

***Martha Washington, An American Life.* Partricia Brady. New York, New York:Penguin Books Ltd. , 2005.276 Pages**

Patricia Brady's book titled *Martha Washington and An American Life* attempts to bring light to the life and times of the first, first lady of the United States of America. The insightful biography begins with a detailed family tree that lends the reader to the complexity of the family and helps as a guide to keep track of the numerous characters that come to light early on in the piece. Brady's book is broken into clearly defined segments that help the reader navigate through the life of young Patsy Dandridge, through the years of early marriage to Mr. Custis, then masterfully into the courtship, marriage, and later life of the larger than life woman that takes on the role of first lady. Though it is known that very little written documentation was kept by Martha Washington the author had painstakingly researched and has put together as complete a picture as can be made with the use of secondary sources and knowledge of the customs and mores of the time.

In this straight forward biography about Martha Washington, Patricia Brady engagingly leads the reader into a more complete study of a woman that helped to shape American society. Brady seeks to enlighten her readers about a woman that is famous by name but largely unknown for her true strength, leadership, and contribution to the newly formed United States of America. The lesson begins with the early life of Patsy (Martha) Dandridge.

Brady presents an image of Martha that many people do not readily know or think about. When reading about the early years of Patsy Dandridge the reader is able to learn about a strong, beautiful young woman. Although Patsy grew up in a moderate household according to Virginia social standards in the mid 1700's, through "proper

manners, posture, gestures, voice modulation, conduct toward social superiors, and inferiors”p.23 she would learn the important lessons of a lady’s role in this structured society. It will be these important lessons combined with her confidence and self assurance that will win her a place in the heart of one of the leading gentry families in Virginia.

Patsy Dandridge and Daniel Custis will fall deeply in love however; Daniel’s father will not allow the marriage to occur until Patsy took charge and went to speak with Col. Custis herself. This action, which was very uncommon at the time, showed the first true insight into the strength and fortitude of the Patsy Dandridge and helped to win over Col. Custis. On May 15, 1750 Patsy and Daniel married and marked a true change in the path of Patsy’s life. Her status in society changed and it gave the opportunity for her to gain both wealth and power. Pg. 33

Patricia Brady gives the reader a great insight not only into the young married life of this couple but it also gives a broader view of the change in societal households such as marriage traditions and household customs. Pg.36 Brady uses shipping records from Daniel Custis to give insight into what household items were purchased for their home to give a greater picture of what the Custis family home would look like. She presents insights into household customs even in planters’ homes to show how symmetry and balance ruled 18th century tastes. This truly helps the reader get into their lives and show how many things that we take for granted, such as China that matched as well as extra chairs for guests, began to emerge and present itself in the colonies.

As the reader progresses some of the information that was presented becomes less detailed and more generalized. Such as when describing Patsy’s sons death, Brady

discusses how arrangements would typically take place and how Patsy would have cared for her child. There is little information about what actually occurred as no diary or detailed writing was kept.

However, when Daniel Custis died Brady presents insight into women's' status in society as she became feme sole and took charge of the Custis families plantations and the White House, as their home was called. Only women in her social position would be able to maintain control and thrive alone after her husbands' death. Women of lower status would have to either quickly remarried or would be forced to live with relatives or worse. Brady presents the shipping journals now in Patsy's handwriting to show how she took over ordering, as well as a letter sent to her late husband's dealers, to present how they would now be dealing straight with her or she would find someone else to handle her business. This again, shows the strong will and take charge fortitude of the soon to become first lady.

The painstaking task of presenting the courtship, marriage, and jump into the political limelight was no easy task as letters between George and Martha were all destroyed so there is little to show courtship and how they came closer to marriage. However, Brady is able to present how Martha began to emerge early on as the strength behind Washington when even at the start of the marriage she decided what furniture would be taken to Mount Vernon through a list given to servants. Further, she was the force that brought people to their house. She was gracious and entertaining therefore people from all around would come and stay and share their lives.

