

10-25-2013

Book Review of Martha Jefferson Randolph, Daughter of Monticello: Her Life and Times by Cynthia A. Kierner

Dinah Mayo-Bobee

East Tennessee State University, mayobobee@etsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etsu-works>



Part of the [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Citation Information

Mayo-Bobee, Dinah. 2013. Book Review of Martha Jefferson Randolph, Daughter of Monticello: Her Life and Times by Cynthia A. Kierner. *West Virginia History: A Journal of Regional Studies*. Vol.7(2). 124-125. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wvh.2013.0022> ISSN: 1940-5057

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETSU Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

Book Review of Martha Jefferson Randolph, Daughter of Monticello: Her Life and Times by Cynthia A. Kierner

Copyright Statement

This document was published with permission from the journal. It was originally published in the *West Virginia History: A Journal of Regional Studies*.

Martha Jefferson Randolph, Daughter of Monticello: Her Life and Times. By Cynthia A. Kierner. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. Pp. ix, 281.)

In recent years, historians have broadened our knowledge of early US history by providing glimpses into the public and personal lives of historical women. A new addition to this body of work is Cynthia A. Kierner's biography on Martha Jefferson Randolph (1772–1836). Kierner insists that Martha, Thomas Jefferson's oldest daughter, deserves a place in history, which always "looks somewhat different from the prospective of female protagonists" (8). She hopes to add Martha to an expanding pantheon of notable women in US politics and culture that includes such women as the "lionized" Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison (7).

Writing this biography was an ambitious undertaking. For one thing, it is impossible to isolate Martha from her father. Jefferson was a towering figure in politics and his daughter's life until his death in 1826. After his wife died in 1782, Jefferson oversaw Martha's education and cultural refinement. She accompanied him on diplomatic missions and lived with or in close proximity to her father for the remainder of his life. Another difficulty associated with making her the focus of a book-length study is the fragmented record of Martha's life. She married young, bore twelve children, changed residences quite often, and was a Washington hostess during her father's presidency. Her husband, Thomas Mann Randolph, was a member of Congress, a three-term governor of Virginia, and also spent long periods away from home due to illness, business, or short stints in the military. Martha had little time to chronicle her own life.

Yet, Kierner successfully transforms Martha into a luminary around which her father, husband, children, and friends can orbit. Along with reconstructing Randolph's life from first and secondhand accounts scattered in repositories from Boston to Virginia, Kierner relies on an impressive body of scholarly works to recreate the cultural, socioeconomic, and political contexts of Martha's world. The result is a nicely written, amply documented book that renders both the mundane and the exciting aspects of Randolph's life engrossing.

The most engaging sections of the book are those that deal exclusively with Martha, such as her four years at the Abbaye Royale de Panthemont, an exclusive boarding school in France. While there, Martha made friends and developed her personality independently of her father (54–57). Other fascinating accounts of Martha's life include her choices for postnatal care, decisions about her children's educations and careers, bouts with menopause, domestic violence, and the deterioration of her marriage. In her later years, Martha

emerges as a resourceful woman who demonstrates adeptness at pulling political strings to help her sons, capitalizes on her celebrity, and is able to navigate the waters of economic turmoil and financial ruin with dignity.

Kierner also explores the lives and experiences of persons loosely or sometimes unrelated to Randolph. In many cases these vignettes add texture to Martha's life, but too often she indulges in unnecessary digressions and non sequitur conclusions. For example, there is no clear link between Jefferson's affair with Maria Cosway and his daughter, nor is it clear that Martha soothed the "bruised egos" of the Britons who publically criticized Jefferson and his affair with Hemmings, despite their admiration for her (132). Kierner also avoids much-needed appraisals of Martha's "stewardship" over slaves in light of her violent whipping of a female bondswoman (253). In such instances she reaches perplexing and, with her uncritical praise of the American Colonization Society, troubling conclusions (249). While Kierner's affinity for Martha Jefferson Randolph is obvious and preferred in biographical authors, critical analysis would have enhanced the book and revealed an expected level of scholarly objectivity.

Many readers will be interested in Martha's response to reports of Jefferson's affair with Sally Hemmings. The book demonstrates that the accusations offended Martha more than her father. Yet, Kierner never questions Martha's outrage although master-slave liaisons were commonplace in her own family where the children that resulted from such unions grew up around their white half-brothers and sisters. Instead, she suggests that Federalists initiated the scandal, never mentioning that James Callender, who was recruited by Jefferson to attack his political enemies, aired the affair after he was denied an office in Jefferson's administration in return for his services (119). By portraying publication of the account as part of a partisan smear, the book mirrors attempts to question the validity of the affair by discrediting its sources.

Kierner is the first to place Martha Jefferson Randolph at the center of a historical study, and the book's shortcomings, though important, do not diminish its intrinsic value. The biography provides a close, often intimate, look at an interesting woman whose life touched upon and was affected by every important issue and historical development that affected the young nation. Kierner's scholarship and informative, palatable prose will have popular appeal, attract academics across several disciplines, and be savored by scholars for its detailed content and extensive research.

Dinah Mayo-Bobee
East Tennessee State University