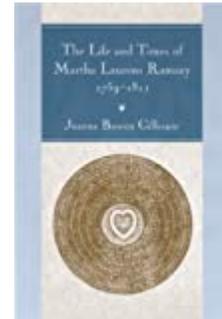




**Joanna Bowen Gillespie.** *The Life and Times of Martha Laurens Ramsay, 1759-1811.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001. xxviii + 315 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-373-5.



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## Following One Woman's Spiritual Odyssey to a Deeper Understanding of Colonial America

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The critical examination of the lives of colonial American women, even those who left written records, is often dictated by the public persona of male family members and the patriarchal shadow under which colonial women lived. Martha Laurens Ramsay might easily be seen as strictly auxiliary to prominent men—a woman who led a privileged but unremarkable life. However, in the hands of Joanna Bowen Gillespie, Martha Laurens Ramsay's world, duties, pleasures, and psyche come vividly alive. The author probes the daily challenges of this well-educated, elite, southern woman (especially those challenges masked by silence in the historical record), analyzes them from multiple angles, and gives them form and voice.

Martha Laurens Ramsay keenly felt obligated to live up to her family heritage. The Laurenses had come to Charleston as Huguenot merchants and had risen to prominence in the city. Martha's father, Henry Laurens, became a leading merchant and importer (including a large traffic in slaves) and served as a vestryman at St.

Philip's Episcopal Church. Fellow colonists elected him to the Continental Congress, where he served as president. On a diplomatic mission to England during the American Revolution, he was captured and imprisoned.

Martha Laurens Ramsay's life differs substantially from what one might expect about the daughter of a prominent South Carolina planter and Revolutionary patriot. Following her mother's death in 1770, young Martha was sent to live with her uncle, James Laurens, and she assumed the responsibility of "kin-keeping" for the Laurens clan, including adopting a cousin. Martha moved with her uncle and his family to England in 1775, and when the politics became too difficult there, to France. Thus, her letters reflect little of the Revolution, the political struggles of the young nation, or the debate over the Constitution. Returning to Charleston, Martha married a prominent physician, David Ramsay, who also authored the first history of South Carolina in the Revolution. Although using works by and about David Ramsay to augment her narrative, Gillespie successfully keeps his life from overshadowing his wife's.

"Those thirsting for women's history in Martha's spe-

cific record,” writes historian Gillespie, “must follow a path that is introspective and biographical, a trajectory only rarely turned outward to comment on events of the ‘real world’” (p. 17). The journal that forms the basis of Martha’s writings was principally the record of a spiritual odyssey. Only by using other sources to recreate Ramsay’s activities, friendships, duties, and interests can Gillespie reconstruct the world and its meaning for this enigmatic colonial woman. Although the biography follows a rough chronology, Gillespie organizes her material thematically, using the influence of family, piety, and theology; perceptions of wifely duties; republican motherhood; slavery; and Martha’s personal depression as the chief organizing categories. For example, although we know that multiple pregnancies are central to any eighteenth-century married woman’s life, Martha’s feelings about them (twelve children, of whom three died in infancy) are not explored as part of a chronological unfolding of her life, but rather are discussed in the final chapter, entitled “Discontented in Nothing but Her Heart” (a phrase from Ramsay’s diary).

Gillespie dissects everything her subject wrote, including family letters written to or about Ramsay and her private religious journal. In addition, Gillespie pursues extended contextualizations for every project and event in Ramsay’s life. Gillespie is a meticulous researcher in the primary documents of her subject’s life, the physical and geographical world that Martha inhabited (whether London, rural France, or Charleston), and the ideas that circumscribed her world. Gillespie’s close engagement with Martha Ramsay’s psychological-religious state results from her thorough understanding of the terrain of the inner life and her ability to make sense of eighteenth-century Anglican spirituality. Gillespie seamlessly weaves Martha’s ever-present pietistic world view with the demands of Republican motherhood and the financial worries brought on by David Ramsay’s limited income and ill-advised investments. Shadowing all of Martha Ramsay’s life is her constant struggle to live up to a Christian ideal, one that she herself penned at the age of thirteen after reading the devotional works of the Reverend Philip Doddridge. Her six-page “covenant with God,” written in the naivete and enthusiasm of her teenage years, became the standard by which she judged her behavior and piety for the rest of her life. In seeking to understand the many issues about which Ramsay is silent, Gillespie relentlessly probes her subject’s mental and emotional state. She concludes that Martha struggled with an “outsize devotion to her father and to the Laurens family name” (p. 130). For example, her first four

