

Marcus Cunliffe: GEORGE WASHINGTON

IT MAY seem odd to include George Washington in a series called "Men and Ideas." He was an able, upright, and sensible man, but he was bookish neither by training nor by temperament. He had little formal education, and the thirty-seven volumes of his collected writings may be searched in vain for evidence of profundity, though they contain any amount of gumption. To such American contemporaries as Jefferson, Madison, and John Adams the word "speculation" probably meant primarily a process of thought: to Washington it probably first suggested investment in Western lands. A recent Washington anthology has a section of "Maxims, Mottos, Brief Opinions." Under *Philosophy* we find: "The principles of Philosophy Moral, Natural, etc., I should think very desirable knowledge for a gentleman." Or on *Potatoes*: "Of all the improving and ameliorating crops, none in my opinion are equal to potatoes on stiff and hard-bound land." These are fairly typical entries. There is nothing silly about them, but they are hardly *pensées*.

Washington, that is, held "views" rather than "ideas": the decent, moderate views of a Virginia gentleman whose most absorbing interest (if he had been left to his own devices) would have been agriculture. When he was decorating the parlour of his Mount Vernon home in 1759, he wrote to London for busts of Alexander the Great, Julius Cæsar, Charles XII of Sweden, and Frederick II of Prussia. He was told that none was available at a reasonable price, but that there were plenty of busts of poets and philosophers at fifteen shillings each. He did not order these.

Indeed, few of his admirers have ever sought to prove that Washington was an intellectual. There is a pamphlet, by a James Penniman, which seems to argue that because Washington wrote a great many letters he

was therefore a man of letters. Penniman works hard to establish Washington as a scholar-reader ("In 1784 he made a complete summary of Higgins on Calcareous Cements. . ."). But he gives up in the end, content to claim that "England's greatest contribution to the civilisation of the world is the works of Shakespeare; America's is the character of Washington."

There is no need to labour the point. Washington is not important as a thinker but as a phenomenon. He was the object of thought in others. The idea of Washington is the interesting thing; he is Marmoreal Man, the omnipresent Hero, less urgent and menacing than the Lenins and Titos and Mao Tse-tungs who stare down from modern hoardings, yet perhaps one of their innocent progenitors.

AS WITH these latter-day Heroes, Washington began to disappear as a credible human being while he was still alive. Babies were being christened after him as early as 1775; the new federal capital was named in his honour; he was exhibited in waxwork effigy in the 1790's. *Vae, puto deus fio*, the dying emperor Vespasian is supposed to have said: Alas, I think I am about to become a god. Such a mixture of levity and magnificence would have been foreign to Washington. But he might with justice have thought the same thing as he lay on his death-bed at Mount Vernon in 1799. "God-like" Washington, dead, passed into legend, his surname appropriated for 1 American state, 7 mountains, 8 streams, 10 lakes, 33 counties; for 9 American colleges; for 121 American towns and villages. His visage is on coins and banknotes and postage stamps; his portrait (usually the pebble-mouthed, immensely grave likeness by Gilbert Stuart) is hung in countless corridors and offices. His head—60 ft. from chin to scalp—has been carved

out of a mountainside in South Dakota. There are statues of him all over the United States—and all over the world: you can find them in London and in Paris, in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro, in Caracas and Budapest and Tokyo. The Washington Monument in Washington D.C. is 555 ft. high: higher (we are told) than the spires of Cologne Cathedral, higher than the Pyramids, higher than St. Peter's, much higher than St. Paul's. There are books about him by the score, speeches by the hundred, nearly all of them sonorous and reverential. Most of them are impossible to read, and can only be evaluated statistically, in round numbers or in man-hours. Set-pieces in adulation, they repeat themselves and one another.

