Lady Henrietta Liston's Journal of Washington's "Resignation," Retirement, and Death

HENRIETTA LISTON first set foot on American soil on May 3, 1796, when she disembarked in New York after a six-week voyage aboard the H.M.S. Assistance. The rigors of the transatlantic crossing were offset, however, by the fact that this was also her wedding trip. Scarcely two weeks before her departure from England she had married Robert Liston, the newly appointed British minister to the United States.

Liston was an experienced diplomat of Scottish origin who had begun his career in 1774 as secretary to Hugh Elliot, minister plenipotentiary at Munich. Good sense, tolerance, affability, and an unusual ability to master languages made Liston particularly suited to the diplomatic line. In nine short years he had risen from the rank of private secretary to that of minister plenipotentiary at Madrid. Appointments to Stockholm (1788) and Constantinople (1794) followed the Madrid assignment. Liston was not happy with his situation at the Sublime Porte, however, and he complained to Lord Grenville, the Foreign Secretary. Grenville offered to shift him to Philadelphia and Liston accepted.

It was upon his return from Constantinople and prior to his departure for Philadelphia that Liston became engaged to Henrietta Marchant, daughter of Nathaniel Marchant of the Island of Antigua. Very little is known about her background except that she came from a middle-class Scottish family and was living in Glasgow with her uncle, James Jackson, when she became acquainted with Liston in the early 1790's. She was several years younger than Liston but was a mature woman and rather matronly in appearance.¹ Her exact age is not known but she herself said that she was "marrying in advanced

¹ Her portrait by Gilbert Stuart is in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.
life.” Liston, however, was hardly in a position to be demanding when it came to physical attributes. Scottish prudence and a tender devotion to his mother had prevented him from forming any durable attachments to the fair sex and at the time of his marriage to Miss Marchant he was somewhat past the prime of his early manhood. He was, in fact, fifty-four, bald (he wore a wig), and in possession of only half his full complement of teeth. These shortcomings must have been compensated for by his desirable qualities, for Henrietta was obviously attracted to the genial Scot. They were married in early March, 1796.

Liston and his wife were well received in America. Though not a brilliant diplomat, the new minister was extremely competent. Moreover, his friendly good nature and even temper were much appreciated and were in striking contrast to the coldness and arrogance of his predecessor, George Hammond, who was cordially disliked by the Americans. He also had the rare gift of remaining aloof from party politics. By doing so, he created few enemies and was able to carry out his duties more effectively. During his three-and-a-half year stay, he was instrumental in creating good will and harmony between Great Britain and the United States.

George Washington valued Liston’s diplomatic services, but there was another factor which helped establish a bond of friendship and mutual respect between the two men. Although they had dedicated the better part of their lives to public service, both men were passionately devoted to farming. Liston, who was born and raised in the country, owned a sizeable tract of land called Damhead Farm which was located about three miles east of Edinburgh. This was his home between diplomatic assignments and he eventually retired there, just as Washington retired to Mount Vernon when he gave up the presidency. Shortly after Liston’s arrival at his new post, Washington invited him to visit his estate. “The President,” Henrietta wrote to her uncle, “was anxious to show Mr. Liston his crop, which he said would be off the ground by mid-summer.”

Henrietta Liston recorded her impressions of life in America in numerous letters to her uncle and in a series of journals. The journals,

---

2 In a letter to a friend, Liston Papers, 5547, fols. 43-44, National Library of Scotland.
which are as yet unpublished, are among the Liston Papers in the National Library of Scotland. They consist of some 250 pages of manuscript and are, for the most part, a record of her travels throughout eastern United States and Canada. One of the journals is of a different nature, however, and stands apart from the others. Strictly speaking it is not a journal at all but an interesting personal account of Washington's "resignation," retirement, and death. It belies certain historical facts about Washington and corroborates others but there is little in it that is really new. A possible exception is the unexpected reference to Gil Blas and the Archbishop of Granada. One might speculate that Washington's allusion to Lesage's masterpiece indicated that his knowledge of literature was not quite so deficient as has always been supposed. Of course, one might also speculate that he had heard the anecdote from one of his more lettered colleagues. In any case the value of the journal does not lie in revelations of heretofore unsuspected facets of Washington's character, but rather in the attitude of the writer. As one reads the journal it becomes clear that it is not simply a portrait of Washington, though it is that as well, but is in reality a sincere tribute to a man whom Henrietta Liston had grown to respect and admire.4

Colgate University

James C. Nicholls


Yesterday General Washington voluntarily resigned his office of Chief Magistrate of the United States of America. Mr. Adams was sworn in President as his successor, carrying the election by a majority of three votes over his opponent Mr. Jefferson, who, at the same time, took the oaths as Vice President.