Along with this great emerging love story is the intermingling of history in the making. Brady talks about how George and Martha learned of the Boston Tea Party in

the “newspapers and entertained well-informed visitors, how the discussion usually turned to British colonial policy and what it might mean for Virginia’s interests”Pg.89. They both showed interest in the larger picture of what was going on beyond their plantation and family life. They shared this information and their opinions together.

The Washington’s and the American Revolution will be artfully told through the letters sent to family and friends from both Washington’s. Brady presents the deep rooted connection of these two soles and how they depended upon each other for support and their lives. While Washington was beginning to engage in what was going to be a very uncertain war his focus was on the happiness of Martha and how she would maintain life with him not at her side. Martha also putting the needs of George beyond her self decided to join him at the battlefield to insure his comfort.

The fact that Martha took it upon herself to be in the midst of the Revolution gives the reader a new vision of what is truly a “great” women. Her insight into war is far different than the normal battle tactics or letters home from soldiers. Her letters show the irrationality of war that only an intelligent woman could present. She writes “every person seems to be cheerful and happy here. Some days we have a number of cannons and shells from Boston and Bunker Hill but it does not seems surprise of anyone but me; I confess I shudder every time I hear the sound of a gun”.Pg.104 “ To me that has never seen anything at war, the preparations are very terrible indeed, but I endeavor to keep my fears to myself as well as I can”Pg.105 As Martha takes the role as Lady Washington “she became a mother figure matching Washington’s patriarchal role- a pleasant, kind woman who visited the hospital and showed “motherly care” for the soldiers, sick and well.”Pg119.

On April 30, 1789 George Washington assumed the presidential office in New York City and the final chapters on Martha Washington are written the reader begins to see a picture of a woman that is a culmination of all she has lived through and all she had stood for. Brady presents a picture of the first lady as the strong driving force that she had developed from over all the years. From the unhappiness of having to leave Mount Vernon to the tediousness of having to be formally done up every day she again took on her new role with the strength that the reader has seen as her trademark.

The manner in which Martha not only cared for Washington after falling ill with possible anthrax but also maintained her public duties lends a greater insight into her new public role as the first lady. She still took on guests while caring for her husband.

Abigail Adams remarked “Mrs. Washington is one of those unassuming characters which create Love & Esteem. A most becoming pleasantness sits upon her countenance & an unaffected deportment which renders her the object of veneration and Respect.” P.167 Abigail Adams also remarked that both the Washington’s as being just what the nation need for a republican government. Martha was just what the nation needed at that time to gain respect of the people of America as well as symbols of what America presented to the world.

The last real insight into Martha that is discussed throughout is Martha Washington’s involvement with slavery. Right up until the last chapters it is clear that Martha supported the idea and partook in slavery. When one of her slaves Ona Judge escaped to New Hampshire it came as a total shock to Martha. She couldn’t understand why she would escape as she was treated well and had a very light workload. Simply the idea of wanting to be free escaped Martha’s understanding. Pg. 209

Martha Brady's biography of Martha Washington not only gives insight into the largely unknown women, but places it into context of the time. It adequately illustrated the key events of the American Revolution, early policies of the newly emerged United States, as well as the on going saga of the French Revolution and the new trials that it brought upon the nation. Although most of the information is gained through secondary sources it does present a better insight of the true Martha Washington.

Patricia Brady who has a PH.D. in history from Tulane University, and also has served as a director of publications at the Historic New Orleans Collection for twenty years has proven herself as a respected historian that not only can provide strong support through her extensive research but is also highly skilled at the art of storytelling. She makes the person of her focus such as Martha Washington, come alive through the material she chooses to include. It is evident by the type of sources she used such as primary letters to friends and relatives, to shipping journals, to political correspondence that she has done the work needed to present as clear of a picture into Martha Washington and the Washington's lives as can be made.

