PARSON WEEMS AND GEORGE WASHINGTON'S CHERRY TREE

BY MARCUS CUNLiffe, M.A., B.Litt.

PROFESSOR OF AMERICAN HISTORY AND INSTITUTIONS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

When George . . . was about six years old, he was made the wealthy master of a hatchet! of which, like most little boys, he was immoderately fond, and was constantly going about chopping every thing that came in his way. One day, in the garden . . . he unluckily tried the edge of his hatchet on the body of a beautiful young English cherry-tree, which he barked so terribly, that I don't believe the tree ever got the better of it. The next morning the old gentleman finding out what had befallen his tree. . . . came into the house, and with much warmth asked for the mischievous author. . . . Nobody could tell him any thing about it. Presently George and his hatchet made their appearance. George, said his father, do you know who killed that beautiful little cherry-tree yonder in the garden? This was a tough question; and George staggered under it for a moment; but quickly recovered himself: and looking at his father, with the sweet face of youth brightened with the inexpressible charm of all-conquering truth, he bravely cried out, "I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet."—Run to my arms, you dearest boy, cried his father in transports, run to my arms; glad am I, George, that you killed my tree; for you have paid me for it a thousand fold. Such an act of heroism in my son, is worth more than a thousand trees, though blossomed with silver, and their fruits of purest gold.

Mason L. Weems, The Life of George Washington

I. THE MAN

MASON LOCKE WEEMS is known today mainly for one book, his Life of Washington, and indeed for one anecdote in the book—that of young George and the cherry-tree. Largely on the strength of his single, immortal and dubious anecdote, Weems has become a test-case in American historiography. His name and reputation evoke reactions that range between exasperation, indulgence, and delight. But Weems made other contributions to American mythology. His life was busy, varied and prolific; before it was over he too in his humbler way had passed

1 A lecture delivered in the library series of public lectures.

58
into American folklore. His story presents problems that, in a
minor key, are no less interesting than the problems of the
greater men whom he celebrated.

Weems was born at Marshes Seat, Herring Bay, Anne
Arundel County, Maryland, on 11 October, 1759. He was the
youngest of the nineteen children of David Weems, who was of
Scottish descent; twelve of the children were by David Weems's
second wife, Esther Hill Weems. Not much is known about the
eyear life of Mason Weems. He had some schooling in Mary­
land, and may have made some voyages in the trading vessels
owned by his two eldest brothers. It seems likely that in 1777-9
he was in Edinburgh or London, studying medicine. There is a
story that at the outset of the Revolutionary war he was serving
as a surgeon in the Royal Navy. Weems does seem fond of
nautical descriptions and maritime metaphors. But this is
conjecture. There is surer evidence that he returned to Mary­
land in 1779, when his father died. For part of the next three
or four years the supposition is that he was back in England,
studying for another profession—the ministry. With the end of
the Revolutionary war he ran into difficulties. He wished to be
ordained in the Anglican church. But when independence was
secured, the status of the Church of England needed to be
redefined in relation to the former American colonies. An
American citizen could not be expected to take an oath of
allegiance to the British crown, and yet such an oath was required
of an ordinand. In his plight Weems appealed for help to the
American Minister at the Hague, John Adams. This was late
in 1783, or possibly early in 1784. On 9 July 1784 he wrote a
letter in the same vein to Benjamin Franklin in Paris, and got a
courteous answer. A way out of Weems's dilemma was found,
and he was fully ordained as a priest, by the Archbishop of
Canterbury, on 12 September 1784.

By the end of 1784 he was installed as Rector of All Hallows,
at South River, Herring Creek, in the county of his birthplace.
He remained there until 1789. About two years later he was
Rector of St. Margaret's, Westminster, Maryland. During the
same year (1791) Weems appears to have launched himself upon
his long career as a promoter and seller of books and pamphlets,
and after about 1793, though he remained an Episcopalian minister, he had no further permanent clerical connections.1

His first publishing activities involved merely the reissue of other men’s works, usually at the hands of printers in Baltimore or elsewhere in Maryland. The title-pages stated that these productions were “printed for the Rev. M. L. Weems”. Among the earliest examples, in 1791-3, were collections of sermons by Robert Russel and Hugh Blair, and Hannah More’s Religion of the Fashionable World. These were blameless enough productions. He seems though to have provoked both amusement and embarrassment by sponsoring the publication (in 1791 or 1792) of a pamphlet entitled Onania, which warned the reader against the dangers of masturbation.2 At any rate we catch a glimpse of him in the manuscript diary of a fellow-churchman, the Rev. William Duke, who notes at Annapolis on 1 June 1792, that he “walked into the country and lodged with Mr Weems and Mr Coleman. Subscribed Weems’s proposals for 2 books and paid 1/10.” On 12 September 1792, Duke records:

Went to Church and preached. the Revd. Mr. Weems came in the meantime. . . . Was sorry to see Weem’s pedling way of life but God knows best by what methods we can most directly answer to designations of his Providence.3

Perhaps in the course of a bookselling tour, Weems became acquainted with Colonel Jesse Ewell of Bel Air, near Dumfries, in Prince William County, Virginia. In July 1795 Weems married Colonel Ewell’s daughter Frances; he was thirty five, his bride a good deal younger. He moved to Dumfries, a small tobacco port on Quantico creek, which flowed into the Potomac some eighteen miles downriver from George Washington’s Mount Vernon home. He bought a house in Dumfries and some years later, possibly on the death of Colonel Ewell in 1806,

1 The main sources of information about Weems are Lawrence C. Wroth, Parson Weems: A Biographical and Critical Study (Baltimore, 1911), a rather slight work; Harold Kellock, Parson Weems of the Cherry-Tree (New York, 1928), which adds a little new material but relies principally on Wroth; and Mrs. Emily E. Ford Skeel, ed., Mason Locke Weems: His Works and Ways, 3 vols. (Norwood, Mass., 1929), an important collection originally assembled by Paul Leicester Ford. Vol. I is biographical and bibliographical; vols. II and III are devoted to Weems’s letters, mostly to the publisher Mathew Carey.
2 Wroth, p. 3; Kellock, pp. 57-58; Skeel, i. 259.
3 Skeel, i. 257-8.
established himself at Bel Air, which was to be his home or at least his base of operations for the rest of his life. ¹

His operations ramified. In 1794 he began to act as agent for the young publisher Mathew Carey, an Irishman who had emigrated to America in 1784 and settled in Philadelphia. The two men were to be associated for another thirty years, and much of what we know of Weems derives from their vigorous correspondence. Carey was an able and enterprising man. In addition to the items which he himself had had printed, Weems was soon offering works published by Carey, such as William Guthrie’s *New System of Modern Geography* and Oliver Goldsmith’s *Animated Nature*. He sold them on commission; and little by little his journeys grew longer and more ambitious. Though at first he travelled mainly in Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia, with occasional forays into New Jersey and New York, by degrees his journeys extended and took him further south, into the Carolinas and to Georgia. Sometimes in concert with Carey and sometimes on his own account, he added to the list of publications which bore his own name somewhere on the title-page. In the next decade, for instance, he promoted *The Lover’s Almanac, The Bachelor’s Almanac, and The Grand Republican Almanac*. In 1799 he brought out a pamphlet, dedicated to George Washington, called *The Philanthropist; Or, A Good Twelve Cents Worth of Political Love Powder, for the Fair Daughters and Patriotic Sons of Virginia.* ²

In the following year appeared the first edition of his own life of Washington, the history of which will be discussed in a moment. For some years thereafter he acted as agent for another Philadelphia publisher, Caleb P. Wayne, though he did not sever his connection with Carey. More and more publications came from Weems’s pen: further editions of *Washington*; biographies of Francis “Swamp Fox” Marion (c. 1810), Benjamin Franklin (1815) and William Penn (1822); and pamphlets

¹ Van Wyck Brooks, *The World of Washington Irving* (New York, 1944), p. 278, confuses this with Bellair or Bel Air in Harford County, Maryland.

² Skeel, i. 150-2. Though Weems added comments of his own, the pamphlet was culled from William Laurence Brown’s *Essay on the Natural Equality of Man*, first printed in America in 1793.
II. The Life of Washington

Weems's biography of George Washington was thus only one of many enterprises during his career. But it was his most successful venture, and its evolution tells us a good deal about the temperament of Weems and the climate of his day.

The first editions of the work appeared in 1800, only a few months after Washington's death at Mount Vernon on 14 December 1799. The event produced a huge crop of memorial sermons and tributes. Weems's earlier biographers, Lawrence C. Wroth (1911) and Harold Kellock (1928), have supposed that his little book grew out of a sermon he had himself preached. Perhaps he did preach such a sermon—few clergymen in America seem to have missed the opportunity—but William A. Bryan argues convincingly that Weems was already writing a biography of sorts when Washington died. As early as 22 January 1797 he told Mathew Carey:

1 The full history of all these publications is set out in Skeel, vol. i, though the record is intricate and in some cases incomplete. Next to Washington, Weems's Marion was by far the most successful of his creations. It had reached the 12th edition by 1825, and went on being reprinted up to 1891. Franklin, which enjoyed a fair success, seems to have had its last reprinting in 1876. Penn, though it too sold fairly well, was the least popular of the biographies. First published by Carey in 1822, it reappeared in editions of 1829, 1836, 1845, 1850, 1854 and possibly 1859.

2 The last known letter from Weems, postmarked 11 February 1825 and sent to Henry Carey, is reprinted in William A. Bryan, "Three Unpublished Letters of Parson Weems", William & Mary Quarterly, 2nd ser., xxiii. 272-7 (July 1943). Weems writes that he is "very ill of the strangury". According to Bryan this may have been urethritis or one of several other diseases.