On the third of March, it being the last day of General Washington's power as President, he gave a publick dinner to the officers of State, Foreign Ministers, principal Senators, & to their respective Ladies.

I had, as usual, the gratification of being handed to Table & of sitting by the President. Had I never before considered the character

4 Mrs. Liston's journal, MS.5698 of the Liston Papers, is published with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.
of Washington, I should certainly have joined the general voice, & pronounced him greater in this voluntary retreat, & in the resignation of power over an immense country, than when, having by his conduct as a Soldier, been the principal means of rendering his Country independent, he became, by the universal suffrage of the people, its ruler & director. I should have repeated with others—Washington is the first of men, wise, great, & good, whereas as I now view him, he is in truth & reality, honest, prudent & fortunate, & wonderful to say, almost without ambition: these words are less dignified but not less strong.

Emperors and Kings are generally born to exalted Stations, bred up in luxury & fed by flattery. When Charles the fifth abdicated his crown it was perhaps from ostentation & vanity, possibly from caprice or superstition, & could he afterwards have resumed his power it is likely he had done so. He had been born a Monarch. Washington, to whose fame every thing conspired, was born a private individual, a needy Man, & at one period of his life followed the employment of a Land surveyor; & this perhaps gave him or at least increased in early life a taste for the country. His business led to long rides, in which he acquired a knowledge of the quality of land & the different modes of farming. He afterwards became a Soldier under Great Britain, & studied the profession as one by which he was to gain his bread. Naturally grave & silent, his mode of life had rendered him frugal & temperate. Vanity in him was a very limited passion, & prudence his striking trait. Most people say & do too much. Washington, partly from constitutional taciturnity, but still more from natural sagacity & careful observation, never fell into this common error. Nature had been liberal to him. To a majestic figure was added a native unaffected gracefulness of deportment, & dignity of manner, which was rather improved by a liking—I will not say a fondness—for dress. To all this was joined, how acquired heaven knows, a perfect good breeding, & a correct knowledge of even the Etiquette of a Court. His graceful figure had rather assisted his command as a General when in the Army, & his dignified manners excited involuntary respect when he appeared as the President of a Great Country.

Charles V, Holy Roman emperor from 1519 to 1556, abdicated his imperial title two years before his death.
His education had been confined; he knew no language but his own, & expressed himself in that, rather forcibly than elegantly. Though neither a Man of learning, nor of much acquired knowledge, he possessed, not only great good sense & a sound judgment, but was a Man of observation & of deep reflection. Letter writing seemed in him a peculiar talent. His style was plain, correct & nervous. Ill-natured people said that Washington did not write his own publick letters, answers to addresses, etc. This is not true. I have known him to write in his usual impressive manner when no person was near to aid him; & what may seem conclusive, he has always written better than the Gentlemen to whom the merit of his letters was ascribed.\(^6\)

Character

Naturally hot-tempered, cold hearted, & guarded, he acquired a uniform command over his passions on publick occasions, but in private & particularly with his Servants, its violence sometimes broke out. His countenance was peculiarly pleasant when he laughed which he apparently did with good humour at the jests of others, & he told his own occasionally with gaiety; but it was the flash of a moment; gaiety was not natural to him. He rose at all seasons early. It was his constant practice to reply to every letter he received, whether the contents were of more or less importance, agreeable or otherwise. His first & last pleasure appeared to be farming; on that theme he always talked freely, being on other topics extremely cautious not to commit himself, & never spoke on any subject of which he was not master. When I happened, for the first time, to converse with Washington upon his determination to resign the Government of this Country, I expressed how much Mr. Liston & I had wished for his continuance four years longer, (being the probable term of our stay); he smiling asked if I remembered Gil Blas’s story of the Archbishop of Granada?\(^6\)

