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Review of *Lincoln on Lincoln; Franklin on Franklin;
Jefferson on Jefferson; Washington on Washington;
Adams on Adams* edited by Paul M. Zall

James E. Guba

Papers of George Washington, University of Virginia

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Autobiography by Proxy; Or, Pastiche as Prologue

James E. Guba

Paul M. Zall, ed., *Lincoln on Lincoln* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 198 pp.; *Franklin on Franklin* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 315 pp.; *Jefferson on Jefferson* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 160 pp.; *Washington on Washington* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 164 pp.; and *Adams on Adams* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 181 pp.

“*I* had rather glide gently down the stream of life, leaving it to posterity to think & say what they please of me, than by any act of mine to have vanity or ostentation attributed to me.” Thus wrote George Washington to his friend the physician James Craik on 25 March 1784, a few months after retiring to Mount Vernon upon his resignation as commander in chief of the Continental Army. Among Washington’s contemporaries, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson during their own retirements composed autobiographical fragments, blending irony and apologetics into narratives that ended with events near the midpoints of their respective lives. Eschewing memoirs and initially reluctant even to authorize a contemporary biography, Washington eventually relented. A former aide-de-camp, Col. David Humphreys, was among the first to examine the general’s meticulously preserved manuscripts that would contribute not only toward a brief sketch of Cincinnatus returned to the plough, but also toward any history of the new American nation.

Paul M. Zall, professor emeritus of English at California State University at Los Angeles and research scholar at the Huntington Library, has taken up Washington’s invitation “to posterity to think & say what they please” by completing “autobiographies” left unfinished or never written by several preeminent Americans. He is perhaps best known as one of the editors, together with J. A. Leo Lemay, of the Center for Editions of American Authors’ approved genetic text and subsequent critical edition of Franklin’s *Autobiography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981; New York: Norton, 1986). The prolific Dr. Zall has also built upon his study of early

modern English jestbooks to produce several collections of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American witticisms and humorous sketches. In a series of imaginative and entertaining volumes for the University Press of Kentucky, the editor and the anecdotalist meet.

How does one write another man's autobiography? Zall most clearly describes his method, along with his selection and transcription policies, in his first venture, *Lincoln on Lincoln*. In order to "tell a story of Abraham Lincoln's life in his own words," Zall starts with two sketches prepared by Lincoln for the 1860 presidential campaign and then interpolates "extracts from correspondence, speeches, interviews, and reliable reports" along with brief transitional passages (*Lincoln*, ix, 1-2). Interested in more than just the public career, the editor also selects documents that reveal "personality," "inner struggle," and "powerful feelings" (*ibid.*, 1, 3). Admitting that the use of excerpts with only occasional indication of omissions "weakens the integrity of Lincoln's documents," Zall defends his emendations on the basis of readability, a desire to keep the focus upon Lincoln rather than the editor, and his citations to manuscripts and printed texts (*ibid.*, 3-4, 175). The documents or their accompanying notes include the date and the name of the recipient in addition to the citation. The apparatus is enhanced by a chronology, an index listing letters received and other topics, and a brief commentary on the manuscripts, printed editions, and other significant works used. With greater or lesser detail and success, Zall employs the same approach in each of his subsequent volumes: begin with an autobiographical kernel written by his subject, supplement it with other writings, and where possible reveal the private rather than the public man.

It is no surprise that Zall's most satisfactory volume is on Benjamin Franklin, the subject of his particular expertise. *Franklin on Franklin* reveals the virtues and vices of an idiosyncratic method. The volume is not merely a new version of the *Autobiography*, which in any event ends before the final three decades of Franklin's life. With a clear statement on editorial policy, generous attribution to prior scholarship, and an elegant essay on Franklin's own layers of revision to the *Autobiography*, Zall prepares the reader for a fresh look at a deceptively familiar text and life. Employing to good use the aforementioned genetic text based upon Franklin's unique holograph, Zall as editor strips away changes to the original draft. Zall as anecdotalist boldly continues by rearranging text and interspersing excerpts from Franklin's journal and other writings in order to clarify and then complete the narrative to include his subject's death.