3 William A. Bryan, "The Genesis of Weems's 'Life of Washington'," Americana, xxxvi. 147-165 (April 1942)—a valuable article. There is also much...
Experience has taught me that small, i.e. quarter of dollar books, on subjects calculated to strike the Popular Curiosity, printed in very large numbers and properly distributed, would prove an immense revenue to the prudent and industrious Undertakers. If you could get the life of Gen'l Wayne, Putnam, Green[e] &c., Men whose courage and Abilities, whose patriotism and Exploits have won the love and admiration of the American people, printed in small volumes and with very interesting frontispieces [sic], you would, without doubt, sell an immense number of them. People here think nothing of giving 1/6 (their quarter of a dollar) for anything that pleases their fancy. Let us give them something worth their money.¹

This was at a period when Weems was trying to dispose of certain expensive publications such as Guthrie's Geography, which apparently sold at over ten dollars a set.² Carey did not respond to the suggestion; so in 1799 one guesses that Weems set out to meet the demand by composing a short, popular account of the prime Revolutionary hero, George Washington. On June 24 of that year he was far enough along to write to Carey:

I have nearly ready for the press a piece christened, or to be christened, "The Beauties of Washington." 'Tis artfully drawn up, enlivened with anecdotes, and in my humble opinion, marvelously fitted, "ad captandum—gustum populorum Americanorum!!! ["], What say you to printing it for me and ordering a copper plate frontispiece of that Heroe, something in this way. George Washington Esq. The Guardian Angel of his Country "Go thy way old George. Die when thou wilt we shall never look upon thy like again" M. Carey inver. &c.

N.B. The whole will make but four sheets and will sell like flax seed at quarter of a dollar. I could make you a world of pence and popularity by it.³

A month after Washington's sudden, fatal illness, Weems was urgently pressing Carey, in another exuberant letter that deserves to be quoted at length:

I've something to whisper in your lug. Washington, you know is gone! Millions are gaping to read something about him. I am very nearly primed and cocked for 'em. 6 months ago I set myself to collect anecdotes of him. My plan! I give his history, sufficiently minute—I accompany him from his start, thro the French & Indian & British or Revolutionary wars, to the Presidents chair, to the throne in the hearts of 5,000,000 of People. I then go on to show that his unparallelled [sic] rise & elevation were due to his Great Virtues.

² Weems to Carey, 6 June 1796, from Dumfries: "Draw me up 300 elegant subscription papers. . . . I should like to see an eloquent little preamble on the pleasures and advantages which a Gentleman may promise himself from so complete a system of Geography. . . . You talk of 13 Dol. exclusive of binding. I must you know have them bound." (Skeel, ii. 16).
³ Skeel, ii. 120.
Washington's virtues, as Weems enumerated them, were:


Thus I hold up his great Virtues... to the imitation of Our Youth.

"All this," Weems went on.

I have lined & enlivened with Anecdotes apropos interesting and Entertaining. I have read it to several Gentlemen whom I thought good judges, such as Presbyterian Clergymen, Classical Scholars, &c. &c. and they all commend it much. . . . We may sell it with great rapidity for 25 or 37 Cents and it would not cost 10 . . . it will be the first. I can send it on, half of it, immediately.¹

Again Carey seems to have been unresponsive, for Weems wrote to him on 2 February 1800:

I sent you on a sample of [the] History of Washington. In consequence of not hearing from you I resolved to strike off a few on my own acct. . . .²

As a result, Weems's first edition (1800) was probably printed for him by another Dublin-born figure, George Keatinge of Baltimore. It was entitled The Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington and ran to eighty pages, more or less along the lines indicated in Weems's correspondence with Carey. The pamphlet was anonymous. However, another edition, probably also of 1800, was printed in Georgetown, " for the Rev. M. L. Weems of Lodge No. 50, Dumfries ". This Masonic designation was followed on many of Weems's title-pages. A third edition of 1800, described on the title-page as " A Second Edition Improved ", was printed for the author by John Bioren of Philadelphia. The second and third of these were dedicated to George Washington's widow, Martha. There may have been a fourth edition in the same year.

The pamphlet continued to sell extremely well, with minor changes of text, and eventually began to appear under Carey's imprint. But in the meantime Weems went to work as an agent for C. P. Wayne. In this capacity he found himself soliciting subscriptions for a much more ambitious undertaking. This was the official biography of George Washington entrusted to Chief Justice John Marshall. There was widespread interest in the project, though some apprehension that it would be unduly Federalist in tone. Weems drummed up plenty of advance

¹ " Jan. 12 or 13 ", 1800; Skeel, i. 8-9. ² Skeel, i. 9.
trade. But, to Weems not least of all, Marshall's book proved to be a considerable disappointment. The first two volumes did not reach the impatient subscribers until 1804, in some cases two years after their money had been committed. Of these volumes, the first was a general history of the American colonies up to 1760, with only incidental references to Washington. The second volume dismissed Washington's boyhood and early manhood in a single page. The third and fourth volumes, published a year later, provided a survey of the Revolution but again failed to focus on George Washington. The fifth and final volume (1807) dealt with the years 1783-99 in 700 cramped pages. They were an improvement on the previous contents, but still stiff and impersonal. Weems, struggling to appease his public, became increasingly disgusted, as his letters to Wayne testify. The subscribers were complaining, he said. The work was too voluminous, too formal. Worse than that, the publisher was trying to cut his costs by bringing out later volumes in cheap bindings with inferior paper. Weems insisted, no doubt correctly, that the customers would still buy the set as an act of piety, if it were handsomely produced. As it was, they felt cheated.¹

This is the background to Weems's renewed attention to his own piece of Washingtoniana. In 1806 Carey brought out the so-called fifth edition of Weems's Washington. The author still identified himself as of Lodge No. 50; the text was still only eighty pages. Yet it had been rewritten quite completely, and divided for the first time into chapters. Moreover, two new anecdotes were included, both destined for a long life and both referring to Washington's childhood. One of them, in fact, was the tale of the cherry-tree which young George admitted to cutting "with my little hatchet"—the word "little" disappeared in later editions. The other story was of the cabbage-seed which George's father secretly planted so that on sprouting it would spell out the letters of "GEORGE WASHINGTON".


5
The next development, a more decisive one, was revealed in 1808, with the sixth edition. By then Weems had ceased to peddle John Marshall's mammoth potboiler and could devote some leisure to his own creation. The outcome was no longer a pamphlet, but a book of over 200 pages (216 in one version, 228 in another). *The Life of George Washington; With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable To Himself and Exemplary To His Young Countrymen* was now almost in its final form. On the title page, now and in all subsequent editions of *Washington*, Weems styled himself "Formerly Rector of Mount-Vernon Parish". The text was much amplified. Among the fresh material was the story of the Quaker named Potts who saw General Washington on his knees in prayer at Valley Forge. The vivid dream of Washington's mother, Mary Ball Washington, was also newly introduced. In fact, these had already in a sense been tested on the public. Weems had described himself as Rector of Mount Vernon as far back as 1804, in some Georgia newspaper announcements of Sunday services at which he was to officiate. He had likewise used the Potts anecdote in 1804, as a newspaper advertisement for Marshall's *Washington*. The dream too had been recounted as part of an advertisement, in the *Columbia Museum and Savannah Advertiser* of 12 June 1807, with the additional comment:

This little dream tho' presenting Washington as in crayons, and dimly seen like Ossian's "Half viewless Heroes," bending forward from their clouds, yet does it surprisingly mark the characteristic features of that unequall'd man... A complete and elegant history of this great man, compiled from his own papers, by Chief Justice John Marshall, five volumes in calf and gilt, with an atlas of military charts, are now for sale at DR. GEORGE HARRAL'S at 20 dollars to subscribers, and 21 to non-subscribers. M. L. Weems tenders his best thanks to those of his numerous subscribers whom he has had the honour to see, for the truly filial cheerfulness with which they have generally receiv'd the History of their POLITICAL FATHER.¹

Thereafter, only minor changes were made in the text. The seventh edition (1808) contained 228 pages, as did the eighth and ninth. It still had a rather improvised air: it was an inflated pamphlet, with an introduction, eleven chapters of biography, and four more expatiating on Washington's character.

¹ Skeel, i. 32-33.
benevolence, industry and patriotism. Some time in 1808
Weems apparently sold the copyright of the work to Carey, for
about $1,000. He soon began to regret the arrangement, not only
because he seemed to have got the worst of the bargain but also
because he felt the book could be much improved. "You have
a great deal of money lying in the bones of old George", he told
Carey in January 1809, "if you will but exert yourself to extract
it."¹ A few days later Weems returned to the theme:

Believe me I sometimes mourn that I ever let it go out of my hand,—but chiefly
because it is not half finished, not half finishd. Several most valuable chapters
... ought still to be added. And in the work, as it now stands, there are many
passages that are capable of being wrought up to a far more interesting height, but
which can hardly be done except by a mind peculiarly prone to the thing like
mine, and enthusiastically heated.²

Weems offered to do the necessary adding and polishing for
"some trifling douceur". Carey was unresponsive.

For several more years, at intervals, Weems renewed the
suggestion. "Washington outsells anything I have, no com­
parrison", he told Carey in 1810. With embellishments it could
be a gold-mine. So he urged the publisher, seemingly without
response, to issue an "elegant edition" at three or four dollars.