\(^6\) Mrs. Liston’s great admiration for Washington prevented her from being a completely objective judge of his writing ability. It is well known that much if not most of Washington’s public writing was ghost-written by such men as Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison. Her appraisal of his letter writing would be more accurate if applied only to his private correspondence. See Thomas J. Fleming, “Affectionately Yours, George Washington.” A Self-Portrait in Letters of Friendship (New York, 1967).
I feared, said he, that the same might happen to me. About ten days before his quitting his situation, I congratulated him on his approaching happiness. Yes, said he, like a Child within view of the Holydays, I have counted the months, then the weeks, & I now reckon the days previous to my release. I observed that his countenance indicated the pleasure to which he looked forward. You are wrong replied he, my countenance never yet betrayed my feelings; (an anecdote indeed is told of him, that while in the Army he once bit his lip entirely through to restrain his passion at the conduct of an officer); & this was the only weak or vain thing I ever heard Washington utter: for I had myself once witnessed his extreme palleness & agitation while delivering a publick Speech, at a moment when he thought his country ill used by the French Government.

The World gives General Washington more credit for his retirement from publick life than I am disposed to do. He had for eight years sacrificed his natural taste, first habits, & early propensities—I really believe we may truly say—solely to what he thought the good of his Country. But he was become tired of his situation, fretted by the opposition often made to his measures; & his pride revolted against the ingratitude he experienced, and he was also disgusted by the scurrilous abuse lavished upon him by his political enemies.

Written 14 months after

Mr. Liston & I have repeatedly visited General Washington at his Seat of Mount Vernon, & have always found him improved by retirement. He now converses with more ease & less guardedly than when in publick life. His hospitality is no way diminished, though

---

7 The story of Gil Bias and the Archbishop of Granada is in the seventh book (Chaps. III–IV) of Alain-René Lesage’s long picaresque novel, *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* (1715–1735). The Archbishop, fearing the debilitating effects of old age on his intellect, insists that Gil Bias, his servant, inform him at once if a noticeable deterioration in the quality of his sermons should occur. He assures Gil Bias that his frankness and sincerity will be rewarded. Shortly thereafter, the Archbishop suffers an attack of apoplexy which, though not affecting him physically, seriously impairs his mind. Gil Bias finds himself in the delicate position of having to tell his master that his sermons are not, perhaps, quite as brilliant as they once were. Predictably, the Archbishop refuses to recognize that his intellectual powers have diminished. He complains bitterly of Gil Bias’s limited intelligence and dismisses him forthwith from his service. As he shoves the hapless hero out the door he wishes him “all sorts of prosperity and a little more taste.”
the Splendor of his table is considerably lessened, for towards the magnificence with which he lived, while President, the allowance of five thousand pounds yearly went but a little way. His private fortune is great, & the Lady he married was rich. Mrs. Washington told me herself that the General spent almost his whole Income in addition to the sum allowed by the government in order to support the rank of first Magistrate of this Country, as he thought it ought to be supported.

Washington's fame appears to have been the peculiar care of Fortune. From the first Soldier in America he became the first Magistrate. He is now the most extensive farmer—of his great landed property he holds four thousand acres in his own hands. He has five hundred slaves.

Philadelphia 29th November 1799

A week or two ago We paid another & a longer visit to Mount Vernon than we usually do. For Mr. Liston having asked leave of the King to return to England, We may not have it in our power to repeat it.

General Washington & his amiable Wife received us with much kindness. The pleasing change in the General's manners which we had remarked since his resigning the Presidency still continued, but I was sorry to observe that a late fit of illness seemed to have somewhat altered his looks a little. His figure, always noble, appeared less & an approaching deafness, had in some degree affected his spirits.

We found him still devoted to his farm, & he had of late busied himself in repairing his family Vault. He from time to time attempts to beautify his Seat of Mount Vernon, though not with much taste.