It is hard to know what to say in face of this process of civic elephantiasis. Not only has the man himself been well-nigh obliterated: what he might be thought to stand for is almost lost. We seek some sour antidote to so much saccharine, and tend to agree with Emerson: "Every hero becomes a bore at last. . . . They cry up the virtues of George Washington—'Damn George Washington!' is the poor Jacobin's whole speech and confutation." Yet, fighting back stupefaction, we may identify four rôles that Washington has been made to play. The four are not sharply distinct—nothing is, in this misty Valhalla—but at any rate they are something to hang on to. So, there is

- (a) *the Copybook Hero*,
- (b) *the Father of His People* (I follow what might be called hallowed custom in capitalising the pronoun),
- (c) *the Disinterested Patriot*, and
- (d) *the Revolutionary Leader*.

These are all guises of the hero-figure. In each, Washington is a member of a pantheon; and for each pantheon there is a kind of anti-pantheon of heroes who fell from grace.

The Copybook Hero

WASHINGTON as he has descended to us is largely a creation of the 19th century English-speaking world, with its bustling, didactic, evangelical emphasis. This is the world of tracts and primers, of Chambers's *Miscellanies* and Samuel Smiles, of mechanics' institutes and lyceum lectures. Bazaars and bridges are opened, foundation-stones laid, prizes and certificates distributed,

drunkards admonished and rescued, slaves emancipated. It is, in the convenient term of David Riesman, the age of the "inner-directed" personality whose essential attributes are summed up in the titles of Smiles's works—*Self-Help, Thrift, Duty, Character*—or in a short poem of Emerson's that is also called *Character*:

*The sun set, but set not his hope:
Stars rose; his faith was earlier up:
Fixed on the enormous galaxy,
Deeper and older seemed his eye;
And matched his sufferance sublime
The taciturnity of time. . . .*

Character is the key-word in the copybook version of George Washington, as we have already seen with Mr. Penniman. Lord Brougham is of the same opinion: "The test of the progress of mankind will be their appreciation of the character of Washington."

The enterprising Parson Weems, a Victorian before his time, was the first to fit Washington into what was to become the pattern of the century. His aim in writing a pamphlet-biography of Washington was, Weems explained to a publisher in 1800, to bring out "his Great Virtues. (1) His Veneration for the Diety [*sic*], or Religious Principles. (2) His Patriotism. (3) His Magnanimity [*sic*]. (4) His Industry. (5) His Temperance and Sobriety. (6) His Justice, &c &c." Here is the copybook canon. Weems had no more hesitation in distorting the actual Washington to make him fit than had Jared Sparks in "editing" Washington's correspondence so as to present a more dignified picture. Weems's pamphlet grew into a book, with all the famous false anecdotes: Washington chopping down the cherry-tree ("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); Washington upbraiding his schoolmates for fighting ("You shall never, boys, have my consent to a practice so shocking! shocking even in slaves and dogs; then how utterly scandalous in little boys at school, who ought to look on one another as brothers"); Washington praying on his knees alone at Valley Forge (in fact, Washington was very far from being a religious fanatic). All through the book, as unremittingly as Horatio Alger was to thump home the mes-

sage, Weems showed how "duty and advantage" went together. Thus, kindness to his elder brother brought George the Mount Vernon estate, when his brother died childless; and exemplary conduct won him the hand of the widow Custis, whose "wealth was equal, at least, to one hundred thousand dollars!" The homily was irresistible; by 1825 Weems's biography had gone through forty editions, and forty more were to appear in due course. The cherry-tree tale became a special favourite in copybook lore. In the secular hagiology of the period—the equivalent of St. Lawrence with his gridiron, or St. Catherine with her wheel—Washington and the tree joined Newton and William Tell with their respective apples, Watt with his kettle, Bruce with his spider, Columbus with his egg, Philip Sidney with his water-bottle. But Washington's whole career was pressed into service, not merely one episode. He was the man without faults, and with all the 19th century virtues, from courage to punctuality, from modesty to thrift—and all within human compass, and all crowned by success.