In 1814 he said wistfully, "I have some noble anecdotes to
add to it". In January 1816 he tried another tack:

I wish you wd instantly give me orders to finish Washington. It cries aloud for
60 or 70 pages more, for it is much clamourd against as far too small for a dollar
book. Ramsay's is nearly twice the size, & better plates, & yet Cushing says he
prints it for 40 cents.³

All this to no avail: Weems's Washington remained the same,
in edition after edition. Other writing engrossed his attention,
and his fertile mind sought other expedients. He seems for
time to have envisaged his Washington, Franklin and Marion
biographies as a trio, to be sold accordingly if possible. Such

¹ 13 January 1809; Skeel, i. 47. ² 19 January 1809; Skeel, i. 47.
³ 4 February 1810; postmarked 19 March 1814; January 4 1816. Skeel, i.
50, 62, 64. The Life of George Washington by David Ramsay (New York, 1807),
though largely military and political in treatment, was smoothly written and quite
popular: further editions appeared in 1811, 1814, 1815, 1818, 1825, 1832 and
1840. Unlike Weems, Ramsay had the honour of being reprinted abroad, in
English and French editions (1807, 1809) and in various Spanish translations.
See W. S. Baker, Biblioteca Washingtoniana (Philadelphia, 1889), passim.
would appear to be the implication of an advertisement, probably inserted by Weems, in a North Carolina newspaper in 1821:

. . . Where also may be had, the Biographies of the three NOBLEST FOUN­DERS of our LIBERTIES;—WASHINGTON,—. . . of whom not even admiring strangers speak without exclaiming—"FAVOR'D, HAPPY AMERICA! The Lightnings of Heaven bowed to thy Franklin! The Temptations of Earth could not seduce thy Washington! The Demons of Hell were vanquish'd by thy Marion!" N.B.—A liberal part of the profit will be given to the Sunday Schools of Newbern.¹

No matter what its imperfections, the Washington kept on selling. By 1825, the year of Weems's death, it had reached its twenty-ninth "edition"—or, more accurately, reprinting (a century afterward the number had risen to eighty). It had come out in German translations.² Its anecdotes were being borrowed by other biographers, with and without attribution. The story of the cherry-tree was the favourite, and gained still wider notoriety when it was included in one of McGuffey's Readers. Close behind in popular esteem came the story of the cabbage-seed, and of the little boy in the apple-orchard. Other much-cited bits of Weemsiana were Potts and the Valley Forge prayer; Mary Washington's dream; and the story of the "famous Indian warrior" who fired seventeen times at Washington, at the Monongahela in 1755, but was mysteriously unable to hit him. Various details of Washington's childhood were also frequently adapted from Weems—the information that his first schooling was at the hands of old Hobby the sexton; that George's schoolmates submitted their disputes to his adjudication; that he

¹ Skeel, i. 73.
² This twenty-ninth "edition" was the last to be numbered separately. It was the first to be published not by Carey but by Joseph Allen, also of Philadelphia. The text had long since become final, though the illustrations had undergone some modification in style and number. Apart from the frontispiece portrait, the illustrations were wretchedly bad—battle-scenes vaguely fashioned after the paintings of John Trumbull. During the 1850's the book came under the imprint of J. B. Lippincott, who reprinted at regular intervals until 1892, when there was a pause until 1918. The most recent edition (New York, Macy-Masius, 1927) carries the title borne by some of the 1800 pamphlet-versions of the book: A History of the Life and Death, Virtues & Exploits of General George Washington. German translations appeared in 1810 ("Libanon," Penn.) and 1817 (Baltimore). Both were taken from the ninth edition of Weems; and both described the author as "ehemaligen Prediger der Mount-Vernon Kirche."
prevented them from fighting; but that he nevertheless organized mock-battles; and that he was an admirable athlete, who was often seen to "throw a stone across Rappahannock, at the lower ferry of Fredericksburg".


1 Anna Reed's biography, published anonymously, came out in revised form in 1832 and 1842. The 1832 edition includes Potts and the prayer; the cherry-tree does not turn up until 1842. M'Guire's *Religious Opinions* cites the apple-orchard and cherry-tree episodes in Weems's own words, and paraphrases the cabbage-seed story (pp. 33-37). S. G. Arnold's *Life* introduces the cherry-tree and cabbage-seed (pp. 14-16). Horatio H. Weld's anonymous *Pictorial Life* makes no use of the cherry-tree but does adopt other Weemsian anecdotes—for example, the Valley Forge Prayer (p. 88): "The inhabitants of the surrounding country, knowing the condition of the army, were alarmed; one of them left his home one day, and, as he was passing thoughtfully the edge of a wood near the camp, heard low sounds. He paused to listen, and saw Washington engaged in prayer. He passed quietly on... and, on returning home, told his family he knew the Americans would succeed, for their leader did not trust in his own strength, but sought aid from the Hearer of prayer. Many, who, in prosperity, have forgotten to worship their Creator, call upon him earnestly in the day of trouble, when they feel that His power only can deliver them; but with Washington it was a custom..." Frost's *Pictorial Life* quotes the anecdotes of the apple-orchard and the cherry-tree *verbatim* (pp. 17-18), together with Weemsian information on Washington's schooling. Caroline M. Kirkland relegates to an appendix the story of Mary Washington's dream, as "too vivid and picturesque to be omitted, yet too evidently fabulous to deserve admission into the text" (p. 30); but she praises Weems's style and reproduces several other anecdotes in full. See also Bryan, *Washington in American Literature*, pp. 97-107.
testified to the influence that Weems and the Weemsian anecdotes exercised over them. William Russell Smith of Alabama (1815-96) was one; and his more famous contemporary Abraham Lincoln confessed that "away back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got hold of a small book, . . . Weem's [sic] Life of Washington". Some of Weems's successors improved on the Weemsian canon. Thus in 1864 Morrison Heady produced a juvenile work on Washington, *The Farmer Boy, and How He Became Commander-in-Chief*. In this the cherry-tree tale was set at Christmas-time, and the hatchet was described as a little Indian tomahawk brought by Santa Claus. George first used it, virtuously, to chop some firewood for the family, then mischievously upon the cherry-tree. His father, finding the damaged tree, suspected a little slave-boy, Jerry, and was about to whip him when George arrived upon the scene:

"O papa, papa!" cried he, "don't whip poor Jerry: if somebody must be whipped, let it be me; for it was I and not Jerry, that cut the cherry-tree."

Ever after, Heady assures us, Jerry "loved his noble little master to distraction". A few pages earlier, Heady says that it would be pleasant to record some stories of George Washington's childhood,

but we must keep within the bounds of true history, and content ourselves with . . . that which really did happen. With this safe rule for our guidance, we will therefore proceed at once to take up the thread . . . at that period of George's boyhood, concerning which some certain record has come down to our time.

A generation later, though popular biographers were less sure of the strict accuracy of the canon, they showed themselves reluctant to abandon it. For example, Virginia F. Townsend writes of her efforts in 1887:

1 Smith, who led a full and varied career, read Weems at the age of ten: "It was true to its great office . . ., and that was, to make the American youth feel and believe that Washington was the greatest man that ever lived . . ., and that the country he delivered was the greatest country on the globe." See Jay B. Hubbell, *The South in American Literature* (Durham, N.C., 1954), pp. 233-4, 628-9; and see Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, 1953), address to the New Jersey Senate at Trenton, 21 February 1861, iv. 235.

PARSON WEEMS

The material for a biography is, at this early period, rather scanty. The story of the hatchet and the cherry sapling, whether true or not, is singularly characteristic. It shows the strong impression which the sensitive conscience of the child must have made on those around him. Nobody would ever have thought of relating such a story in connection with the boyhood of Napoleon Bonaparte.¹

With similar equivocations, this approach is evident in a children's book published as recently as 1954:

Stories about George Washington as a boy have been retold so often through the years that even though we're not sure they really did happen, they have become a part of the story of America. And they do tell us something of the kind of boy he was.²

III. CRITICISMS OF WEEMS

There can be no doubt that either directly or through borrowings Weems has, to quote Albert J. Beveridge, "profoundly influenced the American conception of Washington". Beveridge goes on, though, to assert that the "grotesque and wholly imaginary stories "that Weems propagated have depicted Washington, "that intensely human founder of the American Nation", as "an impossible and intolerable prig". Another scholarly commentator, John S. Bassett, while admitting that Weems's Washington was "the most successful historical book of the day", dismisses it as "a romance, interlarded with pious stories. It was slightly esteemed by educated men of the day but was acceptable to the unsophisticated. Except as a curiosity, it is beneath contempt or criticism." William Roscoe Thayer, who published a biography of Washington in 1922, spoke even more sharply, of the biographer's disadvantage in "having to counteract the errors and absurdities which the Reverend Mason L. Weems made current . . .". Thayer declared:

Owing to the pernicious drivel of . . . Weems no other great man in history has had to live down such a mass of absurdities and deliberate false inventions. At last after a century and a quarter the rubbish has been mostly cleared away, and only those who wilfully prefer to deceive themselves need waste time over an imaginary Father of His Country amusing himself with a fictitious cherry-tree and hatchet.

Rupert Hughes, another Washington biographer of the 1920's, remarked that there was a gap in our knowledge of Washington's early life: "It was this gap that Parson Weems filled up with such slush of plagiarism and piety."¹

Indeed, his material was queried during his lifetime. The *Washington* pamphlet of 1800 was described by a reviewer as "eighty pages of as entertaining and edifying matter as can be found in the annals of fanaticism and absurdity".² The enlarged version of a decade later was wittily analysed by Dr. Bigelow of Boston:

> With a style of rotundity and bombast which may distance Macpherson himself, he has intermingled the ludicrous quaintness of Joe Miller; and he often transports us from a strain of religious moralizing ... to the low cant and balderdash of the drinking table ... We have questioned whether the book before us may not be termed a novel founded on fact. Second thoughts would induce us to style it rather an epick poem; for, besides its figures, characters, battles, and episodes, it is duly provided with a suitable quantity of preternatural machinery. The exploits and future greatness of Washington are ... foretold by a wonderful dream ... which happened to his mother while he was a boy ...³

This slightly condescending scepticism seems to have been common among educated Americans. John Neal, who contributed some impressionistic sketches of American writers to


³ Quoted in Skeel, i. 55-56. Dr. Bigelow's report was read to the Anthology Society of Boston on 11 December 1810. The *Macpherson* he mentions is James Macpherson (1736-96), a Scottish poet who aroused enormous interest by publishing "translations" from Ossian and other bards from the shadowy Gaelic past. Weems was indeed acquainted with Macpherson/Ossian (see n. 1, p. 66). As for Joe Miller, a collection of what might be called gags was published in 1739 under the title of *Joe Miller's Jests*.

