

FOUNDING MOTHERS: THE WOMEN WHO RAISED OUR NATION¹

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*As this book is about the women who influenced the Founding Fathers, almost all of them are recognizable only because of the men in their lives.*³

I. Introduction

While many authors have attempted to persuade their readers that women should be given some credit for significant historical events in our nation's history, none have failed quite so miserably as Cokie Roberts. Though perhaps unintentionally, Roberts could not have stated the inescapable theme of this book any more succinctly than in the above quotation. In her book, the author suggests that Benjamin Franklin would have been a failure but for the wife from whom he was estranged for ten years⁴ and that Mercy Otis Warren almost single-handedly spawned the American Revolution after (amazingly) predicting it.⁵ The cites Roberts provides for her research are often cryptic and unhelpful in providing readers with the ability to decide for themselves whether her facts are accurate and her conclusions warranted (*e.g.*, she does not provide pinpoint cites).⁶ Indeed, Roberts takes her agenda to an extreme in this book, forcing significance upon every minute event that occurred in the lives of the women she wrote about. Her writing style is agonizing for the reader, as she inserts editorial comments after each set of facts asserted, rather than allowing the reader to come to his own conclusions based on the information presented.

Rather than choosing women from the Revolutionary time period whose accomplishments stood on their own, the author chose women whose husbands or sons were famous in an attempt to reconcile her chosen subject with her thesis. For example, why choose Deborah Franklin, Benjamin's wife, over her sister, Ann Smith Franklin, who ran a commercial printing business and, for a period of five years, wrote a series of almanacs printed by her business?⁷ "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."⁸ If, as the author posits, women had a significant role in founding this nation, why address only those who hold the status of wife or mother rather than demonstrating the women's status as revolutionaries? Why not establish that some of these women, and many others left unmentioned, were "Founding Mothers" regardless of their domestic circumstances? Certainly, it does not appear that the "Founding Fathers" were defined as such due to the fortune of being married to or borne by the right person.

II. Analysis

The author breaks the book into chronological chapters with no other apparent organization. Within each chapter, Roberts covers several women whom, she believes, are somehow significant. This significance, however, is not always clear, other than their role as wives, mothers, sisters, or daughters of great men. The book's opening quote could not establish this more succinctly. The fact that many of these women were part of the elite class and had a coterie of slaves and servants to help them accomplish their tasks detracts from many of their accomplishments from a modern standpoint. Regardless, several women are worth mentioning, either for their distinguished, unsung accomplishments or for their apparent lack thereof, despite the praises of the author. Unfortunately, many passages are worth noting simply for the infuriating, informal editorial comments of the author.

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

² 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 279.

⁴ *See id.* at 36.

⁵ *See id.* at 53, 59-60.

⁶ *See id.* at 289-348; *see, e.g.*, JOSEPH J. ELLIS, *FOUNDING BROTHERS: THE REVOLUTIONARY GENERATION* (2000) (providing an excellent example of a properly cited, well supported text).

⁷ COLUMBIA ENCYCLOPEDIA (6th ed. 2004), available at <http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/f/franklina1.asp>.

⁸ ROBERTS, *supra* note 1, at 277.

Eliza Lucas Pinckney

When you hear of a family with two brothers who fought heroically in the Revolutionary War, served their state in high office, and emerged as key figures in the new American nation, don't you immediately think, "They must have had a remarkable mother?" And so Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and Thomas Pinckney did. Today Eliza Lucas Pinckney would be the subject of talk-show gabfests and made-for-TV movies, a child prodigy turned into a celebrity. In the eighteenth century she was seen as just a considerate young woman performing her duty, with maybe a bit too much brain power for her own good.⁹

Thus begins the author's own "gabfest." She sets the overly familiar, often condescending tone from the beginning and never deviates from it. This proves to be incredibly distracting. While the facts she chooses to address could make a compelling argument that some of these women led interesting lives and were leaders in some sense, the ubiquitous tone repeatedly sours the delivery. Indeed, many passages are worthy of reading aloud, but only for the purpose of marveling at the outrageous colloquialisms and inciting a sense of general outrage from the listener.

Despite the delivery, the author established that Eliza Lucas was remarkable in that, at the age of sixteen, she took over the running of her father's three plantations in South Carolina. At the time, her father was off at war in Antigua, her mother was ill, and her brothers were attending school in England.¹⁰ Roberts writes, "Can you imagine a sixteen-year-old girl today being handed those responsibilities?"¹¹ When Eliza's father attempted to join her in marriage to various wealthy gentlemen, she gracefully declined.¹² "[T]he feisty Miss Lucas was, despite the workload, having too much fun to settle down with some *rich old coot*."¹³ Eventually, Eliza successfully created a cash crop out of indigo and silk.¹⁴ An "old biddy in the neighborhood,"¹⁵ however, became concerned that Eliza would never marry. "Some things never change—these older women worrying that the younger ones might be too serious for a man have been around forever."¹⁶ The "old biddy" need not have worried—Eliza married Charles Pinckney and became pregnant quickly thereafter. This, apparently, is the author's measure of success because she gave birth to Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and Thomas Pinckney—"[k]ey players in the move to independence."¹⁷

Esther Edwards Burr

In contrast to Eliza Pinckney's success as a mother, the next founding mother addressed by Roberts is Esther Edwards Burr, mother of Aaron Burr.¹⁸ Although Esther died when Aaron was two,¹⁹ and despite her son's notorious prosecution for treason, Roberts believes she deserves recognition and admiration as his mother.²⁰ A depressed woman and the wife of minister Aaron Burr,²¹ she left evidence of her life in the form of "a series of letters to her friend, Sarah Prince."²² In an

⁹ ROBERTS, *supra* note 1, at 1.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 2.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 3.