Father of His People

FOR obvious reasons, American admiration of Washington took on heightened forms. In the well-worn phrase of Henry Lee, he was *first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen*—first chronologically as well as emotionally: America's first commander-in-chief, and first president. He was the prime native hero, a necessary creation for a new country. It was only natural to replace "George Guelf" (Jefferson's description) by George Washington; indeed the substitution was made actual in New York, where the base of a destroyed statue of George III was used to display one of Washington. For America he was originator and vindicator, both patron saint and defender of the faith, in a curiously timeless fashion as if he were Charlemagne, St. Joan, and Bonaparte telescoped into one person. After him, only Lincoln has rivalled his glory. In some respects Lincoln is now a more relevant hero than Washington: his Second Inaugural is the new testament among national documents to the old testament of Washington's Farewell Address. Yet Lincoln is still human, time-bound and even time-stained. One cannot quite imagine him

in a painting like Brumidi's "Apotheosis of Washington," which is on the dome of the National Capitol and shows Washington flanked by Freedom and Victory. Nor can one imagine American critics objecting to a fictional account of Lincoln (or for that matter any other American heroes, with the possible exception of Robert E. Lee) as they objected to Thackeray's treatment of Washington in *The Virginians*: "Why, this is the very essence of falsehood. Washington was not like other men; and to bring his lofty character down to the level of the vulgar passions of common life, is to give the lie to the grandest chapter in the uninspired annals of the human race." To admit failings in Washington was to attack the holy fabric of America. In this respect J. P. Morgan too acted as a defender of the faith when (in the 1920's) he burned some letters by Washington that had come into his possession, on the grounds that they were "smutty." Hence, too, the universal American horror at men like Benedict Arnold, the betrayers of Washington and of their fatherland.

Some of his countrymen—notably John Adams—were a little irked by the Washington cult. They felt that adulation had gone too far—as in the suggestion that God had denied Washington children of his own so that he could assume paternity for the whole nation. But even Adams was prepared to defend Washington as a native product against all challengers from other lands, with the proviso that Washington's virtues were America's virtues, rather than vice versa. Washington was great because his country bred such qualities, and shaped their fulfilment. Here then are two conceptions of Washington, as transcendent American and as representative American. In either case, he was "identified with the country" to an unparalleled degree (as Rufus Griswold wrote). "He was its mind; it was his image and illustration. If we would classify and measure him, it must be with nations, and not with individuals."

The Disinterested Patriot

AS FATHER of His People, Washington of course stands apart—though perhaps conceding a lesser share to Benjamin Franklin ("The history of our Revolution," said John Adams, "will be one continued lie from one end to the other. The essence of the

whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical rod smote the earth and out sprang General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his rod, and thence forward these two conducted all the policy, negotiations, legislatures, and war"). As Disinterested Patriot he is one of a select pantheon. Against nearly all historical precedent, he retired to private life twice, after holding the two most powerful offices in the land. Marvelling at such humility, men could only compare him with Timoleon of Corinth, with Cincinnatus, with the younger Cato of Addison's play (two of whose lines—" 'tis not in mortals to command success," and "the post of honour is a private station"—he was fond of quoting). And they could contrast him with the larger anti-pantheon of interested patriots, figures like Sulla and Cæsar, Wallenstein, Cromwell, or his own contemporary, Napoleon. On the whole it is a classical assembly—these are Marmoreal Men—and Washington's place in it contributes still further to the strange, timeless, dreamlike unreality of our vision of him. His rôle here fits well into the Classical Revival mood of early 19th century America. (It does, though, conflict a little with the cosier, more domesticated Weems-ian view. We should remember that Horatio Greenough's colossal marble statue of Washington in a toga was ridiculed in the 1840's. A tourist who went to look at Greenough's work found that "some irreverent heathen had taken the pains to climb up and insert a large 'plantation' cigar between the lips of the *pater patriæ* . . . I could not help thinking . . . that if Washington had looked less like the Olympic Jove, and more like himself, not even the vagabond who perpetrated the trick of the cigar would have dared or dreamed of such a desecration").