Another review, in the Boston *Panoplist*, v. 525 (April 1810), quoted in Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1930-57), i. 263, commended Weems for having "collected a number of facts particularly relating to the childhood and youth of the American sage, and presented them ... in such an interesting, and frequently comic dress, that it will require the most immovable gravity of disposition to preserve a composure of muscles in reading this book".
PARSON WEEMS

Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine in 1824-5, had only a brief verdict on Weems:

WEAMS, Dr.—a D.D. perhaps: Rector of MOUNT VERNON—the seat of George Washington, whom he knew from his boyhood: author of A WASHINGTON’S LIFE—not one word of which we believe. It is full of ridiculous exaggeration.¹

Neal’s note does not suggest a very close acquaintance with Weems or his work. But an 1817 review of Weems’s Franklin would indicate that the Parson was becoming a semi-legendary figure, endowed with “the power of doing considerable good, and considerable mischief, among the lower orders of readers in this country:”

Our readers should know, that he is an author, a pedlar, and a preacher. He writes a book, and carries it about the country; holding forth a godly sermon in every village, and taking occasion to exhort all manner of persons to read fructifying books. The cart stands ready at the door; and, after a congregation have heard a sermon for nothing, they will seldom be so hard-hearted as not to pay for a book.²

Though the reviewer admitted that he could not vouch for the accuracy of this account, it was corroborated and amplified by Bishop William Meade, who was fairly well acquainted with Weems. Meade, half-amused, half-scandalized, pictured the Parson as a man “of a very enlarged charity in all respects.” Weems, he said,

was in the habit of having the servant[s], assembled in private houses, where he would spend the night, and would recite a portion of Scripture, for he never read it out of the book. . . . I do not think he could have long even pretended to be the rector of any parish. From my earliest knowledge of him he was a travelling bookseller for Mr. Matthew [sic] Carey, of Philadelphia, visiting all the States south of Pennsylvania, and perhaps north of it, in a little wagon, with his fiddle as a constant companion to amuse himself and others. . . . One instance of his good-nature is well attested. At the old tavern in Caroline county, Virginia, . . . Mr. Weems and some strolling players or puppet-showmen met together one night. A notice of some exhibition had been given, and the neighbours had assembled to watch it. A fiddle was necessary to the full performance, and that was wanting. Mr. Weems supplied the deficiency. . . . Though calling himself an Episcopal minister, he knew no distinction of Churches. He preached in

¹ Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, xxvii. 203 (February 1825). Neal (1793-1876), an American author of great facility, was in England at the time and so wrote from memory.
² Analectic Magazine, ix. 389-91 (May 1817), quoted in Skeel, i. 132-3,
every pulpit to which he could gain access, and where he could recommend his books. His books were of all kinds. . . . On an election or court-day at Fairfax Court-House, I once . . . found Mr. Weems, with a bookcaseful for sale, in the portico of the tavern. On looking at them I saw Paine's "Age of Reason," and, taking it into my hand, turned to him, and asked if it was possible that he could sell such a book. He immediately took out the Bishop of Llandaff's answer, and said, "Behold the antidote. The bane and antidote are both before you." He carried this spurious charity into his sermons. In my own pulpit . . . in my absence, it being my Sunday in Winchester, he extolled Tom Paine and one or more noted infidels . . ., and said if their ghosts could return to the earth they would be shocked to hear the falsehoods which were told of them. I was present the following day, when my mother charged him with what she had heard of his sermon, and well remember that he was confused and speechless.

Bishop Meade conceded that some of Weems's pamphlets on drunkenness and gambling would be valuable, "but for the fact that you know not what to believe of the narrative." The same must be said of Weems's "very popular" biographies of Washington and Marion: "You know not how much of fiction there is in them."1

At least one outraged contemporary was in no doubt on that score. This was a Carolinian named Peter Horry, who had fought under General Marion and tried to set down his reminiscences. Finding that he lacked the necessary flair, Horry turned his notes over to Weems. On 13 December 1809 Weems informed Horry that the book was finished. He added: "I told you I must write it in my own way, and knowing the passion of the times for novels, I have endeavoured to throw your ideas and facts about Gen. Marion into the garb . . . of a military romance." A year later Weems wrote that he was astonished to hear that Horry was displeased: how could he be? Horry answered, on 4 February 1811, with some dignity:

_A history of realities turned into a romance!_ The idea alone, militates against the work. The one as a history of real performance, would always be read with pleasure. The other as a fictitious invention of the brain, once read would suffice. Therefore, I think you injured yourself, notwithstanding the quick sales

---

1 William Meade, _Old Churches, Ministers, and Families of Virginia_, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1857), ii. 234-6. The bishop of Llandaff in this passage was Richard Watson (1737-1816). His "antidote" was _An Apology for the Bible_ (1796), a copy of which is said to have been presented to every Harvard undergraduate of the period. See Vernon L. Parrington, _Main Currents in American Thought_, 3 vols. (New York, 1927-30), i. 324.
PARSON WEEMS

of the book. Nor have the public received the real history of General Marion. You have carved and mutilated it with so many erroneous statements, [that] your embellishments, observations and remarks must necessarily be erroneous as proceeding from false grounds. Most certainly 'tis not MY history, but YOUR romance.¹

Horry and others may have wondered too about the nature of Weems’s devotion to George Washington, in view of the couplet he inserted on the title-page of Marion:

On VERNON’s Chief, why lavish all our lays?
Come, honest Muse, and sing great Marion’s praise.

Weems’s eccentricity and unreliability were, then, known to at least some people during his lifetime. All the more sober and ambitious biographers of Washington avoided his prize anecdotes. There is no hint of the cherry-tree in the biographies of Washington produced in 1807 by Aaron Bancroft and David Ramsay. Jared Sparks, who published the first large collection of Washington’s writings and completed the set with a biographical volume (1837), may have had Weems in mind when he said of his own book:

Anecdotes are interwoven, and such incidents of a private and personal nature as are known; but it must be confessed, that these are more rare than could be desired. I have seen many particulars of this description which I knew not to be true, and others which I did not believe. These have been avoided; nor have I stated any fact for which I was not convinced there was credible authority. If this forbearance has been practised at the expense of the reader’s entertainment, he must submit to the sacrifice as due to truth and the dignity of the subject.²

In Sparks there is no mention of the cherry-tree, Mary’s dream, Potts and the prayer, and so on; nor in A Life of George Washington in Latin Prose (New York, 1835) written by an Ohio teacher named Francis Glass; nor in James Kirke Paulding’s more sprightly Life of Washington of the same year. Paulding also may have been thinking of Weems when he maintained, rather too confidently:

¹ These exchanges, quoted in Skeel, i. 100-2, are taken from William Gilmore Simms, "Weems, the Biographer and Historian", Views and Reviews, Second Series (New York, 1845), pp. 123-41. The Simms article first appeared in the Southern and Western Monthly Magazine and Review (Charleston), i. 35-47 (January 1845).

² Jared Sparks, The Writings of George Washington ; . . . with A Life of the Author, 12 vols. (Boston, 1834-7), i. p. xiii.
It has hitherto been found impossible to mar the severe simplicity of Washington's
greatness by coupling it with puerilities that have neither the merit of illustrating
his character or increasing our stores of useful knowledge.¹

Although Washington Irving probably consulted Weems in the
course of preparing his own extensive biography of Washington
(1855–9), he, like Sparks, eschewed the more fanciful anecdotes.
So did the dignified Edward Everett (1860), and Woodrow
Wilson (1897).² It was the producers of juvenile, Sunday School
and semi-fictional biographies who perpetuated the cherry-tree.

Anyone who examined the Weemsian oeuvre at all methodi-
cally could not help but be suspicious of his claims as a bio-
grapher. He wrote, as Dr. Bigelow observed, in a grotesque
medley of styles. He had no hesitation in rendering conver-
sations as if he had been present with a shorthand notebook. He
was a free, undiscriminating and often ludicrous adapter of
well-known material. For example, he modified for his own
purpose the famous epitaph on the Countess of Pembroke,
attributed to Ben Jonson:

Underneath this sable hearse
Lies the subject of all verse,—
Sidney’s sister, Pembroke’s mother.
Death, ere thou hast slain another,
Learn’d and fair and good as she,
Time shall throw a dart at thee.

"A little altered", these lines became in Weems’s Washington
an epitaph on Martha Custis:

Underneath this marble hearse,
Lies the subject of all verse.
Custis’ widow—great George’s wife—
Death! ere thou robb’st another life,
Virtuous, fair and good as SHE,
Christ shall launch a dart at thee.

¹ James Kirke Paulding, A Life of Washington, 2 vols. (New York, 1835),
i. 43-44.
² Washington Irving, Life of George Washington, 5 vols. (New York, 1855-59);
Edward Everett, The Life of George Washington (New York, 1860; originally compiled as an article for the Encyclopedia Britannica); Woodrow
Wilson, George Washington (New York, 1897). Irving, who began to collect
material for his biography as early as 1841, asked his bookseller to send him
Weems’s biography in addition to Paulding and others: Bryan, Washington in
American Literature, pp. 103-4.
Weems's pamphlet *Hymen's Recruiting Sergeant* contained a very free version of Proverbs, chapter 31, "with a touch or two of an American brush":

Verse 10. Behold a virtuous woman, for her price is above rubies. . . .

15. She regardeth not the snow; for her household are clothed in fearnought.

16. By her much industry her cheeks are made ruddy like the rose of Sharon; yea, her nerves are strengthened, so that when she heareth talk of the hysterics, she marvelleth thereat. . . .

21. Her poultry multiply exceedingly in the land, even as the black-birds in the corn field for multitude; so that she feedeth her household daintily on chicken pies. . . .

