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George Washington Up-to-Date

BY RUPERT HUGHES

GEORGE WASHINGTON, by Count Michael de la Bedoyere. \$3. 6 x 9; 310 pp. Philadelphia: Lippincott.

WHEN an historian is both a foreigner and a part of posterity, his point of view is apt to be detached and his perspective fitted with an exteriority that a native historian can never attain. This is particularly true in the writing of histories which concern a nation's foundations and its founding fathers, since it is impossible for a citizen of any country to rid himself entirely of certain emotions that he acquires with his mother's milk, his father's boasts, and his first lessons in school. He may grow up to resent the fables and the buncombe that have been foisted on him as truths when he was too young to know better, but they will always have a certain legendary beauty of which he can never rid himself. Thus a man brought up in a church atmosphere of enveloping piety may turn atheist yet never be able to feel toward his quondam saints as he feels toward the alleged saints of other religions. A man may grow up to such a point of skepticism that he even denies the historicity of Santa Claus; yet the appearance of Christmas snow and stockings and sleighbells can put him in the proper mood for hearing the hoofbeats of aerial reindeer. In the same way I for one have long since ceased to believe in the super-sanctity of the American Revolution or the infra-diabolism of those who

opposed it: yet words like Lexington, Trenton, Valley Forge, Saratoga, and Yorktown can never be as coldly regarded as, say, Thermopylæ, Salamis, Mohács, Fontenoy, Trafalgar, and such names, that are like beads on a rosary to other people who look coldly on our sacred citadels.

Never shall I forget the first time I read a foreign history in which a war with the United States was put in its small international niche as foreigners saw it. An English history of our War of 1812, a French history of the Revolution and its aftermath—such things were startling and bewildering. So there is drama in the reading of any foreign history of one's own country: as we constantly oppose the new idea with our old prejudices, the duller pages gain tension.

But it goes without saying that no one can pretend to a true grasp of his country's history until he has read a foreign version of it. Americans need such fresh estimates peculiarly because the nation is so remote from others and so conceited about the isolation that aliens are treated with an unfortunate condescension. Your average American regards the wars of European history with the pity or disgust of one who looks down into a can of writhing fishing-worms; while his own country's historical agonies, even the savage dealings with the Indians and the appalling political corruptions, are far more sym-

pathetically reported by European historians. George Washington and his colleagues have always been handsomely treated abroad; while it is only of late that American historians have ceased to present the British and the Tories as fiends and tyrants opposing angels and equalitarians. The few American historians who have written of the Redcoats with any decency have usually been accused of accepting British gold, and their books have been forbidden in the public schools.

Of late there has been a remarkable quickening of interest abroad in our Revolutionary period and in what it is now dangerous to call the "Civil War", (a curious fashion having grown up of calling it "the War between the States", though this name is false both as to grammar and to history). Some of our finest character studies of the warriors of these periods have recently come from foreign writers. An excellent military history, *The American War of Independence* by Lieutenant-Colonel F. E. Whitton, was published a few years ago, along with R. Coupland's study of the influence of the Revolution on the British treatment of Ireland, Canada, and other dominions, *The Causes and Character of the American Revolution*. A German novelist, Walter Bloem, has actually published a trilogy based on George Washington's life under the general title, *Held seines Landes*. A well-balanced biography subtitled *Die Geschichte einer Staaten-gründung*, by Walther Reinhardt, followed, and later we had *George Washington und seine Zeit* by Carl F. Wittke of Ohio State University. From France a few years ago came a brief biography by Firmin Roz, followed by a brilliant addition to Bernard Faÿ's studies in Franco-American relations, called *George Washington, Republican Aristocrat*. And just now England

enters the field with *George Washington* from the pen of Michael de la Bedoyere.

Bedoyere is an unusual product of inheritances. He is a French count, yet he is "three-quarters English" and an Oxford man. His grandfather was the Anglican Bishop of Winchester, but he is the editor of *The Catholic Herald*. These contradictions, however, did not prevent him from dealing very fairly (in his biography of *Lafayette, a Revolutionary Gentleman*, 1933), with Lafayette's lifelong struggles for religious tolerance. In his *Washington* he disclaims all pretense to research into the original sources. This is more a help than a hindrance to his book, for there is already more than enough documentation at hand for digestion. There has been of late a veritable explosion, an inundation of Washington documents, and a reconsideration of the whole subject of the Revolution. This new book furnishes, therefore, a valuable bird's eye view of these matters in a judicial spirit impossible to one who has buried himself in them.

Regarding the gigantic structure erected from the pitiful materials Washington had to use for foundations, and considering Washington's own clay feet, not to say entire clay structure, Bedoyere is dazed at his success and gives him up as a hopeless problem. His concluding sentence is: "With the death of George Washington has perished perhaps for ever the secret of his greatness." Of course, everything is a mystery in this world, and the simplest human character is an infinitely complex mystery, packed with secrets. But, granted Washington's character, you have the secret of his greatness. His very lack of dazzling wit and poetry, of theatricism and fantasy, of skyscraping ambition and ruthless selfseeking, made him understand his people and enabled him to be

of immortal usefulness to them. His aims were theirs. His resolves were theirs. He wanted to be treated with the courtesy he showed others; he wanted to run his farm, and live his life, without bullying or being bullied.