The Revolutionary Leader

THIS is an idea of Washington held mainly outside the United States, one with a strong tincture of ideology. It is of Washington as the strong man, the champion of nationalism, the victor in the first great revolution of modern times. Here he is chairman of a vehement, faintly swash-buckling committee whose other members include Lafayette, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Bolívar, and Garibaldi, with vacant places left by Itúrbide and others who disgraced themselves. Seen in the right way, he shares

—indeed predicts—their experiences, though for him the conclusion is far sweeter. At the head of his "banditti" (as the English often called his forces) he is hunted, thwarted, lonely, outnumbered, maintains midwinter vigils. But the Cause (and the reading of Tom Paine) sustains him; he crosses the Delaware . . . and triumph is eventually his. It is all an intoxicating brew of republicanism, conspiracy, freemasonry, new banners (in one of the Washington myths he collaborates with Betsy Ross in devising the American flag) and new anthems, new fashions in dress and so on. Lafayette sends Washington "the main key of the fortress of despotism" (i.e. of the Bastille; the key still reposes at Mount Vernon). "It is," Lafayette writes, "a tribute which I owe as a son to my adopted father, as an aide-de-camp to my general, as a *missionary of liberty to its patriarch*" (my italics). Bolívar carries a portrait-medallion of Washington. Latin-American statesmen of the 19th century often allude to Washington in their speeches; and possibly we may discern the dim outlines of a fifth rôle for Washington, one that he *might* have played—as presiding genius for the never-found Atlantis known as Pan-America. . . .

It is too late for that now; and the idea of Washington has faded for us in other ways. We are aware of ourselves, in the 20th century, looking at 19th century versions of an 18th century man. We are less disposed to play at pantheons like that of the Pennsylvania German's *Washingtons Ankünfft in Elisium*, which pictured Washington in earnest conversation with Brutus and Columbus. We are distinctly suspicious of revolutionary leaders; and in any case we note how poorly Washington fitted this particular part. Thanking Lafayette politely for the Bastille souvenir, he responded with a gift of his own: "Not for the value of the thing, my dear Marquis, but as a memorial, and because they are the manufacture of this city, I send you herewith a pair of shoe-buckles." What inspired flatness!

This is the clue we think we see to Washington nowadays. As an inspiration he has gone rather flat. It is not that he has been exposed as a fraud. The debunking historians of the 1920's claimed that Washington was a prig and a bad general. Subsequent and more serious historians have shown that he was not

quite impeccable, especially as a young man. But their disclosures are all harmless: it is Weems and Sparks that they expose, not Washington. He is still, deservedly, regarded as America's primary hero, and no doubt always will be. We may think that Weems's mistake was to conceive of Washington as "inner-directed" where in truth he had many qualities of the "tradition-directed" 18th century. But that does not matter very much. As far as the *idea* of Washington is concerned, Americans now find assurance rather than inspiration. They have had him long enough to take him for granted, or almost to forget him altogether. For the last thirty years the admiration accorded him has been somewhat perfunctory. Or—as in the case of the 1932 bicentennial celebrations, as organised by the remarkable Sol Bloom—it has been frenetic. He is corny, as Jefferson or Lincoln are certainly not. The better authors are not moved by him, and—so far as I know—children are no longer named after him (that habit persisted longest among American Negroes, it would appear. For the little ex-slave boy Booker Taliaferro to adopt the surname of Washington was in a way to take on American citizenship).

But such flatness is comforting in the 1950's. Older panegyrists made the point, though they tended to cover it over with rhetoric and patriotic pride, when they stressed the Americanness of Washington—his blessed ordinariness in a land of ordinary people. Despite a certain grudging perfectionism, John Adams was right when he told a correspondent in 1785, after Washington had gone back to private life:

Instead of adoring a Washington, mankind should applaud the nation which educated him. . . . I glory in the character of a Washington, because I know him to be only an exemplification of the American character. . . . In the days of Pompey, Washington would have been a Cæsar; his officers and partisans would have stimulated him to it; he could not have had their confidence without it; in the times of Charles, a Cromwell; in the days of Philip the second, a prince of Orange, and would have wished to be Count of Holland. But in America he could have no other ambition than that of retiring. In wiser and more virtuous times he would not have had that, for that is an ambition. He would still

be content to be Governor of Virginia, President of Congress, a member of a Senate, or a House of Representatives. . . .