Nevertheless, there was reason for contemporaries to accept at least some of Weems's statements. After all, he had lived near to George Washington. If his data seemed to be casually assembled, the historical standards of the day were not very exact. The full attack on Weems was delayed until the latter part of the nineteenth century. By then, American historians were far more professional in technique; they had accumulated a great deal of information about Washington and his era; Washington was no longer quite so sacred a figure; and so his biographers felt that it was feasible and desirable to present him in more human guise. Much of the previous Washington historiography was criticized. Jared Sparks was blamed for editing the humanity out of Washington's correspondence. Weems was thoroughly discredited. He had turned Washington into a prig, and influenced generations of young Americans into accepting his version: he was exposed as shamelessly inaccurate and irresponsible. Scholars pointed out that only in his *Washington* did Weems claim to be "formerly Rector of Mount-Vernon Parish": on other title-pages he was Weems "of Lodge No. 50, Dumfries". The reason was obvious: Weems meant to lay claim to special knowledge of Washington. But there was no such parish as "Mount Vernon." Washington had once attended Pohick church, in Truro Parish, where Weems was

---

1 Mason L. Weems, *Three Discourses* [*Hymen's Recruiting Sergeant, The Drunkard's Looking Glass, God's Revenge Against Adultery*], ed. by Emily E. Ford Skeel (New York, 1929), pp. 31-32. Fearnought was a rough woollen cloth, often worn by sailors.
an occasional preacher. There is no proof that Weems was Washington’s pastor, or met him after March 1787 when he once stayed overnight at Mount Vernon.

On inspection, other features of his Washington appeared equally dubious. "You know not how much of fiction there is . . .": the cabbage-seed anecdote was detected as a plagiarism from the Scottish poet-philosopher James Beattie. In 1799 Beattie published a commemorative account of his dead son, as part of an edition of his works. In this Beattie describes how he imparted instruction to the little boy:

The first rules of morality I taught him were, to speak truth, and keep a secret; and I never found that in a single instance he transgressed either. . . . I was desirous to make a trial how far his own reason could go in tracing out . . . the . . . first principle of all religion, the being of God. . . .

He had reached his fifth (or sixth) year, knew the alphabet, and could read a little. . . . In a corner of a little garden, . . . I wrote in the mould, with my finger, the three initial letters of his name; and sowing garden-cresses in the furrows, covered up the seed, and smoothed the ground. Ten days after, he came running to me, and with astonishment . . . told me, that his name was growing in the garden. I smiled at the report . . .; but he insisted on my going to see what had happened. "Yes," said I carelessly, on coming to the place, "I see it is so; but there is nothing in this worth notice; it is mere chance": and I went away. He followed me, and . . . said, with some earnestness, "It could not be mere chance. . . ." ¹

Nor could Weems’s use of the story, to make the same homiletic point about George’s “true Father”.

What Weems did not borrow, he seemed gaily to invent. Later investigators could find little or no substance in several of his anecdotes, and good cause to suspect that they came out of Weems’s imagination. For the seminar-trained historians of a later generation, proud of their diligence and objectivity, Weems furnished an object-lesson in how not to write history. Their position is eloquently summarized in the biography of Washington (1889) by Henry Cabot Lodge, who had worked at Harvard under Henry Adams and earned a Ph.D.:

In regard to the public life of Washington, Weems took the facts known to every one, and drawn for the most part from the gazettes. He then dressed them up in his own peculiar fashion and gave them to the world. All this,

PARSON WEEMS  

forming of course nine tenths of his book, has passed, despite its success, into oblivion. The remaining tenth described Washington's boyhood . . . and this, which is the work of the author's imagination, has lived. Weems, having set himself up as absolutely the only authority as to this period, has been implicitly followed, and has thus come to demand serious consideration. Until Weems is weighed and disposed of, we can not even begin an attempt to get at the real Washington.

Lodge goes on to say that Weems was "a man destitute of historical sense, training, or morals, ready to take the slenderest fact and work it up for . . . the market until it became almost as impossible to reduce it to its original dimensions as it was for the fisherman to get the Afrit back into his jar:"

Weems says that his stories were told him by a lady, and "a good old gentleman", who remembered the incidents. . . . To a writer who invented the rector of Mount Vernon, the further invention of a couple of Boswells would be a trifle. I say Boswells advisedly, for these stories are told with the utmost minuteness.

The real point, for Lodge, is that the Weemsian tales are unhistorical:

No English-speaking people, certainly no Virginians, ever thought or behaved or talked in 1740 like the personages in Weems stories. . . . These precious anecdotes belong to the age of Miss Edgeworth and Hannah More and Jane Taylor. They are engaging specimens of the "Harry and Lucy" and "Purple Jar" morality, and accurately reflect the pale didacticism which became fashionable in England at the close of the last century.

Lodge concludes:

To enter into any serious historical criticism of these stories would be to break a butterfly. So much as this has been said only because these wretched fables have gone throughout the world, and it is time that they were swept away into the dust-heaps of history. They represent Mr. and Mrs. Washington as affected and priggish people, given to cheap moralizing, and, what is far worse, they have served to place Washington himself in a ridiculous light to an age which has outgrown the educational foibles of seventy-five years ago.

In a word, the objection to Weems is that he was slapdash and even fraudulent; and that he forced upon the world a false and repellent picture of George Washington.

1 Henry Cabot Lodge, George Washington, 2 vols. (Boston, 1889), i. 39-45. If Lodge had been in need of any more ammunition, he might have noted how remarkable lachrymose Weems short book is. There are more than thirty references to weeping and in several cases Washington himself is the weeper.
IV. EXTENUATIONS

It is useless to try and pass Weems off as a scrupulous historian. His main claim to our attention must rest on other grounds. But he has been perhaps too roughly handled, and too much singled out as a scapegoat. Emily E. Ford Skeel, who took over the large collection of Weemsiana assembled by her brother Paul Leicester Ford, an experienced historian and author of The True George Washington (1896), notes that in early drafts Ford dismissed Weems as a "fabricator and sensation-monger"; whereas later estimates "showed a larger toleration and understanding born of sympathy and wider knowledge".¹ A previous champion of Weems, the South Carolina novelist William Gilmore Simms, spoke of him as a "person to whom . . . full justice has never been done, as a man of talent". After weighing up the evidence in the case of the Horry-Weems biography of Marion, Simms concluded that there had been little real distortion of the truth about Marion. This, of course, is the viewpoint of a writer of fiction, who would be disposed to look favourably on history dressed as romance.²

Yet by more rigorous standards it can be argued that Weems's Washington is not altogether unreliable. Sometimes, no doubt, this was because Weems got his facts "from the gazettes". For example, the story of how Washington at 14 or 15 almost became a midshipman in the British navy, and was dissuaded by his mother, seems to have been widely current—and true in essentials.³ Other stories which look like pure Weemsian inventions turn out to be either true or at least plausible. There is, for example, the tale of the Indian chief who failed to shoot Washington. According to Jared Sparks, the tradition rests

¹ Skeel, i. p. ix.
² Simms to Benjamin Franklin Perry, 30 October 1842, in The Letters of William Gilmore Simms, ed. by Mary C. Simms Oliphant et al., 5 vols. (Columbia S. C., 1952-6), i. 328; Skeel, i. 100-2.
³ See for example Aaron Bancroft, An Essay on the Life of George Washington (Worcester, Mass., 1807), p. 2: "At his own importunity, the birth [sic] of a midshipman . . . was obtained in the British navy. His views in this instance were defeated by the anxiety of an affectionate mother." The episode is thoroughly investigated in Douglas Southall Freeman, George Washington: A Biography, 6 vols. (New York, 1948-54), i. 190-9.
upon the authority of Dr. Craik, an intimate friend of Washing-
ton's who was with him in the battle and who journeyed with
him to the Western country fifteen years after. An Indian chief
came to see them and told them through an interpreter that
during the battle of the Monongahela, he had singled [Washington] out as a
conspicuous object, fired his rifle at him many times, and directed his young
warriors to do the same, but to his utter astonishment none of their balls took
effect. He was then persuaded, that the youthful hero was under the special
guardianship of the Great Spirit, and ceased to fire at him any longer. He was
now come to pay homage to the man, who was the particular favorite of Heaven,
and who could never die in battle.¹

A detailed investigation might show that in this instance as in
others, a Weemsian invention had escaped into folklore, and
perhaps secured lodgment in the recesses of Dr. Craik's mind,
so that what he thought he remembered he had in fact merely
read. If so, this would illustrate the process by which, in the
opinion of Henry Cabot Lodge and others, Weems established
himself as the Father of the Father of His People.² But it is at
least conceivable that Weems heard the story from Dr. Craik in
the first place; for Craik was married to the sister of Colonel
Ewell, Weems's father-in-law, and may well have talked to
Weems at Bel Air or in Dumfries. By the same token, it is
arguable that Weems's sin in styling himself rector of Mount
Vernon was no more than venial. Though the label was an
advertising dodge, letters to Carey show that he preached quite
often at Pohick during 1802, and we cannot prove that he did not
sometimes take services there while Washington was still alive.
He was in touch with Washington's literary executor, Bushrod

¹ Sparks, *Writings of George Washington*, i. 68-69; ii. 475.
² A complicated instance is the story of Potts and the Valley Forge prayer,
which is discussed at some length in Hughes, *Washington*, iii. 270-87. In seeking
to demonstrate the intensity of Washington's religious beliefs, Weems like a great
many other patriotic chroniclers confused what he wished to discover with what
the real facts showed. Yet there is some kind of factual basis in Weems, no
matter how shadowy. There are several different versions of the Potts story.
It is possible that they all derive in part from Weems. But there was an inhabi-
tant of the Valley Forge area named Potts; and a reference in E. C. M'Guire,
*The Religious Opinions and Character of Washington*, p. 159, to a second source
suggests that the anecdote may have been in existence, perhaps already in variant
forms, when Weems first brought it into print. Thus in Weems, Potts seems an
enthusiastic patriot: in M'Guire he is a tory.
Washington, probably in connection with his "subscriptioneering" for the Marshall biography, and with the rest of "the Mount Vernon Family". Moreover, as Emily Skeel notes, he convinced himself in this matter: see for instance his letter to Carey of 10 July 1816, from New Holland, Pennsylvania:

'Tis 11 o'clock P.M. and I have just finish'd a Sermon to a host of good Dutch People, who are mightily taken with me for having been Chaplain to the Great Gen'l Washington, and the writer of his wonderful Life. ¹

