failure to provide government appointments for her husband and their sons.<sup>66</sup> Adams had claimed not to interfere with executive privilege in appointments and earned the political enmity of James Warren as a result. Adams indirectly addressed Mercy Warren’s husband in response to the perceived attacks on him in her *History*, “Corrupted! On what ground? On what color did he venture his assertion and expression? . . . Corrupted! Madam, what provocation, what evidence, what misrepresentation could he have received that could prompt him to utter this execrable calumny? Corruption is a charge that I cannot and will not bear. I challenge the whole human race, and angels and devils too, to produce an instance of it from my cradle to this hour.”<sup>67</sup> On the charge of ambition, Adams responded: “If by ‘ambition’ you mean a love of power or a desire of public offices, I answer, I never solicited a vote in my life for any public office. I never swerved from any principle, I never professed any opinion. I never concealed

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<sup>65</sup> Frank Shuffelton, “In Different Voices: Gender in the American Republic of Letters,” *Early American Literature*, 25 [1990], 293. For the letters, see Charles F. Adams, ed., *Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Warren* (orig. publ. *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 4 [1878]; rpt. ed., New York, 1972).

<sup>66</sup> Mercy Warren never forgot Adams’s failure to appoint her sons and husband to government positions. Her son Henry served as an aide de camp to Benjamin Lincoln during Shays’ Rebellion and sought a government appointment that he never obtained. He did serve briefly as clerk to Lincoln, customs collector at Boston before resigning because of poor health. By contrast, Jefferson rewarded the family’s republican loyalty by naming Henry customs collector for Plymouth in 1803 and James Jr. town postmaster. In 1804, seventy-eight-year-old James, Sr. was appointed a presidential elector for his state (*The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2007. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/pgwde/search-Rev03d48> [accessed 06 Jan. 2009]). See also Henry Warren to George Washington, 1 July 1789 (*The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2007. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/pgwde/search-Pre03d42> [accessed 06 Jan. 2009]; Zagari, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 125, 127, 139; Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* [Chapel Hill, NC, 1976], 238).

<sup>67</sup> JA to Mercy Otis Warren, 20 July 1807 (Adams, ed., *Correspondence Between Adams and Warren*, 335).

even any speculative opinion, to obtain a vote. I never sacrificed a friend or betrayed a trust. I never hired scribblers to defame my rivals. I never wrote a line of slander against my bitterest enemy, nor encouraged it in any other.”<sup>68</sup>

Adams in retirement was preoccupied with setting the record straight on his legacy. In 1802 a suppressed history of his administration was published (and copies could be found in both Adams’s and Jefferson’s libraries) and challenged Adams’s reputation and honor.<sup>69</sup> To him, Warren’s work put salt in these old wounds. Adams was deeply disappointed about how his administration, foreign service, and role in the Continental Congress had been treated and became defensive about his career, especially before 1800. He poured through his letterbooks and notes trying to rework his arguments and come up with a defense. He set aside his own autobiographical project and channeled his energies into correcting Warren’s portrayal, and by extension, the Republican view of his own past.<sup>70</sup>

Mercy Warren did not take these as constructive criticisms of her work but as vindictive assaults on her character and family. She accused her former friend of “meanness as well as malignancy” and thought his correspondence was full of indigested anger. “The lines with which you concluded your late correspondence cap the climax of rancor, indecency, and vulgarism,” she wrote.<sup>71</sup> In defending herself to Adams, she harkened back to her own *History*, “The veracity of an historian requires, that all those who have been distinguished, either by their abilities or their elevated rank, should be exhibited through every period of public life with impartiality and truth. But the heart of the annalist may sometimes be hurt by political deviations which the pen of the historian is obliged to detail.”<sup>72</sup> She refused to make her history a panegyric for Adams and urged him to pick up his own autobiographical pen if he felt the history of his public service needed to be corrected.

Eventually Massachusetts Governor and mutual friend Elbridge Gerry sought to bridge the divide between the parties and Abigail Adams also extended a peacemaking gesture through a renewed contact and personal visit with her one-time friend and confidante. Unlike his wife, John Adams was not ready to move on from the controversy with Mercy Otis Warren and refused to destroy his copies of the criticisms leveled against her.<sup>73</sup> While he may have softened toward nominal

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<sup>68</sup> JA to Mercy Otis Warren, 19 Aug. 1807 (Adams, ed., *Correspondence Between Adams and Warren*, 474; Shaw, *Character of John Adams*, 291).

