

Book Review

FOUNDING MOTHERS: THE WOMEN WHO RAISED OUR NATION¹

REVIEWED BY MAJOR MARY E. CARD²

But as I got to know these women, reading their letters and their recipes (I've decided not to dress a whole head of cow, but Harry Choke Pie is delicious), I came to the conclusion that there's nothing unique about them. They did—with great hardship, courage, pluck, prayerfulness, sadness, joy, energy, and humor—what women do. They put one foot in front of the other in remarkable circumstances. They carried on. They truly are our Founding Mothers.³

I. Introduction

Despite using a wide range of historical primary sources⁴ and providing short biographies of famous and not so famous women of the fourteen-year period surrounding the Revolutionary War, Cokie Roberts fails to glorify the women who raised our nation. Instead, Ms. Roberts minimizes the contributions of these women by stating, for example, there was “nothing unique about them”⁵ and concluding the women should be praised because they “made the men behave.”⁶ Additionally, while Ms. Roberts provides a wealth of historical information, she fails to provide much analysis or meaningful insight into the lives of the women she profiles and often adds anti-feminist commentary in the form of “glib quips or superfluous recapitulations.”⁷ Ms. Roberts's thesis is that the success of the new nation was due to the efforts of the women, mostly married with children, whom she defines as the founding mothers.⁸ Yet, at the conclusion of her book, she still identifies and defines these women by their “male attachments”⁹ and offensively provides recipes.

A fair reading of this book can yield not only pride in the accomplishments of the women profiled, but also a sense of anger that these trail-blazing women are still defined by the recipes they contributed. This review will discuss the author's background and the book's organization and content; it will also analyze several of the book's weaknesses and strengths, including its modern day applicability to military families.

II. Background

Ms. Roberts graduated with a degree in political science in 1964 from prestigious Wellesley College. The mission of Wellesley College is to “provide an excellent liberal arts education for women who will make a difference in this world.”¹⁰ It can be assumed that Wellesley is a bastion for the empowerment of women and advancing feminist world views.¹¹ After graduation, Ms. Roberts, the daughter of two representatives of Congress, became a congressional journalist and public policy analyst.¹² For the last twenty years, Ms. Roberts has served as a correspondent for American Broadcasting

¹ COKIE ROBERTS, *FOUNDING MOTHERS: THE WOMEN WHO RAISED OUR NATION* (2004).

² U.S. Army. Written while assigned as a student, 53d Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³ ROBERTS, *supra* note 1, at xx (Introduction).

⁴ *Id.* at 290-348 (citing to multiple primary sources such as personal letters, pamphlets, military records, songs, poems, and recipes).

⁵ *Id.* One could interpret Ms. Roberts as saying that these women represent millions of women, famous and not so famous, who serve their country and their families everyday. The overall impression that the book leaves with the reader, however, is more along the lines of diminishing the value of these women as opposed to lauding their significant and vast achievements.

⁶ *Id.* at xvii.

⁷ Amanda Fortini, *Books In Brief: Nonfiction*, N.Y. TIMES, May 9, 2004, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/09/books/review/0509books-briefs.html?ex=1115438400&en=0dbf0af9a7c0d012&ei=5070>.

⁸ ROBERTS *supra* note 1, at 277.

⁹ *Id.* at 279.

¹⁰ See Wellesley College, Mission Statement, at <http://www.wellesley.edu/Welcome/college.html> (last visited Sept. 9, 2004).

¹¹ See generally *id.* (outlining the mission of Wellesley and describing the college as a distinguished leader in the education of women). The term “feminist” is used throughout this paper. “[A] precise, or even meaningful, definition of feminism has perplexed many lexicographers, writers both female and male, and feminists themselves.” JANE MILLS, *WOMAN WORDS: A DICTIONARY OF WORDS ABOUT WOMEN* 87 (1989). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, feminist is defined as a person who believes in political, economic, and social equality for women and in eradicating gender discrimination.

¹² See Women's Equity Resource Center, *Cokie Roberts Biography*, available at <http://www.edc.org/WomensEquity/women/roberts.htm> (last visited Sept. 11, 2004).

Corporation News and National Public Radio (NPR).¹³ She is a prolific writer and has received fifteen honorary degrees.¹⁴ Ms. Roberts has received many distinguished awards including the Edward R. Murrow Award and was the first broadcast journalist to win the Everett McKinley Dirksen Award.¹⁵ Overall, she has an impressive background and a history of profound thought and award winning analysis.