In another instance, two reputable biographers of Washington are inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to Weems. Nathaniel W. Stephenson and Waldo H. Dunn discuss the uncertainty surrounding Washington's appointment to General Braddock's staff in 1755. They point out that the circumstances are obscure, but that Weems's explanation—that Braddock talked with Governor Dinwiddie about Washington—fits the facts.²

On a further and more circumstantial matter Weems emerges with credit. He recounts at some length an alleged dispute between Washington and a man named Payne, who knocked him down. According to Weems, Washington felt that he was in the wrong and so apologized to Payne. Lodge dismisses the episode as one of the Weemsian stories "so silly and so foolishly impossible that they do not deserve an instant's consideration". Yet Washington's foremost biographer, Douglas Southall Freeman, confirms that apart from minor inaccuracies the Weemsian version is correct.³

This is not to pretend that all the Weemsian anecdotes (except for the cabbage-seed) are authentic. From what we know of Weems, and of Washington's mother, her dream is almost certainly a fabrication. So are the details of his early schooling. The story of young George refusing to fight, and

¹ Skeel, i. 19, 34-36.
³ Lodge, i. 44. Lodge's view is shared by Paul Van Dyke, who in George Washington: The Son of His Country, 1732-1775 (New York, 1931), pp. 147-8, asserts that the Payne story is "much more inherently improbable than the cherry-tree". Freeman, ii. 146 offers a decisive answer; he arrives at much the same conclusion as John Corbin, The Unknown Washington (New York, 1930), pp. 43-46.
refusing to let other children fight, is distinctly fishy. Washington's death-scene is fictitious and absurdly overblown. Nevertheless the real complaint is not that Weems retailed impossible tales, but rather that he drew such unctuous lessons from them. The cherry-tree incident could have happened to any small boy let loose with a hatchet: the unforgivable offence, in critics' eyes, was to moralize about it.

That Weems was an inveterate sermonizer is undeniable. One of his reasons for disliking Marshall's Washington was that it "is not half so moralizing & Republican as my own." But by "Republican" in this context, Weems meant "human". His own intention, while drawing moral lessons for young Americans, was also to reveal Washington's private life and private virtues. His motives and his styles were certainly mixed. But we miss much of the nature of Weems, and of his appeal to bygone generations, if we fail to note how much the early chapters at any rate seek to avoid the marmoreal, "Federalist" tone of John Marshall. Weems did try—unlike Marshall—to show that Washington was once a child. Though his moralizing tendency ran away with him, Weems did also try to make young George plausible. If what George said sounded sanctimonious, the way in which he said it was remarkably colloquial:

—"Well, Pa, only forgive me this time; see if I ever be so stingy any more. . . ."
—"HIGH, Pa, an't you my true father, that has loved me, and been so good to me always?"

The father's answers are less colloquial and more uplifting. But there is a certain gusto in these early chapters, turgid in places though they are. It is instructive to compare the Weemsian prose with that of writers who paraphrased him. His successors, though more even in tone, are more dull and formal. One of them, for instance, modifies Weems's "I can't tell a lie, Pa" to "Father, I can not tell a lie".  

1 Weems to Carey, Savannah, 24 May 1807; Skeel, ii. 362.
2 John S. C. Abbott, "George Washington", Harper's New Monthly Magazine xii. 291 (February 1856). John Abbott (1805-77) was the brother of Jacob Abbott, author of the "Rollo" series of juvenile works. The article is derivative and sententious—a standard specimen of patriotic journalism. One can see that according to the taste of such authors, Weems came very near to offending against a sacred image of Washington. Thus, though M'Guire quotes freely
Again Lodge is only partly justified in saying that Weems portrayed Washington's parents as "affected and priggish people." The truth is that Weems is one of the few biographers of the nineteenth century who allowed any prominence to Washington's father. Most of them hustled him off the stage with hardly a mention. They did so to make way for Washington's mother: indeed for Washington's Mother. As Moncure D. Conway observed:

The Washington family has passed into a conventionalization curiously resembling that of the Holy Family: the saviour of his country has for his mother a saintly Mary; his father is kept in the background like Joseph; he is born in a mean abode.¹

The comparison with Jesus and the Virgin Mary is made explicit in a gushing passage by Rufus Griswold. There is a glowing picture of Mary Washington in Jared Sparks:

Her good sense, assiduity, tenderness, and vigilance overcame every obstacle; and, as the richest reward of a mother's solicitude . . ., she had the happiness to see all her children . . . filling the sphere allotted to them in a manner equally honorable to themselves, and to the parent who had been the only guide of their principles, conduct, and habits. . . . It has been said, that there never was a great man, the elements of whose greatness might not be traced to the original characteristics of early influence of his mother. If this be true, how much do mankind owe to the mother of Washington.

Edward Everett echoes the sentiment. "Washington", he says, "is unquestionably to be added to the list of eminent men whose characters have been moulded by a mother's influence."²

from Weems, he does so with a prefatory apology: "What these little domestic occurrences shall be found to want in historical dignity, we think they will make up in real worth and useful intimations" (Religious Opinions and Character, pp. 32-33). Similar caution is apparent in John Frost, Pictorial Life, p. 17: "The moral tendencies . . . of childhood, are seldom eradicated in after life. It is with this conviction, and at the risk perhaps of being considered as detracting from the dignity of our subject, that we give some incidents of Washington's life, which illustrate his father's system of early training."

¹ Quoted in Francis Rufus Bellamy, The Private Life of George Washington (New York, 1951), pp. 7-8. Bellamy remarks that though Washington's father did not die until George was eleven, he has been oddly neglected. Conway, a Virginian by origin and an unconventional scholar, "regretted this neglect . . . because Captain Washington . . . was a vigorous man in his own right and moreover exceeded his wife in both family and education."

² Rufus Wilmot Griswold, The Republican Court; or, American Society in the Days of Washington (New York, 1855): "There is no fame in the world more
Weems is certainly not hostile to Mary Washington: she is not the pipe-smoking crone that we encounter in the pages of Rupert Hughes, or even the limited, self-centered old woman that Douglas Southall Freeman depicts. Yet on inspection Weems's Mary Washington seems closer to these than to the Ideal Mother of nineteenth-century biography. The first mention of her character is a remark that George could not have inherited his martial spirit from her: "For as some of the Virginia officers, just after the splendid actions of Trenton and Princeton, was [sic] complimenting her on the generalship and rising glory of her son, instead of showing the exultation of a Spartan dame", she replied . . ., "Ah, dear me! This fighting and killing is a sad thing! I wish George would come home and look after his plantation!" And the story of her reluctance to let George go away to sea, as Weems tells it, illustrates his obedience more than her generosity.

This leads to another consideration. Weems was far from being the only purveyor of Washington anecdotes. We have seen that he was not responsible for the glorification of Mary Washington. Nor did he contribute the tale of George Washington, Betsy Ross and the American flag to national mythology. He did introduce the legend that young Washington threw a stone across the Rappahannock: it was left to others to add the news that George also threw stones over the Natural Bridge in Virginia, and into the Hudson from the New Jersey Palisades. Weems pure than that of the mother of Washington, and no woman since the Mother of Christ has left a better claim to the affectionate reverence of mankind " (p. 125, 1867 edn.); Sparks, Writings of George Washington, i. 5; Everett, Washington, p. 35; and Margaret C. Conkling, Memoirs of the Mother and Wife of Washington (Auburn, N.Y., 2nd edn., 1850). After quoting the famous passage from Sparks (p. 67), Miss Conkling goes on to say of Mary Washington (p. 72): "Enshrined in the Sanctuary of Home, her sublime example is the peerless boast of her country. . . ." The writer was the sister of Senator Roscoe Conkling, who did not always maintain so fine a sense of the sanctity of the home; see Thomas Graham Belden and Marva Robins Belden, So Fell the Angels (Boston, 1956), 287-319.

1 Hughes, ii. 44-46; Freeman, i. 193, ii. 17-18, iii. 597, v. 281-2, 491-1, vi. 228-31; and see Paul Leicester Ford, The True George Washington (Philadelphia, 1896), pp. 17-21.

did not plant the notion that the youthful Washington composed out of his own head the "Rules of Behaviour in Company and in Conversation" which were found among the Washington papers—though Weems would no doubt have fastened upon them avidly if he had had the chance. Nor, despite assertions to the contrary, did he have anything to do with a legend that has attained almost as much prominence as the cherry-tree. This is the story of the sorrel colt, a fiery animal which was a great favourite of his mother's. Egged on by some companions when he was in his early teens, Washington is said to have managed to mount and "break" the colt, a fine piece of horsemanship—only to have it drop dead from bursting its "noble heart". He confessed what had happened to his mother:

The hectic of a moment was observed to flush on the matron's cheek, but like a summer cloud, it soon passed away, and all was serene and tranquil, when she remarked: "It is well; but while I regret the loss of my favorite, I rejoice in my son, who always speaks the truth."

The anecdote first appeared in the United States Gazette, in an article by George Washington Parke Custis, the grandson of Martha Washington, on 13 May 1826. It was later incorporated in an influential book, Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington.¹ The story of the sorrel colt was widely repeated, sometimes by biographers such as James K. Paulding who did not include the cherry-tree.² Custis did more than anyone to propagate the cult of the Mother of Washington. He wrote


²Paulding, i. 41-42; and also, to take some random instances, M'Cuirre, pp. 37-39; S. G. Arnold, pp. 14-16; Weld, pp. 12-13; Frost, pp. 20-22; Hughes, i. 31-32. Caroline M. Kirkland, Memoirs of Washington (New York, 1857), p. 59, is more circumspect: "The story of his having ridden to death a fiery colt of his mother's . . . sounds a little too much like a modernized version of Alexander's taming Bucephalus; so we shall not repeat it here." Paulding, incidentally, dedicated his biography to "the pious, retired, domestic MOTHERS OF THE UNITED STATES, . . . for the use of their children. . . ."
PARSON WEEMS 87

historical plays as a pastime; and as the extract from his Recollections may indicate, he does not carry conviction as a historian. The colt, as Henry Cabot Lodge discerned, is probably as apocryphal as the cherry-tree, and suffers from the same didactic tendency.

