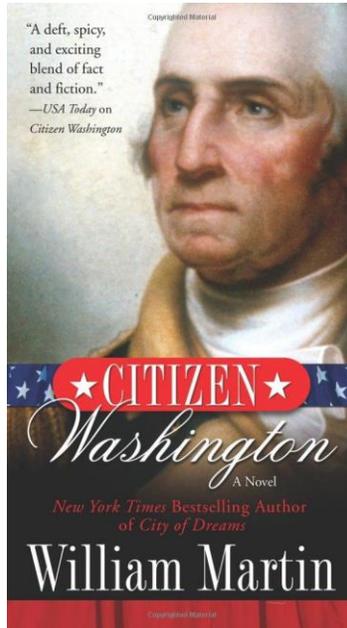


BOOKS IN REVIEW



Citizen Washington

by William Martin

Forge Books

784 pages

Review by Joe Wagner

Often, the most difficult part of reading the biography of a famous person is trying to get behind the history, behind the facts and legend, and get to the “real person”. We want to know the person the way we know someone working in the office, or someone we meet in our hobby. We’d like to know if that “hero” really was intelligent, or an oaf. We’d like to know if he had integrity and respect for other people, or was a loudmouth show-off who used people to get himself advanced. Finding the real person is always tough, and gets really impossible when the subject is our leading icon – George Washington. But if you want to get really close – to feel you are looking at a real person, to see why he does what he does, and what kind of human being used the events of our revolution to become its champion – you should read this book.

The author’s “trick” is similar to the technique used in “The Killer Angels” and other historical literary efforts. You bring historical figures to life by putting reasonable and relevant words in their mouth – things they might have said or actually did say, and have them talk their way through the historical events with their contemporaries. But Mr. Martin adds another twist. Rather than hear from Washington in the first person, we listen to people who knew him throughout his life via first person “interviews” conducted shortly after his death in 1799. The interviews include everyone from Mt. Vernon slaves to Lafayette and Sally Fairfax. These “interviews” provide the feel of a real person being observed by contemporaries as we travel through his life.

Not only does the technique work really well, but the narrative really puts you on the scene and in the action, as Washington would have participated in it. For example, the following are excerpts from an interview with the fictitious Colonel Hesperus Draper of the Virginia line, an aide to General Charles Lee, describing the scene at Monmouth Courthouse. If you've wondered what it was like that hot June day - the meeting between Washington and Lee and the fight to save the army from defeat - this book comes closest to putting you there.

Excerpt from the interview of Hesperus Draper:

"We were ridin' through a cornfield, Lee was sayin' 'I was against this maneuver all along, Draper. And once more my military prophecy proved correct.'

'Twas then that I saw somethin' risin' from the ravine ahead . . . 'Twas a cloud-white horse bearin' the biggest, maddest, reddest-faced Washington I'd ever seen.

Lee reined up and started to say somethin', like 'Ah, good mornin' - - '

And Washington boomed, 'My God, General Lee, what are you doing?

'Sir, Sir?', Lee pretended he didn't hear him, or didn't understand.

'What is the reason for this disorder and confusion?'

'Reason sir? Why . . . why, there are reasons aplenty, and they are obvious.'

'They're not obvious to me, sir!'

'Why . . . why' - Lee seemed shocked, but he rallied his wits better than he'd rallied his men - 'contradictory intelligence, sir, officers abandoning favorable positions, and you know right well what I've thought of this operation from the beginning.'

And Washington just blew. 'God damn you, sir! Whatever your opinions are, I expected my orders to be obeyed. The British at Monmouth are no more than a covering party!'

He was wrong about that. But not about anything else. He gave Lee a few more God damns while I backed my horse up a bit, tryin' to get clear of his temper.

'Sir,' Lee said when he could force a word in, 'these troops are not able to meet British Grenadiers.'

'You haven't tried them, sir!' thundered Washington. 'They can and by God, they will.'

'Then . . . then I must protest - '

'No, you will not protest, you son of a - ' Washington caught himself. 'You're a damned ignorant poltroon, sir. Nothin' more.'

He looked at Lee and me as if we were both useless. Then he kicked his horse into the mass of men retreating through the corn.

Later in the same interview, Colonel Draper describes the actions of the Virginia Line in responding to Washington's presence, and stopping the retreat.

Still, Washington had no choice but to leave Lee in command. He galloped back to the main body, leaving that presumptuous little Hamilton with us. He started urgin' Lee to put more units along the hedged fence just behind us. Varnum's unit had gone in on the left, and Hamilton wanted Colonel Livingston's brigade sent to the right. Henry Knox

had put two field pieces on a little hillock behind the fence, two more on the sloping' ground in front of it.

Lee opened his mouth with the look of a pompous argument, but fell back with 'Very well sir, order Livingston to the fence.'

Knox's cannon started barkin', but at six hundred yards, they did damn little damage to those fine British lines.

Soon, the British advance carries to the fence line.

'By then, our line stretched four hundred yards along the fence on the hill. Charles Lee had gotten ahold of himself and was riding back and forth shouting orders. Hamilton was ridin' everywhere Lee wasn't. Henry Knox was huffin' and puffin' and hollerin' to his cannoneers on the hillock behind us, and I was on a horse, tryin' to steady our lads on the far right of our line.

'Wayne's lads were streamin' out of the woods, rushin' down the ravine, then up toward the safety of our hedged fence. The dragoons who'd flushed them had those boys right where mounted troops always want infantry – out in the open and on the run. They sabered the stragglers and ran down those who turned to fight. And they used our boys like a moving' shield, ridin' right in amonst them, right up to the fence line. 'Tis a basic truth of warfare – dragoons are death on infantry flanked in line.

'... Guards and Grenadiers were pourin' out of the point of woods too. Down into the ravine, past the spring and up the rise they came, screamin', ragin', some droppin' from the heat, but none of them worried about musketballs or cannonballs or Yankee courage.

'... I spied a British officer, ridin' over towards us. 'Twas General Clinton, screamin' clear as a bell, 'Charge, Grenadiers! Charge! Never heed forming!

But heed our muskets I thought, when Livingston shouted 'Present' and our men rammed their pieces through the hedge. Every man stood his ground, even though we were outnumbered three or four to one. It made me proud.

'Then Knox screamed 'Fire!' And the two cannon on the hillock behind me sprayed grapeshot at the red wall in front. An instant later, Livingston screamed 'Fire!'

'Out in front of our lines, in the sulfurous, chokin' smoke, men's arms flew out or grabbed their guts. Hats and muskets went whirligiggin'. But they kept comin', kept roarin'. 'Twas fury they were showin'.

'Then we saw the dragoons had flanked us on our right. They'd found the end of the hedgerow, and now they were poundin' hard toward our flank.

'Henry Knox was already pullin' his guns off the knoll, gallopin' them across the field toward the West Ravine bridge. Twasn't cowardice. 'Twas war. You saved the artillery – at all costs.

'Charles Lee screamed for a retreat, and this time he was right. The drums took up the tattoo, but do you know those boys along that hedgerow tried to stand and fight, fight hand to hand? The platoon commanders had to call them out, and they fell back by companies, keepin' up a steady covering fire. Nobody panicked. Nobody threw away their weapon

Things sure had changed since Kip's Bay.'

This is the kind of biography that both tells a compelling story and also that will get your heart pounding.