II. Organization and Content

Noting the analytical background of the author, it is disappointing that her book did not take the analysis of the founding women of our nation to a deeper level. Organizationally and stylistically, however, the book has many merits. The work is neatly organized in a chronological format beginning with the road to revolution and the time period before 1775. It then moves on to trace the contributions of women through independence, war and peace, and concludes with the drafting of the constitution and the first election. The purpose of the work as stated in the introduction and ultimately in the conclusion is that “a new nation had been fought for, on the field of battle and in the forum of free debate, and it would survive. And its success was in no small part due to the efforts of the women.”¹⁶ Ms. Roberts attempts to achieve this purpose by profiling many women including: Eliza Lucas Pinckney, Kitty Greene, Deborah Franklin, Molly Pitcher, Margaret Corbin, Mercy Otis Warren, Abigail Adams, Martha Washington, Sarah Livingston Jay, Mary White Morris, and Dolley Madison.¹⁷ To the author’s credit, many of these women are famous for the contributions they made on their own, without a nexus to their famous spouses. The author, however, gives far more pages of text to famous mothers such as Abigail Adams and Martha Washington than she does to less famous yet fearless female Soldiers and mothers such as Margaret Corbin and Molly Pitcher.¹⁸

Additionally, the author does not assume too much knowledge on the part of the reader in terms of the women profiled and does provide essential context and historical background for the reader to evaluate. The author assumes, however, that the women most deserving of note were, for the most part, married women and mothers. This is ironic as one of the few single women profiled, Eliza Pinckney, exemplified that “her legal rights were considerably greater than those of married women.”¹⁹ Ms. Roberts missed the opportunity to point out that single women had greater opportunity to trail-blaze than their married counterparts.²⁰ The primary criticism of this work is that the book is mostly short stories full of facts, but lacks much analysis, teaching points, or lessons learned.

One of the single women profiled was actually a widow, Margaret Corbin, who fought bravely as a Soldier after her husband’s death. It is unknown if the stories of single women are lost or non-existent or if the author selectively discounted any stories of a woman who was not literally, as well as figuratively, a mother. Therefore, the scope of this book is very limited and does not offer much in the way of inspiration to single women or women without children.

Finally, due to the chronological organization, it is difficult to see the major themes or issues addressed. The book contains many examples of issues that founding mothers faced and the issues that women still face today. The author’s themes, however, were buried in each of the chapters. It would have been more effective if Ms. Roberts outlined the book by topic. For example, the author could have chosen to write chapters on how women raised families alone, fought as Soldiers, endured separations, and advocated a myriad of issues through written publication. To her credit, the author relies almost exclusively on primary sources and thoroughly researched the material before writing the book. She also provides some supplementary materials in the form of sketches of the women profiled. The author also included offensive supplementary materials that completely detract from the overall message of the book. By including recipes, Ms. Roberts subtly intimidated

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ See NPR People, *Cokie Roberts, NPR Biography*, at <http://www.npr.org/about/people/bios/croberts.html> (last visited Sept. 18, 2004). The Edward R. Murrow Award is the highest honor in public radio and the Everett McKinley Dirksen Award is for outstanding coverage of Congress. *Id.*

¹⁶ ROBERTS, *supra* note 1, at 277. Ironically, the last line of the book is a quote from George Washington recognizing the contributions of the founding mothers. It is curious that the final words of a book on the founding mothers comes from a founding father. It would perhaps have been more powerful for the author to end with a female voice as opposed to using a male one to ratify her purpose.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* at 11. Ms. Roberts merely states that Ms. Pinckney had considerably greater legal rights as a single or widowed woman, but does not provide any additional explanation.

²⁰ Ms. Roberts provides a cursory view of single women and did not emphasize that at that time single women did not have as many distractions or responsibilities as their married counterparts.

that a woman's place then and perhaps now is still in the kitchen. Even worse, was the inclusion of a "cast of characters"²¹ where the author pitifully apologizes for defining "these wonderful women by their male attachments"²² and states that they are "recognizable only because of the men in their lives."²³ For example, the author states that John Adams was the "husband of Abigail Smith Adams."²⁴ The author could have, and should have, defined these women by their own achievements: Abigail Smith Adams could have been defined as the Champion of the Education of Women.²⁵ Ms. Roberts seems to say these women are founding mothers based solely on their marital relationship to the founding fathers, rather than in their own right and due to their own accomplishments.