In commenting upon it, though, Lodge unwittingly reveals one reason why it enjoyed such popularity. Arguing that Custis's narrative was hopelessly anachronistic, like Weems's, Lodge nevertheless says:

It may be accepted as certain that [Washington] rode and mastered many unbroken thoroughbred colts, and it is possible that one of them burst a blood-vessel in the process and died, and that the boy promptly told his mother of the accident.¹

The language is oddly positive for a cautious historian. One senses that Lodge would like to have accepted this particular anecdote, as others had unquestioningly done before him. Indeed, several gentlemanly biographers who baulked at various stories had unhesitatingly borrowed the Weemsian details of Washington's military and athletic prowess. As Stephenson and Dunn remark of Washington biographers, "they have an amusing way of discovering that whenever [Weems's] subject matter appeals to them he must for once have been correct".² Here is Edward Everett on young Washington:

According to still existing traditions, he evinced in his boyhood the military taste, which seems to have been hereditary in his family. The self-elected but willingly obeyed leader of his comrades, he formed them into companies for their juvenile battles. His early repute for veracity and justice, with his athletic prowess beyond his years, made him the chosen umpire of their disputes. He wrestled, leaped, ran, threw the bar, and rode with the foremost. A spot is still pointed out, where, in his boyhood, he threw a stone across the Rappahannoc [sic]; he was proverbially strong of arm; . . . and he was through life a bold and graceful horseman.³

¹ Lodge, i. 44.
² Stephenson and Dunn, i. 123. Hughes (i. 31) cheerfully accepts the Rappahannock stone-throwing, and the story of young Washington playing soldier and fighting mock battles. He finds them useful touches in his own picture of Washington as a powerful adolescent with "extraordinarily big feet" and "freakishly huge hands".
³ Everett, pp. 31-32.
This improves on Weems, who suggested that the source of Washington's military talent was a mystery.

The point is that Weems supplied distinct needs for the American imagination in the nineteenth century; that he was not a figure apart, uniquely unprincipled or uniquely priggish; that the reasons for his remarkable success lie largely, though not entirely, in the quality of his writing; and that where he failed, his failure has been shared by almost everyone who has sought to capture the essence of George Washington. He should be seen in context, as a stage in the history of American nationalism; of popular and juvenile literature; and of Washington biography, which also has certain timeless aspects.

American nationalism was a self-conscious creation, and George Washington was its chief symbol. Travelling widely and continuously, Weems discovered by experiment what Americans wanted to read. They were religiously minded, so would buy Bibles, sermons, tracts. They were eager for colour and excitement, so would buy novels by the cartload. They were, when stimulated, ferociously patriotic, so would buy works that ministered to their national pride. What better literary fare than the Weemsian biographies, which satisfied all their wants—religion (or religiosity), romanticism, patriotism—simultaneously? They were stirred by his would-be epic strain, edified by his preachments, tickled by his knockabout farce. If he was the most garish of the purveyors of popular nationalist literature, he was one of a numerous company. Gilbert J. Hunt, who produced a *Historical Reader* of the war of 1812, wrote and arranged it in a biblical style which nowadays reads like a burlesque, though it was meant seriously. A textbook of *Arithmetical Questions*, by William Butler, coupled mathematics and nationalism in this sort of way:

No. 201. FEMALE PATRIOTISM. The generous exertions of the American daughters of liberty in Philadelphia, and the neighbourhood, to assist the continental soldiers, in the war with England, are mentioned . . . by Dr. Gordon. Desirous of sharing with the gentlemen of America in the splendors of patriotism, . . . they formed a female association. . . . Their donations, says the historian, purchased a sufficient quantity of cloth, and their hands made the same into two thousand one hundred and seven shirts, which were delivered to . . . General WASHINGTON. . . . Supposing each shirt contained 3 yards and
Washington, up to about the Civil War, was so venerated that no biographer would dream of criticizing him. On the contrary, biographers vied in finding new ways of praising him. "He was as fortunate as great and good", said Aaron Bancroft. For Peleg Sprague, Washington was "The Patriot Hero of our Revolution, the Christian Statesman of our Republic, great in goodness, and good in greatness". Edward Everett did not hesitate "to pronounce Washington, of all men that have ever lived, THE GREATEST OF GOOD MEN AND THE BEST OF GREAT MEN". Even a humorist—Artemus Ward in this case—picked his words carefully:

G. Washington was abowt the best man this world ever sot eyes on. . . . He luved his country dearly . . . He was a human angil in a 3 kornered hat and knee britches. . . .

So it is wrong to suppose that Weems on his own determined the nation's view of George Washington. The American public demanded to be told of a Washington who was a "human angil"—spotless, pious, dauntless. Along with many others, Weems helped to supply the demand.  


It is not quite accurate to say as Kellock does (p. 97) that Weems's enlarged Washington "had the field to itself, with no competition in sight". During the early years of Weems's efforts at Washingtoniana he faced competition from David Ramsay, Aaron Bancroft, and from two other enterprising compilers, Thomas Condie and John Corry. Condie was a Philadelphia book-binder who first issued his *Memoirs of George Washington* in 1798 and brought out a revised edition in 1800. Later editions of varying length appeared up to about 1814. Corry, a more vigorous challenger, was an Irish journalist who worked in London. His *Life of George Washington* first appeared there in 1800. It was reprinted in Philadelphia in 1801 and in the next quarter of a century ran through a quantity of American editions. See Baker, *Biblioteca Washingtoniana*, pp. 6-61.
He was of course unusually enterprising. He was one of the first to realize the size of the market for popular and juvenile literature, and to exploit it. His methods of salesmanship were probably somewhat in advance of his time. He tried to bring inexpensive editions direct to the public. He proposed ingenious methods of disposing of books in quantity, as in 1796-97, when he petitioned the Virginia legislature to establish a charity school by means of a state lottery—the prizes payable in Mathew Carey's books. He used the pulpit as an advertising agency. He timed his journeys to coincide with court-days, revival meetings, legislative assemblies and the like, where crowds might be expected. He offered discounts. He composed eye-catching slogans and newspaper advertisements:

M. L. WEEMS begs leave very respectfully to inform the Honourable the Gentlemen of the Legislature, that his FLYING LIBRARY will leave town on Friday morning. Those who mean to procure some good books will please honour him with their attention. . . . Liberal allowance made to those benevolent characters who take several copies of Washington and Marion for Christmas boxes to their young relations.

He always envisaged his biographies as works for the unlettered and the young. Sending a copy of his Washington to Thomas Jefferson in 1809, he solicited "a line or two in favor of it—as a school book". He suggested to Carey in 1821-22 that it

1 Weems to Carey, 15 October 1796 (Skeel, ii. 48): "The lottery shall contain 20,000 tickets at one dollar per ticket. The number and size of the prizes as also the sum to be raised, is all left to your arrangement. To all good Christians the education of the poor and fatherless is a primary wish. And when there is a prospect of doing this at the very cheap rate of 7/6, and a chance that even this trifle may burn into our bosoms with a ten-fold usury of favorite books, who will not heartily approve. . . . I am well acquainted with the Governor of this State, and also with numbers of those who are most eminent for Wealth & influence . . ., with the co-operation of these and the divine benediction I have no doubt but I shall be enabled to sell you 16,000 dollars worth of books more briefly than you apprehend." Carey heartily approved of the scheme, but the Virginia legislature was less impressed. The petition was not accepted.

2 Georgia Journal, 28 November 1810, quoted in Skeel, i. 97.

3 Weems to Jefferson, 1 February 1809, in Skeel, i. 39-40. As early as 12 July 1800, Weems suggested to Carey that his Washington might be bound in duodecimo " & Sold as a School Book". Skeel, i. 12; and see Bryan, "Genesis", Americana, xxxvi. 148-50. The possibility occurred to others. John Marshall's Washington eventually came out in a condensed edition (Philadelphia,
would be sensible to have the *Washington* translated into French: "Many wth sell in that dress for scholastic purposes".1

But again he was not alone in the field. He was an agent—true, with a stronger commercial tinge than most—in the great didactic and humanitarian mood that was overtaking Britain and America. The techniques of Methodism, the tracts and campaigns of the English Evangelicals were familiar and pervasive influences upon Weems. Henry Cabot Lodge is correct in noting the affinity of Weems's writings with those of high-minded ladies like Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth and Sarah Trimmer. Among other things they evolved a new "improving" literature for children, long before Queen Victoria. The "moral tale" was prominent in such literature—for example, the tale to which Lodge alludes of Little Rosamund who "spent her money on a purple jar from the chemist's window instead of on a pair of shoes, only to find that the colour was in the liquid, not in the glass, while the lack of the shoes led to all kinds of disappointments and disasters".2 Weems read and peddled such stories: they helped to form his world. Before he died, the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society were busy in somewhat similar ways to his. The pamphlet-vending missionaries of the Tract Society moved among much the same audiences as his. Weems anticipated these "colporteurs", but not by much.3


2 Skeel, i. 74. No such edition appeared. But the idea was obviously sound.

Arsène N. Girault brought out a *Vie de George Washington* (Philadelphia, 1835), based on the biography written by Anna C. Reed for the American Sunday School Union. Girault's text ran through four editions in the first year and sold briskly for another quarter of a century. It was used at the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, where Girault became an instructor in 1845. The version of Anna Reed's biography translated by Girault included the colt but not the cherry-tree. Baker, *Biblioteca Washingtoniana*, p. 72.