¹³ *Id.* (emphasis added).

¹⁴ *Id.* at 5-7.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 4.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *See id.* at 6-11.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 15.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 16.

²⁰ THOMAS FLEMING, DUEL: ALEXANDER HAMILTON, AARON BURR AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICA 389-93 (1999).

²¹ ROBERTS, *supra* note 1, at 17-18.

²² *Id.* at 16.

apparent attempt to lend more substance to the “gossipy writings”²³ Roberts characterizes the letters as a “journal.”²⁴ In the last journal entry before her death, Esther wrote about Aaron and his sister Sally:

Aaron is a little dirty noisy boy, very different from Sally almost in every thing. He begins to talk a little, is very sly and mischievous. He has more sprightliness than Sally and most say he is handsomer, but not so good-tempered. He is very resolute and requires a good governor to bring him to terms.²⁵

How this prescient observation makes Aaron’s mother a colonial woman who sufficiently distinguishes herself from others to deserve recognition is not apparent.

Deborah Read Franklin

Benjamin Franklin has come down in history not only as a scientist and statesman but as something of a rogue, a fellow with more than just an eye for the ladies. Much has been made of his relationships with women—a serious scholarly symposium exhaustively explored what Franklin thought of women in general, women in America, women in Europe, women friends, women family members. There’s a question left out of all of these studious inquiries: What about the women? What did they think?²⁶

In discussing Deborah Read Franklin, Roberts focuses on Benjamin Franklin’s indiscretions, giving passing mention to his many accomplishments. Franklin met Deborah Read and asked her to marry him when he was seventeen.²⁷ The wedding, however, did not take place as scheduled because Franklin went to England and “soon forgot about the teenager in Philadelphia when there was a whole new continent to conquer.”²⁸ Deborah’s mother arranged a marriage for her to another man, who eventually spent all of their money and went to the West Indies, where he is believed to have died.²⁹ When Franklin returned from England, Deborah was technically a married woman because her husband’s death was never confirmed.³⁰ Deborah and her mother, however, moved into a house with Franklin and his illegitimate son.³¹

Roberts posits that after Franklin “took to wife”³² Deborah, she “so greatly enhanced his prosperity that soon he paid off his debts.”³³ The author never explains or supports this premise. As Franklin rose in prominence, he spent more and more time in England taking on the “English equivalents of Deborah and Sally”³⁴ in London. A friend of Franklin’s in England wrote to Deborah warning her of Franklin’s indiscretions and advising her to go to London.³⁵ “Can you imagine? Now Deborah had to add *foxy females* to her list of worries.”³⁶

²³ *See id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 24.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.* at 25.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.* at 26.

³² *Id.* at 25.

³³ *Id.* at 26.

³⁴ *Id.* at 29. Deborah gave birth to Sally several years after “marrying” Franklin. *Id.* at 27.

³⁵ *Id.* at 29.

³⁶ *Id.* at 29 (emphasis added).

In 1765, Franklin left for London to take another assembly position and, after a ten year absence, Deborah passed away.³⁷ The author never explains how Deborah was the key to Franklin's success, yet gives her credit for his accomplishments throughout.³⁸

III. The Thesis and Its Modern Application

While Roberts's intent in writing this book may be honorable, her method of delivery fails. In attempting to distinguish these women as individuals and worthy of recognition, she only succeeded in pointing out that the sole thing they have in common is the men with whom they are associated. The author's aim of bringing more recognition to women's accomplishments would have been better served if she had chosen one or two of the truly remarkable women and covered their lives in more depth. She could have developed their upbringings, backgrounds, and their specific accomplishments, many of which would be considered substantial even by modern standards.

IV. Conclusion

This is a book which, "once you put it down, you can't pick it up."³⁹ Let the *Mothers* founder.⁴⁰

³⁷ *Id.* at 36.

³⁸ *Id.* at 26-29, 32-36. *But cf.* 9 ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA 806 (1973) ("Deborah Franklin, although a good manager of her husband's affairs and devoted to her family, was far from his equal in intelligence or adaptability to social situations.").

³⁹ Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) H. Wayne Elliott, *Pass In Review: A Book Reviewer's View of Book Reviewing* 6 (undated) (unpublished manuscript, on file with the Director, Professional Writing Program, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia).

⁴⁰ *See generally id.* (stating that "if reading the book was as big a challenge as writing it must have been, there is no reason not to warn the unwary."). *See also* Posting of Jimmy Frank West to Amazon.com Book Reviews, *For In Style Readers Who've Yet to Graduate to People Mag* (June 23, 2004), at http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/cm/member-glance/-/A3ER2NZ4O83ONY/1/ref=cm_cr_auth/102-4886613-6356957?%5Fencoding=UTF8 ("Trudging through page after page of facts from other books (usually better written ones), I kept attempting to think of another writer so committed to a grace-free style.") (last visited Nov. 23, 2004).