III. Analysis

One of the major flaws of this book is that the author, while having a feminist minded education and over twenty years of analytical experience in her avowed profession, has written an anti-feminist and non-analytical book. Some may argue that the purpose of this book might not be to advance the cause of feminism, but how can it not be? When one adopts the purpose of writing on the women who built our nation, feminism must be a part of the discussion. Including recipes and defining a woman by her husband is contrary to forward feminist minded thinking.

One of the most inspirational profiles in the book is of Mercy Otis Warren.²⁶ Mercy Warren took on the most controversial issue of her time—British laws—and entered into the exclusively male dominated world of political propaganda and activism. She also kept up a "lively private correspondence with some of the great men of the era"²⁷ and became the "bard of revolutionary ideals."²⁸ She essentially provided inspiration for the war and clearly played the role of "calling men to arms."²⁹ Instead of praising this female advocate, Ms. Roberts instead writes, "[i]t would be a mistake to see Mercy Warren as some latter-day feminist; she regularly defended the 'domestic sphere' as the proper place for women. While she was plotting and propagandizing she was also pursuing the 'womanly arts.'"³⁰ Ms. Roberts explains that Mercy Warren wrote that it was possible to both "raise proper children and write profound chapters as long as you arranged your time sensibly."³¹

Ms. Roberts must not understand feminism if she thinks that a woman who balances a demanding career and takes care of her family cannot be classified as a feminist. Ms. Roberts does not define feminism, yet she still decides who is and is not a feminist. Defending the domestic sphere is about defending the rights of women to choose to engage in the activities that have traditionally been undervalued and viewed as "women's work." Feminism itself is about having the choice of focusing solely on a career, or solely on pursuing the domestic arts, or tackling both. Renowned feminist Catharine McKinnon stated that feminists stand for "an end to enforced subordination, limited options, and social powerlessness"³² and that feminists do not seek dominance over men as "it is a male notion that power means someone must dominate."³³ A feminist seeks "transformations in the terms and conditions of power itself."³⁴ Mercy Warren exercised the options available to her at the time and was a transformative woman whose power rested in the fact that she was, by choice, an activist and also a domestic artist.³⁵

²¹ See *id.* at 279-82. Some of these women include: Abigail Smith Adams, Betsy Ross, Dolley Madison, Martha Washington, and Martha Jefferson.

²² *Id.* at 279.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 12.

²⁶ *Id.* at 45-54.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* at 48.

²⁹ *Id.* at 53.

³⁰ *Id.* at 49.

³¹ *Id.*

³² CATHARINE A. MACKINNON, FEMINISM UNMODIFIED: DISCOURSES ON LIFE AND LAW 22 (1987).

³³ *Id.* at 23.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ Domestic artist is a term of art used by Ms. Roberts throughout her book, but is not defined.

Contrasting the description of Mercy Warren with that of “feminist” Judith Murray, it is difficult to understand the distinction. Judith Murray, similar to Mercy Warren, was also an accomplished and prolific writer. Ms. Murray wrote an essay on equality in 1779 and challenged that “the law acknowledged no separate act of a married woman.”³⁶ Ms. Roberts affixed the label of “feminist”³⁷ to Judith Murray. It is curious whether Ms. Roberts is of the opinion that you can only be a feminist if you write articles solely on women’s issues and do not practice the domestic arts.

Ms. Roberts neither understands feminism nor glorifies the contributions of women. Statements such as “making the men behave” and the women not being unique contribute to an underlying theme that the women only have an identity by virtue of whom they married. The cast of characters Ms. Roberts chose to write on seems to confirm this view. *Founding Mothers* seems to reinforce the Feminine Mystique³⁸ and not a modern day feminist ideal.

IV. Modern Day Applicability

Ms. Roberts’s work is not entirely without use however, and can be used to extrapolate lessons learned for one specific community, that of the military spouse. A finely woven theme throughout this book is the impact of the preparations for war and war itself on the lives of the founding mothers. During current times in our “herstory”³⁹ and our many military operations, this book is useful from the standpoint of inspiring those women and men who are left behind as their spouses engage in varied deployments. Military spouses can perhaps take comfort in reading about both the shared challenges of corresponding with deployed spouses—doubling of roles, enduring the separation of families, and making difficult choices—and also women’s impact on their military spouses.