<sup>69</sup> For the suppression of John Wood’s *History of the Administration of John Adams*, published in New York in 1802, see Sowerby, No. 506; Mary-Jo Kline, ed., *Political Correspondence and Public Papers of Aaron Burr*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1983), 2:641-648; James Cheetham to TJ, 29 Dec. 1801 (*PTJ*, 36:228-229; forthcoming).

<sup>70</sup> John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, 1966), 247; Shaw, *Character of John Adams*, 294.

<sup>71</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to JA, 27 Aug. 1807 (Adams, ed., *Correspondence Between Adams and Warren*, 490).

<sup>72</sup> Warren, *History* (1805), 3:391.

<sup>73</sup> Zagari, *Woman’s Dilemma*, 159. In August 1812 after Abigail Adams returned from a visit with Mercy Otis Warren, she wrote, “I can however assure my Friend that no personal animosity exists in the heart of ~~my~~ [sic] the person who considered himself as injured—although he cannot but regret that his principles and actions should thus be transmitted to posterity by the elegant pen of Mrs. Warren whose sentiments and opinions so cordially harmonized with his own in former days” (quoted in Shuffelton, “In Different Voices,” 295-296).

reconciliation, John Adams was not one to let bygones be bygones. In April 1813, Adams wrote to Gerry, critical of Warren's treatment of the naval establishment: "Is this not strange, that one of the boldest, most dangerous and most important Measures and Epochs in the History of the New World The Commencement of an independent National Establishment of a new maritime and Naval military Power should be thus carelessly and confusedly hurried over? Had the Historian never read the Law of Massachusetts? Nor the Journal of Congress? One would think that this momentous Business was all performed by a few rash Individuals and private Adventurers.

History is not the Province of the Ladies. These three Volumes nevertheless contain many Facts, worthy of Preservation. Little Passions and Prejudices, want of Information, false Information, want of Experience, erroneous Judgment, and frequent Partiality, are among the Faults. Other Historians shall soon be examined, by your faithful Friend."<sup>74</sup>

Some scholars see Adams denying Mercy Otis Warren's "right to participate as a woman in the public discourse of the republic of letters."<sup>75</sup> Others see Adams challenging the type of history Warren had written and objecting to her writing a classical narrative of acts of living statesmen since she was not one of them and could not know from her own experience.<sup>76</sup> Here Warren was different from Macaulay whose history was based on documents and a history of events from a century earlier.

On a previous occasion in 1786, Jefferson had noted that original authors and not compilers made the best historians. "An author who writes of his own times, or of times near his own, presents in his own ideas and manner the best picture of the moment of which he writes."<sup>77</sup> Likewise Adams acknowledged to Elbridge Gerry in 1813 that they had sacrificed much for their country and had to brave the charges of vanity and egoism to record "Facts that no other human Beings know." Sobered by the recent passing of friends, Adams wrote, "You talk to me at seventy-seven Years of Age of Writing History. If I was only thirty, I would not undertake an History of the Revolution in less than twenty years. A few Facts I wish to put upon Paper: and an Awful Warning to do it soon has been given me by the Sudden Death of our Friend Rush."<sup>78</sup>

For Adams, his legacy was tantamount. He was obsessed with the perpetual volcano of slander against him all his life.<sup>79</sup> History by women (or even men) might have been acceptable to Adams as long as it did not diminish or vitiate *his* place in it. Adams felt slighted when histories of the American Revolution neglected his role and participation. To Benjamin Rush he wrote with tongue in cheek, "The history of our revolution will be one continued lye from one end to the other. The essence of

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<sup>74</sup> JA to Elbridge Gerry, 17 Apr. 1813 (Massachusetts Historical Society, *Warren-Adams Letters: Being chiefly a correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren*, Vol. II, 1778-1814 [Boston, 1925], 380).

<sup>75</sup> Shuffelton, "In Different Voices," 299.