children bore “Henry Laurens” as their middle names, but following her father’s death, she never named another child after him. Gillespie devotes an entire chapter to Martha’s thirty-sixth year, a time when she was almost incapacitated by extreme lethargy, soul searching, and angst. Martha never references the event that plunged her into such despair, referring to it only as “tumult of my thoughts” (p. 192), “sins, over which I hoped to gain some power” (p. 198), and the “worst year of life” (p. 190). Although Gillespie explores numerous worries and disappointments that occurred that year or shortly before it, she leaves her readers to presume that Martha’s silence was, in effect, the universal expression of frustration that women experienced in a patriarchal society.

Two circumstances make Gillespie’s task particularly difficult. Martha Ramsay kept her journaling secret from her family until her dying days. It was, says Gillespie, “a secret closet in which she could unburden her soul” (p. 226). Ramsay’s grieving husband edited the journal’s contents almost immediately upon her death, combined the diary with letters sent to her sons at college, and published the compilation in 1811 as *Memoirs of the Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay*. Gillespie argues that David Ramsay justified publishing Martha’s work because “her language of submission exemplified his understanding of republican as well as wifely—and, of course, religious—virtue” (p. 112). He also, frankly, needed additional income, having been sued by his brother-in-law for outstanding debts. The publication of Martha Laurens Ramsay’s spiritual diary could transform “Martha into a religious icon for the new nation’s women; [it] was also perfect republicanism” (p. 235). Since the original diary no longer exists, any biographer of Martha Laurens Ramsay is faced with problematic primary evidence.

Another difficulty for the biographer is Martha’s silence on slavery and the dozens of bond servants whose lives touched hers at every turn. As one who searched every fiber of her soul for evidence of true piety for almost forty years, Martha is uncharacteristically silent on this topic, and it clearly troubles her biographer. Gillespie devotes an entire chapter to “Slavery and Silence,” delving into the Laurens family’s various experiences as slaveholders, Martha’s brother’s disavowal of the system, and David Ramsay’s electoral defeat because of his anti-slavery stance. Writing about what *isn’t* in the primary material poses particular hurdles for any biographer. I was reminded of Edith Gelles’s struggle to describe the mastectomy of Abigail Adams’ daughter, and its impact on both women, without evidence from the subjects themselves.[1] John Demos faced similar lacu-

nae when reconstructing the story of Eunice Williams, who was captured in a raid on Deerfield, Massachusetts, in 1703 and adopted into a Native American family. In response to family pleadings that she return to her Puritan village, she responded with a mere two words, the only historical record of her own voice: "Maybe not." Yet Demos used the voices of others and thorough research into their cultures to write through the silences.[2] Joanna Gillespie faced a similar difficulty in constructing Martha Laurens Ramsay's thoughts on the slave system that surrounded her daily. In the end, Gillespie can only conclude that "the scope of silence about slavery in the *Memoirs* and in most public print in her times was its own testimony to the existential ambiguity in which she and her society had to exist" (p. 157).

*The Life and Times of Martha Laurens Ramsay* is not typical women's history, even for colonial America. It is grounded in almost no news-worthy events, although its subject lived through perhaps the most dramatic and radical period in American history. One finds here lit-

tle of women's daily routine, whether domestic or social, and little on childbirth, but detailed attention to the ideals of republicanism. This thought-provoking biography is as much a study of the intellectual and cultural life of Anglican Charleston as it is a spiritual and psychological tour-de-force of its subject's life.

#### Notes

[1]. Edith B. Gelles, *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

[2]. John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (NY: Knopf, 1994).

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