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Laura Auricchio, *The Marquis. Lafayette Reconsidered*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. xxvi + 409 pp. Map. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$ 30.00 US (cl.) ISBN 978-0-307-26755-9.

Review by William Doyle, University of Bristol.

Clearly a labour of love, this new biography of the “hero of two worlds” is very well written, interestingly illustrated, and handsomely produced. Laura Auricchio admires Lafayette. She sees clearly enough the flaws in his character, but in the end remains puzzled that he retains so little respect in the memory of his native land compared with the adulation he still evokes in America. She goes some way towards explaining it by showing how, back in France, he was caught up in events that he repeatedly misjudged. But this has been done before, at greater length and in infinitely more detail, by Louis Gottschalk and Sarah Maddox up to 1790, and in far more analytical depth for Lafayette’s whole career by Lloyd Kramer.^[1] A more interesting reconsideration would be why this shallow and vainglorious self-publicist made such an enduring impact across the Atlantic, but this the author tends to take for granted. She offers a largely traditional and admiring picture of a young idealist sailing at his own expense to help oppressed colonists achieve liberty, ingratiating himself with George Washington and participating at a number of engagements in the revolutionary war, including the final surrender of the British forces. At one point he shed his blood in the struggle, shot in the leg.

But, though not lacking in courage in the field, the jumped-up general won no battles, and the main achievement of his one brief command was a successful retreat. Did he really come infused with the fire of liberty, or because he had no foreseeable future in the French army? Was he more interested in fighting against the British who had killed his father than for the rebellious colonists? After all, at the height of the struggle he abandoned them, heading back to France in the hope of joining an invasion of the British Isles, only returning when that prospect faded. He resented the fact that Rochambeau, a senior officer of wide experience, was put in command of the decisive French expeditionary force, rather than himself. Later in France (something Auricchio does not mention) he sought to pre-empt Rochambeau in introducing the order of the Cincinnati, only to declare, when it became mired in controversy, that he wished it had never been thought of.

Americans who knew him best always had their reservations. Washington, whom the Marquis flattered shamelessly, never seems to have reciprocated with the same warmth, although he was always polite and avuncular. Both the Adamses, father and son, suspected that personal ambition was his driving force. The elder thought he “had gained more applause than Human nature at 25 can bear,” but Lafayette could never get enough. “His foible,” said Jefferson, who liked him for all his faults, “is a canine appetite for popularity.” When, released from Austrian captivity in 1797, he contemplated retiring to America, he received no encouragement from his transatlantic friends. But, at least Auricchio is right to say that he was no schemer. He did not seem to suspect that the American fame that he was always trumpeting made him as many enemies as admirers in France. He liked to jump impulsively on to bandwagons (preferably seizing the reins) whether in calling in the Assembly of Notables for the Estates-General, or drafting a declaration of rights.

Curiously, Auricchio does not follow this project through to its final version. Nor does she examine why Lafayette’s election to the Estates-General by the nobility of his native Auvergne was far less of a shoo-in than he expected. Also unmentioned is the support of a marquis for the abolition of noble titles in 1790, grudgingly though it was expressed because others had proposed it first. His career in

France between 1784 and 1792, in fact, is far more episodically covered than his exploits in America. Too much space that could have been devoted to the man is taken up with colourful set-pieces describing ceremonies and momentous background events. Perhaps the author feels that her American readers will be less familiar with the French Revolution than with their own. In that case, there are a number of factual errors that will mislead them. And the last forty-two years of the Marquis's life are covered in as many pages, more of them taken up by his comeback tour of the United States in 1824-5 than with his prickly relations with Napoleon, or with what was arguably his most successful intervention in French politics during the Revolution of 1830. Aimed at a general rather than a scholarly readership, this is not, despite the title, a serious reconsideration of Lafayette.

NOTE

[1] Louis Gottschalk, *Lafayette Comes to America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), *Lafayette Joins the American Army* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), *Lafayette and the Close of the American Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), *Lafayette Between the American and the French Revolution (1783-1789)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), and with Sarah Maddox, *Lafayette in the French Revolution through the October Days* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), *Lafayette in the French Revolution from the October Days through the Federation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Lloyd Kramer, *Lafayette in two worlds : public cultures and personal identities in an age of revolutions* (Chapel Hill, NC.: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

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