



PROJECT MUSE®

George Washington: A Biographical Companion (review)

John Buchanan

The Journal of Military History, Volume 67, Number 1, January 2003, pp. 231-232 (Review)

Published by Society for Military History

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2003.0010>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40436>

occupational and marriage patterns is particularly interesting and will be appreciated by social and military historians alike. The many anecdotal stories involving individual free colored militiamen mentioned throughout Vinson's work, not only provide for a captivating read but also give a nuanced view of freedom and society in New Spain. While studies of Colonial Mexico conducted over the past two decades have contributed enormously in analyzing the issue of race within colonial society and in reconstructing racial demographic profiles, relatively few have used the military as a means of evaluating this issue. Vinson does draw upon previous studies by Christon Archer and Lyle McAlister concerning New Spain's colonial militias. However, his work remains unique and groundbreaking as it focuses on previously understudied free-colored militias. Historians interested in the Bourbon reforms, Colonial Mexico, or social history (and do not mind the price) should certainly add this work to their libraries.

Iris Marcia Cowher

United States Military Academy
West Point, New York

George Washington: A Biographical Companion. By Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2002. ISBN 1-57607-082-4. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xix, 436. \$55.00.

Frank E. Grizzard, Jr., senior associate editor of the *Papers of George Washington* at the University of Virginia, has put students of American history and reference book addicts in his debt. Steeped in all things Washington, Grizzard has produced, in his own words, "the first encyclopedic work devoted exclusively to Washington" (p. xv). Covering all aspects of the great Virginian's life, personal and business as well as military and political, this excellent work is based for the most part on primary sources which are listed at the end of each entry, along with "Related entries." There are also cross references throughout the work. The alphabetical table of contents enables the user to quickly narrow a search. Following the two hundred entries are twenty-nine well selected writings from Washington's papers, arranged chronologically and including the little known "Recipe for Small Beer" (1757) and the famous "Farewell Address" (1796). A chronology is included, then a very helpful section entitled "Ties that Bind," that includes eight pages of "Familial Relationships"; "Revolutionary War Military Family"; and "Principal Executive Officers during Washington's Administrations."

Unfamiliar entries will pique the reader's interest. For example, "Balloons," which relates Washington's reaction to the French balloon craze that swept Europe in 1783. Or "Conotocarious," which was the Indian name, meaning "town taker" or "devourer of villages," given to Washington in 1753 by the Seneca chief, Half-King.

For the most part, however, the entries tread familiar ground, yet Grizzard's command of primary sources and the literature is such that we learn

things we did not know and end with confidence that we are in the hands of a master of his craft and subject. And if you believe as I do that history is a literary art, despite the efforts of many to prove otherwise, you will appreciate Grizzard's mastery of brevity and clarity of expression.

The book is not a mere compilation of facts. Although giving Horatio Gates his due as an able military administrator and paying tribute to his "warm and generous" (p. 129) nature, Grizzard leaves no doubt that he had a character plagued by vanity, ambition, and susceptibility to flattery. Essays on other controversial characters, such as Benedict Arnold and Charles Lee are equally well done. Nor does Grizzard neglect Washington's shortcomings, for example, at the Battle of Brandywine, where his poor, and inexcusable, knowledge of local geography led to defeat and near disaster. Nathanael Greene is given his due, when Grizzard notes what is so often ignored, that Greene's brilliant Carolina campaign set the stage for Yorktown.

My quick examination of selected Washington biographies reveals no index entries under humor or wit, and indeed Washington is usually portrayed as stiff and reserved. Yet he had, as Grizzard takes pains to point out, a well-developed sense of humor, on at least one occasion, a contemporary reported, laughing "till the tears ran down his face" (p. 152). Under the entry "Humor" Grizzard includes several examples of Washington's wit, including his anticipation of Mark Twain by well over a century, when he wrote to his brother after the Battle of Monongahela (1755), "The report of my death was an exaggeration," and continued, "As I heard . . . a circumstantial account of my death and dying Speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting the first, and of assuring you that I have not, as yet, composed the latter" (p. 152).

Washington specialists, I am sure, will wonder why certain individuals or subjects do not merit entries in their own right, but that would be quibbling. In my opinion, Grizzard has covered the waterfront and done it admirably. Despite the stiff price, the book is a worthwhile investment for students of American history.

John Buchanan

New York, New York

Napoleon and His Collaborators: The Making of a Dictatorship. By Isser Woloch. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001. ISBN 0-393-32341-2. Index. Notes. Pp. xv, 281. \$15.95.

While many of Napoleon's military assistants are famous in their own right, his civilian political assistants are almost completely unknown. Some examples of the former include Marshals Davout, Lannes, Ney, and Masséna, who have all been the subject of numerous biographies. Isser Woloch attempts to address this imbalance by focusing on the politicians who aided Napoleon's seizure of power in the Coup of Brumaire (1799) and then helped him run the Consulate and subsequent Empire. This is not a general history text and will be difficult for the nonspecialist public to follow as it contains