<sup>76</sup> Pocock, "Catharine Macaulay," in Smith, ed., *Women writers*, 253.

<sup>77</sup> TJ to Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., 27 Aug. 1786 (*PTJ*, 10:307).

<sup>78</sup> JA to Elbridge Gerry, 26 Apr. 1813 (Massachusetts Historical Society, *Warren-Adams Letters: Being chiefly a correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren*, Vol. II, 1778-1814 [Boston, 1925], 381).

<sup>79</sup> Bernard Bailyn, "Butterfield's Adams: Notes for a Sketch," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 19 (1962), 252.

the whole will be *that Dr Franklin's electrical Rod smote the earth and out sprung George Washington. That Franklin electrised him with his rod and thence forward these two conducted all the policy, negotiation, legislation and War.*<sup>80</sup> He later remonstrated, "Don't therefore my Friend misunderstand me and misrepresent me to Posterity."<sup>81</sup>

Adams even took offense at his placement on a subscription list for the history of the Revolution by William Gordon. He bitterly commented that Gordon's history was "designed more for Booksellers' and Author's Profit than for the Honour of America or the Cause of Truth." Adams's name appeared at the top of the alphabetical subscription listing with the title "the late American Plenipotentiary" while Jefferson's name appeared as "American Ambassador, Paris" to which the peevish Adams marginally scribbled, "How happened it that Jefferson was an Ambassador, and that first subscriber only a Minister? Oh History! How accurate thou art?"<sup>82</sup>

Jefferson was equally concerned with his reputation and legacy although he did not share Adams's vociferous, reactionary style. Expedient, polished, and aggressively resourceful, Jefferson supported histories of the Revolution and actively encouraged Joel Barlow to write a counter history to John Marshall's Federalist interpretation.<sup>83</sup>

Histories of revolution "faithfully transmitted to posterity"<sup>84</sup> are not only the bookends in libraries but the shapers of legacies. Both Adams and Jefferson realized this later in life and were careful to support good historical writing and wide reading even with interpretations of the past that were not always glowing about their own part in it. "Nevertheless," Adams wrote of Warren's volumes, they "contain many Facts, worthy of Preservation." Both Adams and Jefferson knew the importance of

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<sup>80</sup> JA to Benjamin Rush, 4 Apr. 1790 (MHi: Adams Family Correspondence, John Adams Letterbook, 20 May 1789-7 Jan. 1793, Part II, microfilm 115).

<sup>81</sup> JA to Benjamin Rush, 18 Apr. 1790 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, NHi).

<sup>82</sup> See p. xii of Adams's copy of volume 1 of William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America*, 4 vols. (London, 1788) in the Boston Public Library. I am grateful to Beth Prindle, Manager of the John Adams Library Project at BPL for directing me to the transcriptions of Adams's comments on Gordon and Wollstonecraft.

<sup>83</sup> For the characterization of TJ, see Bernard Bailyn, "Boyd's Jefferson: Notes for a Sketch," *New England Quarterly*, 33 (Sep. 1960), 380-400, esp. 398.

<sup>84</sup> Mercy Otis Warren wrote to George Washington from her home in Plymouth, a letter dated 1 May 1790, which became the preface and dedication in her volume of *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous*. She asked Washington to permit her to "observe, that connected by consanguinity or friendship with many of the principal Characters who asserted and defended the rights of an injur'd country, the mind has been naturally led to contemplate the magnitude both of the causes and the consequences of a convulsion that has been felt from the Eastern borders of the atlantick to the western wilds. Feeling much for the distresses of America in the dark days of her affliction a faithful record has been kept of the most material transactions through a period that has engag'd the attention of both the philosopher & the politician" and "shall be faithfully transmitted to posterity." The text of her letter was published, with minor changes as the dedication to Warren's *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous* dedication under the date of 20 March 1790. (The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2007. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/pgwde/search-Pre05d246> [accessed 06 Jan. 2009]).

preserving and making accessible to future generations the historical record not just of their own lives but of the revolutionary times in which they lived. Not exclusively the province of gentlemen, history was more than the province of the ladies but of all citizens and heirs to the Revolution.