The immediate gains of readability and continuity arrive at a cost. Only by following every citation back to the pertinent source, most of which cover multiple pages, will a reader perceive the frequent but unannounced alterations. In the eighth chapter, for one example, some but not all consecutive journal entries are quoted, and, of those included, sentences and sometimes paragraphs are silently pared (*Franklin*, 69–78, 291; *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* [New Haven: Yale University Press], 1:72–100). There are some slight lapses in the transcription policy, as the reader is not informed that contracted words are expanded but ampersands are retained (*Franklin*, 79–80). Some notes contain minor errors in page citations, while the corresponding numbers for others are inexplicably missing entirely from the text (*ibid.*, 291nn.6 and 10; 127–29, 292nn.7 and 9). What would elsewhere be trifling oversights loom larger given the deliberate, complicated, and otherwise untraceable pattern of interweaving texts. To be fair, the volume provides no less than promised, and if the resulting work fits no modern genre, such as documentary edition or biography, its verisimilitude hearkens back to the early modern memoir.

The three subsequent reconstructed memoirs follow similar patterns. Thomas Jefferson wrote an autobiographical fragment from January to July 1821, and excerpts from this unique manuscript at the Library of Congress form the framework upon which Zall stitches epistolary patches to create his *Jefferson on Jefferson*. The transcription statement, notes, and index are severely reduced in detail from the previous volumes, leaving the casual reader with even fewer clues as to what precisely is at hand. In an account that begins with the words “At the age of 77,” it is peculiar that the date of this writing does not appear, and, aside from the book’s Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, the year of Jefferson’s birth is not mentioned. The volume *Adams on Adams*, although as lively and amusing as its predecessors, is based neither upon manuscripts nor the modern scholarly edition “[o]ut of respect for The Adams Papers’ copyrights” (*Adams*, ix). Relying instead entirely upon other printed editions, mainly from the nineteenth century with “their various styles here made uniform” (*ibid.*), the work thus falls outside the proper scope of this review. Zall’s other volume in the series, *Washington on Washington*, is the most problematic. Except for a few pages of “Remarks” primarily on the 1754–55 military campaigns that he wrote in 1787 for the benefit of his biographer, Col. David Humphreys, George Washington left no autobiographical commentary. Deprived of a ready framework analogous to those available for his previous works, Zall

nonetheless attempts to apply his same methods of selection and editing to the tens of thousands of documents that constitute Washington's diaries, speeches, and outgoing correspondence.

In the main, the selection of documents to support the chosen themes of *Washington on Washington* is unobjectionable. A curious introductory essay, abridged from Zall's earlier book *George Washington Laughing* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1989), attributes to its subject the "Socratic style" adopted by Benjamin Franklin, namely, outward humility and cultivated detachment at the expense of innate conviviality and other emotions. A late printing adjustment that shifted the front matter by two pages rather than authorial error is doubtless responsible for the incorrect index entries for this introduction. In the body of the work, the reader encounters many familiar passages: excerpts from the "Rules of Civility," early diary entries about surveying, contemporary and retrospective writing about the French and Indian War, the two surviving letters to Martha Washington from 1775, and lines from several of the more important speeches and addresses. Some less familiar diary entries on travels in the 1780s and 1790s as well as letters to younger relatives on the topics of finance and romance complement the standard portrait. Parenthetical passages serve as unobtrusive transitions from one excerpt to the next. Washington's role in the Revolutionary War and his life-long attentiveness to plantation management, however, are gravely underrepresented; the battlefield and the wheat field alike disclose a scrupulous and demanding steward of both time and resources, even more revealing of private character than an ironic aside in a diary.

