

**LETTER TO LORD MAHON: BEING
AN ANSWER TO HIS LETTER
ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR OF
WASHINGTON'S WRITINGS**

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Letter to Lord Mahon: Being an Answer to His Letter Addressed to the Editor of Washington's Writings by Jared Sparks

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JARED SPARKS

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TO
LORD MAHON,
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TO
HIS LETTER ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR
OF
WASHINGTON'S WRITINGS.

BY JARED SPARKS.

BOSTON:
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY.
1852.

LETTER

TO

L O R D M A H O N .

MY LORD,

I HAVE had the honor to receive from you a copy of the Letter, which you have addressed to me as a Rejoinder to my Reply to certain strictures on the manner in which I had edited Washington's Writings. In that Reply, it was my main object to explain the plan and principles upon which it was originally designed that the work should be executed, and which, as I thought, you and others had strangely overlooked or misapprehended; and also to show, that I had discharged the duties of an editor in strict conformity with that plan and those principles. While thus reviewing my past labors and vindicating my integrity of purpose, I had occasion to speak with pointed disapprobation of two or three serious

charges in a recent volume of your History, which I knew to be founded in error, and which I was wholly unable to reconcile with the courtesy and candor to be expected in a work from your pen.

It is true, my Lord, as you suggest, I had not then read that volume, and, if I had done so, it could not in any degree have modified my opinion of the passages which I had seen, and to which my remarks were confined. I did not pretend to "answer your book," nor any part of it except the brief extracts here alluded to, which are in no way affected by the general contents of the work. If I had perused the volume, most assuredly I should not have said, "a British historian might, perhaps, find something to commend in the result of my attempts"; referring to the efforts I had made, in the notes and illustrations, to correct the erroneous opinions and false impressions, which had prevailed in America concerning the motives and designs of the British Ministry and military commanders during the war. On this point, your recognition of the fact is explicit and full.

You also say, "Mr. Sparks's own share in these notes and illustrations is written, not only with much ability, but in a spirit, on most points, of candor and fairness, and the whole collection is of great historical interest and importance." I

trust that I am not insensible to your own candor and fairness in forming this estimate, nor to the liberality of the terms in which your judgment is expressed.

But the questions at issue between us are of a different character, and require to be discussed by themselves. You expressed the opinion, that I "had printed no part of Washington's correspondence precisely as he wrote it," which opinion you conceived yourself "bound not to conceal." You also charged me with making additions to the original text, and unwarrantable alterations and omissions for the sake of embellishment; leaving your readers to draw the conclusion, which, if they rested on your declarations alone, they could not but draw, that the editor was totally incompetent to the task he had undertaken.

You now withdraw the charge of making additions, unquestionably the most important, but you say, "On other points I must declare myself prepared, though with all possible respect for your observations, to adhere to and maintain the opinions I advanced." The withdrawal of the first charge might close that part of the discussion at once, if you did not still insist on your right to make it at the time, relying on authority which you then supposed to be entitled to confidence.

Let us briefly consider this claim before we proceed farther.

The case stands thus. You found in one of Washington's letters, as printed by me, the passage which here follows in italics; "but is it possible that any sensible *nation upon earth can be imposed upon by such a cobweb scheme or gauze covering?*" This passage did not appear in a copy of the same letter as printed by Mr. Reed. Whereupon you charged me, in a strain of sarcasm, (certainly unusual in your Lordship's compositions, and therefore the more to be regarded,) with having "manufactured" it for the occasion, and by way of embellishment to the original text. Having ascertained that Washington actually wrote these words, absurd as they seemed to you, and that they had been omitted in the other printed copy by some accident, you now withdraw the charge. And you add, "I will even go farther, and express my regret that, believing as I did the charge to be well founded and fully proved, I adopted a tone towards you, in one or two other passages of my History, different from that which I should have used had I thought you wholly free from this imputation." I am very ready to accept this as a fair recantation, though not so fully as I could have done, if its value were not diminished by the remarks with which it is connected.

You maintain, that, under the circumstances, you were justified in making the charge, and in throwing out insinuations not less erroneous, and scarcely less offensive. You ask, "Having found these passages, I will put it to any candid person, and will include you, Sir, in the number, whether I was to blame for the conclusion I drew from them? Had I not a right to say, that the 'cobweb schemes or gauze coverings' seemed to be of your own manufacture? Had I not a right to intimate a suspicion, in one or two other parts of my History, whether such *improvements* had not extended farther; whether the same manufactory had not been busy elsewhere?" As you put these questions to me personally, I must answer, that I can neither allow, nor conceive for a moment, that you had any such right.

What was the real ground upon which you stood? From fifteen words of suspected addition, and the supposed change of one other word, which you have since acknowledged is at least doubtful, you ventured to hazard the opinion, and to promulgate it in an authoritative manner, that I had made like additions and changes, or, in your own phrase, "manufactured" them, throughout Washington's correspondence; an editorial license, which you properly designate as "not at all short of a literary forgery." Let me ask you, in all plain-

ness, whether you had a right, upon any principles of fair criticism, to draw so broad an inference, implicating not more the literary ability and judgment of the editor than his integrity as a man, from such exceedingly narrow premises?

Every one knows how frequently errors result from accident, or through the mistakes of transcribers and printers, in publishing original manuscripts. A moderate degree of forbearance might have inclined you to suspect an error from some of these sources, and cautioned you to wait till your proofs were better established. The event has shown that this course would have been more judicious, certainly more just. I must dissent, therefore, from your claim of right to charge me with manufacturing "cobweb schemes or gauze coverings."

We may examine this claim a little farther, as applied to "one or two other places" in your History, to which you allude. In one of these, after remarking in the text, that the Declaration of Independence "excited much less notice than might have been expected," you deem it proper to add in a note, "Washington, however, in his public letter to Congress, (unless Mr. Jared Sparks has *improved* this passage,) says, that the troops had testified 'their warmest approbation.'" In another place, referring to certain passages in