

**A REPLY TO THE STRICTURES OF  
LORD MAHON AND OTHERS:  
ON THE MODE OF EDITING THE  
WRITINGS OF WASHINGTON**

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A Reply to the Strictures of Lord Mahon and Others: On the Mode of Editing the Writings of Washington by Jared Sparks

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**JARED SPARKS**

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REPLY

TO THE

STRICTURES OF LORD MAHON AND OTHERS,

ON

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WRITINGS OF WASHINGTON.

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By JARED SPARKS.

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CAMBRIDGE:  
JOHN BARTLETT,  
Bookseller to the University.  
1852.



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METCALF AND COMPANY,  
PRINTERS TO THE UNIVERSITY.

## NOTICE.

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STRICTURES on the method pursued by the editor of "Washington's Writings," in preparing that work for the press, first appeared in the New York Evening Post. Hence the following remarks, intended as a reply, were directed in the form of letters to the editors of that Journal, in which they were originally published.

## REPLY.

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### LETTER I.

ON THE GENERAL CHARGE OF TAKING AN UNWARRANTABLE  
LIBERTY IN ALTERING THE TEXT OF WASHINGTON'S  
LETTERS.

SOME time ago there appeared in your paper several communications containing comments on two or three letters in "Washington's Writings," apparently designed to show the incompetency of the editor of that work for the execution of his task, and to place his fidelity in a questionable light. Ill health at the time prevented me from taking such notice of those comments, as their character and tendency might seem to require. From a recent article in the Evening Post, I learn that Lord Mahon, in a work lately published, has repeated them, and added strictures of his own. I am constrained, therefore, to ask the attention of your readers to a few remarks touching this matter.

The charge made by the writer in the Evening Post, and adopted by Lord Mahon, is, that the



editor of "Washington's Writings," in preparing the manuscripts for the press, has taken an unwarrantable liberty with the text, altering, omitting, and adding, as might suit his caprice, and that, for the purpose of embellishment and of conforming the work to his own standard of taste, he has "tampered with the truth of history."

I deny that any part of this charge is true, in any sense which can authorize the censures bestowed by these writers, or raise a suspicion of the editor's fidelity and fairness. It would certainly be strange, if an editor should undertake to prepare for the press a collection of manuscript letters, many of them hastily written, without a thought that they would ever be published, and should not at the same time regard it as a solemn duty to correct obvious slips of the pen, occasional inaccuracies of expression, and manifest faults of grammar, which the writer himself, if he could have revised his own manuscripts, would never for a moment have allowed to appear in print.

This is all I have done in the way of altering or correcting Washington's letters. The alterations are strictly verbal or grammatical; nor am I conscious that, in this process, an historical fact, the expression of an opinion, or the meaning of a sentence, has, on any occasion, been perverted or modified. I can confidently affirm that the editorial corrections

were never designed to have such a tendency, and, if such should anywhere appear to exist, it must be accidental and of little significance. What possible motive could there be for assuming such a license? Washington's character certainly did not require to be protected by so unworthy an artifice; and least of all could the editor derive from it either fame, profit, or any other conceivable advantage.

These verbal alterations chiefly occur in the private letters, which were written in haste and not intended by the author for publication; and they make but a comparatively small portion of the work. In his official correspondence, and papers prepared for the public eye, no man was more precise and careful than Washington as to the selection of his words and the construction of his language. His private and confidential letters, like those of other men, were often negligently written in regard to these particulars. This class of letters, I thought it the duty of an editor, as an act of justice to the memory of the author, to revise with care for the press. I am still of this opinion. I executed the task according to my best discretion. I do not pretend to infallibility of judgment; probably no two persons would decide alike in all cases of this kind, some of which involve minute distinctions of no great moment in themselves; nor am I sure that I should now in every instance approve my first de-

cisions; but I feel that I have a right to claim the credit of integrity of purpose, and of having faithfully discharged the duty set before me, in strict conformity with the principles explained at large to the public in the Introduction to the first volume that was published.

But the heaviest charge is that of making *additions*. This charge is entirely without foundation. Knowing that not a single line, or fragment of a line, was intentionally *added* to the original text, throughout the whole twelve volumes of the work, I confess it was with no little surprise that I saw a passage quoted from a letter to Joseph Reed, as printed in "Washington's Writings," and declared by the writer in the Evening Post to be an invention of my own, the same not being found in what was supposed to be an exact copy of the original, printed in the "Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed." The following is the quotation.

*"The drift and design are obvious; but is it possible that any sensible nation upon earth can be imposed upon by such a cobweb scheme or gauze covering? But enough."*

In his comment on this passage the writer says; "I assure you that the credit of all the rhetoric, all the invective, all the fancy, all the logic, and all the science of the lines here given in italics, belongs exclusively to Mr. Sparks, and when he imputed