When Washington was called to the head of the army, as when he was called to the Presidency, he felt that he was the representative, the honorable servant of the people about him and of "the unborn millions" to spring from their loins. As soon as he had done their business he went back to his own. He had in him none of the stuff one finds in the Alexanders, Cæsars, Napoleons, and the dictators of our day, men who would slay, rob, and exile other thousands to raise themselves. Washington had no desire to crush anybody. He just refused to have anyone trample him. Keep off his toes and out of his light and he was polite to you: bite your thumb at him and his sword was out. He was always ready to fight without wages or spoils rather than submit to the least imposition on himself or those in the same boat with him. With all that pride, that fierce temper, that fearless bravery, that hatred of cowardice or selfishness, he was meek and patient and always the servant, the trustee of the people, one of them, out of them, for them, back in among them as soon as he could be spared. Such qualities made up his character and his character was the secret of his greatness.

It was this character that won Washington the trust of a people who were selfish, lazy, stingy, and often cowardly. But they knew that he was all for them: "Let George do it", was indeed their motto. They trusted him as no other statesman has ever been trusted by a true democracy. This trust did not, of course, prevent them from clinging to the most precious privilege of democracy—that of abusing,

reviling, and abandoning those whom it has elected as its representatives. Consequently Washington was kept in equal torment by the alternation of embarrassing worship and unmerited denunciation; of being left all by himself at one crisis, and jostled off his feet in another.

The really strange thing is that this most humble and prosaic of men, whose supreme genius was his humanity, should have been selected by the myth-makers for distortion into a plaster statue of stilted grandeur, and promptly surrounded by a priestcraft which resented any revelation of the real man, emitted howls of "Sacrilegel!" at the destruction of their own childish legends, and denounced even the publication of Washington's own letters and diaries when they contradicted the stupid bigotries of the fabulists. To the foreign historian there is something stupefying in the frenzy which certain self-appointed nurses of Washington's glory have displayed because two pathetic love letters of his were reprinted. Bedoyere is so far from being stricken aghast by the possibility that Washington might have fallen in love that he quotes at length from the first missive to Sally Fairfax and calls it "surely one of the great love letters of history". He seems to me a trifle unjust to the beautiful domesticity of Washington's life with Martha. It may be true of the beginnings of their relations that, as he says, "it could not have been love at first sight, but it might have been business at first sight". But there must have grown up a very warm and satisfying love between them, or she would not have been encouraged to come to him as soon as the last gun of every campaign was fired, and stay with him till the first gun of the next.

It is perhaps inevitable that Bedoyere should present Washington as first and

foremost an Englishman — “the last Englishman of the United States — yet the first American”. His qualities, motives, and actions are presented as primarily English, and the author goes so far as to say that, once the Revolution was over and the leveling Democrats were in sway, “there was no place for such a man in the New America”. He emphasizes Washington’s isolation in the Republic he founded, his bewilderment at seeing everything going wrong and his own good name reviled, refers to that terrible day when in his own beloved Virginia — which had almost always given him his least support — a toast was drunk at a large dinner “to the speedy death of General Washington”. Those were the black days when mobs threatened to lynch him, and Congress threatened to impeach him for embezzling public funds and trying to make himself a king. But still he followed what he thought was the right path for the people’s leader, and though his temper exploded, he never bowed to the storm.

The chief fault I find with Bedoyere’s estimate is an underrating of Washington’s genius because it did not express itself in more picturesque gestures and language. But the very avoidance of the spectacular was part of his earthy grandeur, his mountainous monotony of immovable justice as he saw it. Americans will shudder at some of Bedoyere’s icy estimates of Washington as a man of commonplace mind and character, but even if these are accepted at their face value, there remain the glory and the wonder of his achievement, the chastity of his patriotism, the majesty of the fabric he so largely wove and saved, protected and projected into the future. Incidentally, the book is full of charming and unexpected tributes to him, vivid and witty presentations of the national and international picture, and

a fine calm sanity. It is a book that can be recommended to every American as a wholesome corrective to his usual diet of partisan history.



Concerning Honest Politicians

BY FRANK R. KENT

THE POLITICIAN: HIS HABITS, OUT-
CRIES AND PROTECTIVE COLOR-
ING, by J. H. Wallis. \$3. 6 x 9; 331 pp.
New York: *Stokes*.

BOSS RULE, by J. T. Salter. \$2.50. 5¼ x
8¼; 270 pp. New York: *Whittlesey House*.

THERE are several reasons why books on practical politics rarely ring the bell. One is because so many of them are written by academic individuals who have no actual experience and therefore no accurate knowledge of politics — for example, professors. Hence, their most profound observations are often ridiculous and their basic premises not to be relied upon. A second reason is that politics is a game for the playing of which no rules can be laid down, and politicians are a people impossible to classify. It is curious that certain fixed beliefs about politicians, not at all borne out by facts, have become so universally accepted. One which most of the theoretical political authorities particularly cherish, and which permeates the smug ranks of the better-grade business and professional men, is that successful politicians must be crooked. With most people this idea can be described as a basic belief. Of course, it is not so. There are today from three-quarters to a million men and women in the United States who can correctly be called politicians, who hold jobs or are identified one way or another with the two major political parties. Far be it