4 "Thanks to the promoting genius of Mathew Carey, . . . book agents such as Parson Weems traveled up and down the land peddling . . . biographies, histories, and manuals designed for the use and moral uplift of people in the
As the classroom and Sunday School audience enlarged, so did the demand for appropriate texts and tracts. Weems's arguments against drunkenness, gambling and adultery were hardly suitable: but his biographies were ideal. They remained popular in their own right, or were pillaged by later rivals, because in one vital respect they catered to juvenile readers. Not only was his Washington simply written: unlike the abbreviated school-editions of Irving's and Marshall's biographies, his told American children about the hero's childhood. Without his anecdotes, what was there to visualize about young Washington? The anecdotes were indispensable. The same was true to a lesser extent of Washington's later life, though here Weems was not so accommodating. Ordinary people had always needed and cherished brief, vivid characterizations of their heroes. Now that the market was widened to include children, the need was all the greater. It was greater still because the United States lacked a folklore of its own. The Scots could take pride in their tale of Bruce and his spider, the English in the story of Drake playing bowls while he awaited the Armada, the Swiss in the vignette of William Tell shooting the apple from his little son's head. What would America have, without a cherry-tree?

Moreover, such anecdotes, while almost always apocryphal, do not endure unless they express some sort of general truth about the persons they describe. Does not the cherry-tree tale, after all, tell us something about Washington which fits surprisingly well into the known facts of his life—apart from the ordinary walks of life. Moralistic and anecdotal chapbooks found a place in the wagons of the two hundred peddlers that by 1823 were canvassing the country. Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought (New York, 1943), p. 229; and see Clifford S. Griffin, Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865 (New Brunswick, N.J., 1960), esp. pp. 23-43.

1 The Rev. Henry F. Harrington, "Anecdotes of George Washington....", Godey's Lady's Book, xxxviii. 427-9 (June 1849), discussing the scarcity and utility of Washington stories, notes "how eagerly every little anecdote of his hours of boyhood or manly relaxation... has been seized upon.... How many children have been stimulated to inflexible truth... by the story that is told of him... when he injured with his hatchet one of his father's favorite trees... What a bearing this little anecdote alone has exerted over many minds...."

2 Robert Birley, "The Undergrowth of History: Some Traditional Stories of English History Reconsidered" (London: Historical Association, 1955),
American idolization of him, which is a historical fact of another kind?

Washington biographers, from Marshall and Weems onward, have faced well-nigh insoluble problems. Despite the more intimate knowledge of him accumulated through research, his childhood and youth remain somewhat shadowy; while his mature years were public years: the man became merged with his country, with his own legend. Washington is a great national hero. Biographers have naturally wished to convey his transcendent merit, as it struck his contemporaries and as a more objective phenomenon. But they have also, naturally, wished to treat him as a man, not a demigod. More particularly they have sought to render the Americanness of him: to be on visiting terms with him, as they are with Abraham Lincoln. They have wanted to emphasize what was “normal” about him, what practical lessons his actions held for other Americans, what his countrymen could do to be like him. Yet how to accomplish this without suggesting that Washington had blemishes? And even if biographers should wish to point to his faults, how to do so when he appears to have had none, except of the most minor order? How to make such a being credible, when he has proved invulnerable even to the debunkers, so that they have found themselves deriding not Washington but rather Washington’s previous biographers—poor Weems foremost among the targets?

commits sensibly on the origin and function of such stories. Birley points out that while some are plainly fictions, others rest on better evidence, and all survived (p. 28) because they brought out most emphatically the particular traits in the characters of the heroes which the popular imagination considered to be most significant. Eric Robinson, “James Watt and the Tea Kettle: A Myth Justified,” History Today, vi. 261-5 (April 1956), supplies striking evidence in support of the historical antecedents of one of these legends. The cherry-tree too has some faint corroboration in the shape of an earthenware mug, apparently made in Germany between 1770 and 1790, decorated with a quaint illustration of the cherry tree story, a large hatchet, the letters G.W., and the numerals 1776. See Hughes, i. 501; Skeel, i. 26-27. The mug was first described in R. T. Haines Halsey, Pictures of Early New York on Dark Blue Staffordshire Pottery (New York, 1899), pp. 302-6. It is reproduced in Skeel. If however the story of the cherry-tree had really been current in 1776, there would surely have been other illustrations and references. The power of the story, though, as in the case of King Alfred and the cakes, or Francis Drake playing bowls at Plymouth, rests on considerations that have very little to do with precise evidence.
Grappling with these difficulties, biographers often begin by declaring their humanizing intent. Other biographers, they say, have missed the living man. So John Neal, in a historical novel, makes one of the characters say:

George Washington had his infirmities, in the same measure as his virtues. And thanks be to God that he had! Now we have an example to encourage us. . . . His character is not understood by his own countrymen. . . . They have so long listened to hyperbolical eulogy, intemperate, and unmeaning praise, that he has lost to their eyes, the chief attributes of humanity—and become a God.

Washington Irving tells a correspondent that

I have availed myself of the licence of biography to step down occasionally from the elevated walk of history, and . . . depict the heroes of Seventy-Six as they really were—men in cocked hats, regimental coats, and breeches, and not classical warriors, in shining armour and flowing mantles, with brows bound with laurel. . . .

John B. McMaster says:

General Washington is known to us, and President Washington. But George Washington is an unknown man. When at last he is set before us as he lived, we shall read less of the cherry-tree and more of the man. Naught surely that is heroic will be omitted, but side by side . . . will appear much that is commonplace.

Worthington Chauncey Ford declares in the preface of his own scholarly biography: "In one respect Washington has lost in definition. His name and renown are taken for granted, and his individuality has thus lost." And Douglas Southall Freeman introduces the first volume of his huge study by remarking on "the extent to which the personality of young Washington has been ignored":

Apparently there have been two orthodox approaches . . .—one forward through Weems and the other backward from Gilbert Stuart and John Marshall. If Weems were followed, Washington was a cross between a prig and a paragon. When seen through the eyes of the Chief Justice or those of the Rhode Island painter, he was so awesome . . . that he never could be credited with a youth.¹

Yet Weems makes very much the same observation, in his introduction:

IT is not then in the glare of public, but in the shade of private life, that we are to look for the man. . . . Of these private deeds of Washington very little has been said. . . . No! this is not the Washington you see; 'tis only Washington the HERO, and the Demigod. . . .

In spite of their humanizing efforts, the biographers end up in panegyric. Washington recedes into public life and into near-apotheosis. He certainly does in Weems. But the transformation is evident in all the others: in Sparks, and Irving and so on. The same person in John Neal's novel who asserted that Washington was fallible, scolds James Fenimore Cooper for bringing him into a novel "profanely . . ., in situations totally unworthy of him . . .". Another character in Neal's novel, moreover, says: "I cannot write or speak the name of GEORGE WASHINGTON, without a contraction, and dilation of the heart, if I do it irreverently." W. R. Thayer, after pouring scorn initially upon Weems and Sparks as sentimental falsifiers, concludes his book by hinting at almost supernatural attributes in Washington. Dumas Malone comments on the "devastating candor" with which Freeman, in his first two volumes, analyzed Washington as "a bold and dashing but ambitious and calculating young man"; but he notes the gradual emergence, in subsequent volumes, of the lineaments that Washington's countrymen "have so long recognized and so long honored". Or in Freeman's words, "The more I study George Washington, the more am I convinced that the great reputation he enjoyed with his contemporaries and with men of the next generation was entirely justified. He was greater than any of us believed he was." ¹

Washington biographers have sought another compromise between the real and ideal. They have argued that, though great, Washington was not a genius: he was the ordinary man raised to the highest power. He was not, they indicate, an intellectual, or a fine orator, or of unusually magnetic personal appeal. He was great in his character. He had not very much formal education, and no gift for abstract theorizing. Biographers dwell therefore on his simplicity, his rural upbringing, his physical strength, his athletic feats: for these features make him more acceptably "American", and bring him closer to the

average American, who can hope to imitate and emulate him in at least some respects. Once again, Weems anticipates an aspect of Washington biography. His Washington was not born "with a silver spoon in his mouth" but "in humble circumstances", and spent his early manhood in "the laborious life of a woodsman". Weems, of course, overdoes this line in order to present Washington as a "poor young man" who "from a sheep-cot ascended the throne of his country's affections", and who may therefore provide a genuine example for aspiring young Americans. Where Weems expresses a general truth, or a notion that is echoed by later biographers, he sometimes does so for his own peculiar reasons. He hits the truth by accident, we might say. Nevertheless, he is the prototype of all Washington biographers. His respectable successors have adopted without question the anecdotes dealing with Washington's physical strength, because these fit their own picture of Washington. They have avoided the more celebrated anecdotes because of Weems's way of telling them. But in either case, he has managed to embody almost all the possible approaches to Washington. Those who came after have written more comprehensively and with more sophistication: none has altogether escaped the traps into which he tumbles so awkwardly and so engagingly.

1 See for example David Ramsay, *The Life of George Washington* (London, 1807), pp. 429-30: "Youths of the United States! Learn from WASHINGTON what may be done by an industrious improvement of your talents, and the cultivation of your moral powers. . . . You cannot all be commanders of armies or chief magistrates, but you may all resemble him in the virtues of private and domestic life, in which he excelled, and in which he most delighted." Or see Caroline M. Kirkland, *Memoirs of Washington* (New York, 1857), pp. 41-42: "The plain, humble home on Pope's Creek; the stout, kind, planter papa, and serious, housewifely mother; that primitive and retired mode of life, . . . influenced . . . the whole future of the General, President, Benefactor of nations. . . . Through the whole of his grand career, whenever the pressure of duty relented, he sprang back to rural life . . . as the half-weaned child to its mother's bosom. . . ." Ruth Miller Elson, "American Schoolbooks and 'Culture' in the Nineteenth Century", *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, xlvi. 417-20 (December 1959), notes how in these Washington is shown as "brave, charitable, industrious, religious, courteous, and a paragon of the domestic virtues. The best qualities of the self-made man are his. . . . But in no instance are intelligence, learning, or disinterested inquiry associated with Washington. Indeed, in some of the later books he is specifically shown as a practical man who rejected the intellectual life." Compare this with Weem's (probably correct) insistence that Washington knew no Latin.