Although the general content, with reservations, may be satisfactory, the volume suffers from inaccuracy among its particular components. Unlike the Lincoln and Franklin volumes, *Washington on Washington* offers little explanation of editorial policy beyond a few cryptic sentences. "Earlier drafts are preferred" of the "manuscripts at the Library of Congress" which Zall uses to tell this "story of George Washington's life in his own words" (*Washington*, xxiv). These manuscripts are not otherwise identified with greater precision. The unstated transcription policy must be deduced by comparing print against manuscript, from which it appears that the editor silently expands contracted words and replaces ampersands but lets stand peculiarities of eighteenth-century spelling, except when by design or oversight he does not. For example, within three respective documents, the word "tho" is both expanded and retained, ampersands are similarly both replaced and retained, and the contemporary misspelling "Supiness" appears, but a diph-

thong in “economy” vanishes and “of” is silently emended to “off” (*Washington*, 79, 88, 64). Because the Washington quotations may commence from anywhere within a given sentence in a document, capitalization, punctuation, and paragraph breaks are also silently modified. Setting aside lapses and inconsistencies in execution, these policies may be defensible when stated forthrightly, as in the earlier volumes.

Of more significance, however, approximately one-eighth of the document excerpts examined for the present review contained at least one transcription error in the substantives. Most of these errors involve the simple omission or substitution of single words. For example, Zall transcribes “enemy this side of the grave” for “enemy on this side of the grave” and “Having finished” for “Having now finished” (*ibid.*, 56, 72); elsewhere he transcribes “officers who were” for “officers as were” and “interest on it” for “interest of it” (*ibid.*, 58, 69). More striking are larger misreadings and omissions. In the General Orders to the Continental Army on 18 April 1783, the eve of the anniversary of the Battles of Lexington and Concord, Washington was not “endeavouring to stifle the feelings of Joy”; the passage in fact begins, “The Commander in Chief far from endeavouring to stifle the feelings of Joy . . .” (*ibid.*, 70). The opening of Washington’s well-known letter to Lafayette on 1 February 1784 announcing the return to “my own Vine & my own Fig tree” at Mount Vernon transforms from “At length my Dear Marquis I am become” into the bland “At length I am now become” (*ibid.*, 74).

This last example underscores the greater weakness of a book that is by necessity rooted in letters rather than any major autobiographical text. Again, unlike his volume on Lincoln, Zall’s *Washington* in most cases omits the date, place of composition, and recipient of each letter, and this information is not supplied in the notes. Whether this is a deliberate editorial decision or one mandated by the University Press, it reinforces the universal, abstract, and Olympian image of Washington that Zall is trying to replace. Letters sent to family members, such as siblings John Augustine Washington and Betty Washington Lewis, to intimate friends, such as Lafayette and James Craik, and to colleagues, such as Jay, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Knox, become strangely anonymous. For example, in order to learn that the aforementioned vine and fig tree letter was written to Lafayette, especially since Washington used the phrase in other contemporary letters, a reader must turn to the notes, find the reference “Pcon 1:87–88,” and then track down the nearest copy of *The Papers of George Washington: Confederation Series*, Vol. 1. This is necessary because *Washington*

on *Washington* contains no index entry for Lafayette, or for any other letter recipient as such. The loss of context greatly reduces the utility of the index and, indeed, the entire volume. Further complicating matters, approximately one-tenth of the citations list the incorrect documentary edition, volume, or page number (e.g., chapter 5, endnotes 6, 13, and 7, respectively). For some quotations there are no citations at all (e.g., GW to John Hancock, 14 July 1776, in *Washington*, 58–59, 147; *PGW: Revolutionary War Series*, 5:305–6). In basic copyediting, at least, Dr. Zall has been ill served by the University Press of Kentucky.

With his clever fabrications of autobiographies for five American statesmen, Paul M. Zall successfully restores some of the authentic energy and wit to their characters. By obscuring the context and telling these stories from the predominant vantage of his subjects' own words, he paradoxically renders them once again remote.