He was right, that is, in removing Washington from the timeless pantheon of demigods and relating him to his own age and background. This is the trend, expressed with a good deal of confidence and sophistication, of present-day American commentaries. Adams was never able to suppress his disdain for Washington's mental equipment ("That Washington was not a scholar is certain. That he was too illiterate, unlearned, unread for his station and reputation is equally past dispute"). Modern American commentators have fewer difficulties in coming to grips with the facts of American popular culture—a culture in which the scholar and the public man are usually poles apart. Thus Louis Hartz in his interesting new book, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, argues that we do not think "in terms of Washington's self-abnegation with respect to monarchy and dictatorship or in terms of a lucky Providence which saved America from aristocracy. Madison explained the first issue when he said that the country would not stand for autocratic rule, and John Dickinson explained the second when he said that you could not manufacture an aristocracy overnight."

THIS is to cut Washington down to life-size. There may be a danger, though, of proffering something that is not much more than a cut-out—a 20th century one in place of the tired 19th century one. Washington's world was very different from what Edward Shils has called the "populistic" present-day America, with its blatantly tender regard for the general will. As a corrective to the latest correct view there is still something to be said for the familiar, distorted, outmoded notion of Washington as a stiff and strong-willed man, capable on occasion of going against popular opinion. In the old myth he at least prayed in private, and his bowel movements were his own affair.

If we can only keep in mind all the various views of Washington, from antique to contemporary-modern, he can still serve for some generalisations about the nature of the hero-leader in America. Whether or not the pattern could have been different (if, say, his personality had been otherwise, or if some other man had been the first president),

Washington helped to set it: to establish the nature of the president as somewhere between monarch, prime minister, and common denominator, both transcendent and typical, both timeless Delphic oracle and target for ferocious abuse (we find a poet like Philip Freneau treating Washington in both ways). It is a strange, accidental, vulgar-lofty conception, at the heart of the American mystery. It calls for a degree of solemnity (which Mr. Adlai Stevenson is accused of not possessing), and it invites scurrility. During his administration (Washington was no exception) the American president is expected to reveal miraculous qualities (the ritual of choosing him recalls the Tibetan search for a Dalai Lama—some divine child with the precise holy markings). Yet he is left peculiarly vulnerable. Everything is expected of him and nothing is given to him: no titles, houses, decorations. John Adams's petulant remarks on Washington are significant here. It is vain of Washington, he maintains, to have served without pay, and vain to retire from the service of the state; the proper course would have been to carry on like some celestial work-horse. The rewards of such virtue are honorific and largely posthumous.

We are accustomed to think of the American outlook as pragmatic and down-to-earth. So it is, in part; but in comparison with the dense, shrewd, worldly British texture it seems surprisingly thin, diffuse, and heroic. It has no solid chronology; past and future merge, abstractedly, without continuance. The State in America is weak in many ways; devotion to it is not a common American habit; yet—with its presidents at any rate—the State tends to swallow its servants. All this is no doubt less true of some of his successors than of Washington; but how striking it is in his own life. He labours over the years to construct the Mount Vernon that the tourists recognise today. But he works on worn-out soil, the imported shrubs die, America moves away to the west. He has no direct heirs, and if he had, Mount Vernon would have impoverished them. It could only become a ruin or a shrine. There is little permanence for persons or places, only for texts and metaphors. And here we are back with the cherry-tree, Cincinnatus at the plough, the impossible chunks of ice in the Delaware, the imaginary Indian chief at the Monongahela who declared that no mortal bullet could kill George Washington.

Lot's Son

Four in his arms we sleep, Lot lies awake
 All night, he does not let me lie awake
 Or cut my own meat. All night
 Through my ribs I feel his body's heat.
 He will not let me drink from a bright cup
 (Unless he wash it), or climb high up.
 His game: he points his finger at my eye
 Saying, "You are crying," until I cry,
 To make me a man. Rope he holds me taut,
 He knots, undoes the knots, I am caught
 Round myself. A knot ties mother to son
 Not father to daughter; all rope, but Lot,
 Lot who tied us together is undone.

Stanley Moss