

Book Reviews

First First Ladies, 1789-1865. A Study of the Wives of the Early Presidents. By Mary Ormsbee Whitton. (New York, Hastings House, 1948, pp. x, 341. Illustrations, appendix, bibliography, and portrait of Martha Washington frontispiece. \$5.00.)

It was a fine idea for this book to parade the women themselves whose presidential gowns in the Smithsonian Institution at Washington are such a center of attraction to the visitors at that museum. Sixteen women were selected for the procession. It moves along with Martha Washington at its head and Mary Lincoln at the end. But as every parade has some design, even a Coxey army, so this one has its director. Mary Ormsbee Whitton is both director and interpreter of the ladies who pass in review. Unfortunately in many cases she has only fragmentary knowledge for some of her interpretations and in other cases she heavily loads them with feminist clichés, thus attempting to speak in the place of many ladies herself instead of letting their biographies as she recites them speak for themselves.

The purpose of this procession, according to the author, is to "represent a neglected area in the history of American women . . . before the material itself should be scattered irretrievably in the mists of time [p. 313]." Why these women's gowns hang together, with their wearers so evanescent, is a question which comes to the mind of this commentator in the grandstand. Anyway in cultivating a neglected area of any kind in any history, the cultivator in that "field" may be subject to an inquisition. If it is applied to Martha Washington's and Abigail Adams' personalities, to start with, a first question may well be this: "Did you read carefully *New Letters* of Abigail Adams published while you were working on these two wives of our presidents?" If the answer is "No," then the verdict might be stern: "Having failed to read what Abigail said about Martha during their close association at Philadelphia, the second capital of the nation, and before that in New York, the first capital, your interpretation of Martha Washington is too fragmentary, and that's just too bad." As for Abigail, these new letters reveal her as so bloodthirsty during the X Y Z affair that she longed to have the United States go to war instantly against

the French for the insult to American envoys, despite the vital aid rendered to the American Revolution by the French. She is introduced here as "teller of a New England love story." She told her story of hate, if not for publication, in unmistakable language.

Yet as biographer of these ladies this writer has magnetic pages of narrative revealing the courage, the problems which called for it, the initiative, the marital loyalty, and the kinds of dignity which characterized woman after woman in this parade. One of the most appealing to this spectator of their procession is Louisa Adams, wife of John Quincy Adams. Having had an exceedingly dangerous experience in Europe during the last armed act in the Napoleonic war, and expecting revolutionary changes to recur, she established for herself a line of conduct—quiet adaptability though not Buddhistic. This reflective characteristic and firm trait gives distinction to her portrait as this viewer sees it.

Running through nearly every interpretation by the designer of this parade, however, is her diapason of the feminist credo that these were underprivileged women. Mrs. Monroe for instance is "not permitted to speak for herself," despite her bold action in Paris when she had faced the prison officials to call upon Mme. La Fayette awaiting there her summons to the guillotine—a deed which, crowning President Monroe's valiant efforts to liberate the wife of the French devotee of America, saved the great French woman from having her head cut off in the reign of terror. With the feminist interjections of such sorts goes the associated credo of the "gentle" tradition, a literary device for a fresh theme having in reality little substance but highly pleasing to readers themselves enjoying new literary themes.

When all is said that can be said by an inquisition, the verdict of the disagreeable tyrant who raises questions is this: there is power in many of these biographies and facts which every American should know who cares about American history and women in it who helped to make it importantly.

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Pursuit of the Horizon: A Life of George Catlin, Painter and Recorder of the American Indian. By Loyd Habery.
(New York, The Macmillan Company, 1948, pp. xiii,