The background and content for this book is the correspondence that took place in the form of letters between those separated due to the preparations for the Revolutionary War. In current times it is arguable that electronic forms of communication are the modern day equivalent of capturing the personal history and herstory of those impacted by war. While many spouses face the difficulty of phone and e-mail contact during deployments, the book details that one year passed between written correspondence between John and Abigail Adams.⁴⁰ The book is rather inspirational in that it shows the plight of the separated spouse and the many ways throughout the history of our nation that spouses and families have overcome periods of great trials and tribulations during war time.

The book also highlights the tremendous ways women stepped in to take care of families, finances, and estates while their husbands were away. Deborah Franklin is highlighted as one such heroine. She described herself as being forced to be both “father and mother”⁴¹ which is a role that many spouses play during times of deployment. Additionally, Abigail Adams was profiled as a woman of courage who faced childbirth alone just as many modern day military spouses do.⁴²

Separation of families is also a constant theme throughout the book and is exemplified by Abigail Adams statement regarding her husband that “in the 12 years we have been married I believe we have not lived together more than six.”⁴³ Another example provided is that of George Washington traveling to see his wife Martha so they could spend their first Christmas together in four years.⁴⁴ There is comfort in shared experiences, and many modern day spouses of military members can relate to multiple holidays spent apart.

The book also highlights the difficult choices that Revolutionary War spouses made between choosing duty to family and duty to spouse. Martha Washington is profiled as having to make a difficult choice of caring for her family at home and

³⁶ *Id.* at 252.

³⁷ *Id.* (stating in full, “Not only was Judith Murray a guest at a reception in the president’s home, but Martha Washington paid a surprise call on the feminist a few days later so they could talk some more”). Even the use of the word “feminist” in the sentence sounds awkward and critical. It would have been helpful for Ms. Roberts to define feminism especially since she made a feminist determination on two of the leading characters in her work. Yet again, the book fails to achieve the next level of analysis.

³⁸ See BETTY FRIEDMAN, *FEMININE MYSTIQUE* (1962). Essentially “feminine mystique” is a theory that states the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity and that the only way for a woman to be a true heroine is to subscribe to the “housewife” and mother track only. *Id.*

³⁹ “Herstory” is intentionally used to replace the conventional use of the word history and to symbolize that most history is in fact the story of men’s lives.

⁴⁰ ROBERTS, *supra* note 1, at 156.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 33.

⁴² *Id.* at 97.

⁴³ *Id.* at 70.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 115.

balancing her duty to her husband who was stationed elsewhere.⁴⁵ Martha chose her husband over her family in much the same way that military spouses often pick up and leave parents and siblings to follow their spouses today. The book also serves to highlight the tremendous impact of women on their military spouse and their critical roles as advisor and confidant. John Adams went so far as to articulate this view by stating “I believe the two Howes [British Generals] have not very great women for wives A smart wife would have put Howe in possession of Philadelphia a long time ago.”⁴⁶

All of these examples can serve as inspiration and a historical perspective of the common struggles that the founding mothers and current military spouses and mothers (and fathers) share. Ms. Roberts offers neither much insight into how the women survived these struggles and challenges nor what coping mechanisms they perhaps employed, but merely offers the examples of the struggle. Nonetheless, examples of commonalities and shared struggles can inspire meaningful conversations and thus the book is an important work for military spouses.

V. Conclusion

In many ways Ms. Roberts completely misses the mark on the women who made such a permanently lasting mark on our nation. Either intentionally or unintentionally Ms. Roberts does not strongly and forcefully advocate that these women were truly unique and were worthy of an identity aside from that of “wife” and literal “mother” and cook. This book will probably earn its rightful place in Revolutionary War history as a solid, albeit, cursory look at the women who helped build our nation. This book will not earn a place among forward thinking and analytical feminist theory. Finally, it can certainly be inspirational for the women and men who are serving in the roles of both father and mother while their spouses are deployed. Essentially, the truly unique founding mothers of our nation were also the founding mothers of feminism and did so much more than simply “make the men behave.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 94.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 101.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at xvii.