The City of Washington shares his attention, & he seemed to look forward with pleasure to the removal of the Government there in October 1800. At our departure he kissed me, & kindly shaking hands with Mr. Liston said he had ordered his Horse & would escort us to his own boundaries, which are pretty extensive.

Death of Washington
Philadelphia 18th Dec. 1799

An express arrived this day from Mount Vernon with the melancholy accounts of the death of Washington. An inflammatory sore
throat carried him off in 24 hours. He had complained some days of a cold; rose on Friday morning, the 13th, but becoming worse, returned to bed, & although every assistance was immediately called, he died betwixt Saturday & Sunday, at the age of sixty-seven perfectly sensible & resigned.

At no time could the Death of Washington have been [a] matter of indifference to the people of America, but at this moment, when a rupture with France is apprehended, it is critical and unfortunate. He was appointed Commander in Chief of the Army (by President Adams & with much difficulty was prevailed upon to accept on condition of chusing his general officers) & the magic attached to his name—a magic greater perhaps than can ever be attached to any other in this Country, was deemed necessary to keep the parties united.

The marks of publick respect proper to be shown to his memory are now under the consideration of the Senate & House of Representatives.

Mr. Liston & I greatly esteemed & admired the Man & felt grateful for his uniform attention & kindness to us; & it is with satisfaction we reflect on having visited him so lately & parted from him so affectionately.

20th [December]

Congress has decreed that a funeral oration should be pronounced upon him, & General [Henry] Lee, an old brother officer, was chosen for this performance. General Lee said ten days were sufficient for preparation & on Thursday the 26th he delivered an Eulogium (in the large Dutch Church) to a vast concourse of people, admitted by tickets issued by a Committee appointed to arrange the Ceremony.

The President, Vice President, Senators & House of Representatives, Foreign Ministers, the Military, & all the different trades etc.,

8 At the time of Washington's death, the United States was engaged in an undeclared naval war with France. Franco-American diplomatic relations had broken down when the French rebuffed President Adams' envoys to Paris in the "X-Y-Z Affair."

9 The MS. clearly reads "20th" but it is obvious from the text that most of this section was written after December 26.

10 The ceremony was held at the German Lutheran Church of Philadelphia. The word "Dutch" to mean German was in common usage.
paraded in proper order. A bier was placed near the Pulpit, decorated with Military Ensigns. Bishop [William] White read the Prayers (Washington was an Episcopal) & General Lee delivered his oration—pleasing rather than brilliant. We were satisfied by his expressing himself handsomely of the British Nation, for in enumerating the great deeds of his Hero, a successful opposition to Great Britain naturally became the principal theme. A Band of singers from the Theatre accompanied the organ & all was conducted with decency & decorum. A general mourning had been ordered, & commenced that day. The President afterwards gave a publick dinner & certainly the most sombre of which we had ever partaken.

Notice has been given that the 22d of February, the Birth day of Washington, will be held as a solemn Fast, with sermons, orations etc.

Philadelphia 22d February [1800]

The most remarkable performance of this day was an Oration by Major [William] Jackson a Member of the Cincinnatia, of which institution Washington was the head.

Major Jackson’s Eloquence was heard by great numbers & in the same Church as the Oration of General Lee, but with music more appropriate—the choir of the Church—otherwise the same arrangements took place. Major Jackson’s Eulogium was certainly more correct & gave more general satisfaction than that of General Lee.

The Catholicks also produced their specimens of Eloquence, & the Masonic order of the French had an oration in a room completely decorated for a Catafalque.

1800

In the Autumn of this year, & before Mr. Liston & I were to bid a final adieu to the United States of America, We paid a melancholy visit to poor Mrs. Washington at Mount Vernon.

Washington was more a respectful than a tender Husband certainly; yet we found this excellent Woman grieving incessantly. She repeatedly told me, during the few days we had it in our power to stay with her, that all comfort had fled with her Husband, & that she waited anxiously her dissolution; & indeed it was evident that
her health was fast declining & her heart breaking. We parted with much tenderness on all sides, never, alas! to meet again.

A few months after our departure we heard of her Death.\textsuperscript{11}

Washington never had any Children. His wife was, when he married her, the rich & beautiful Widow of a Mr. Custis, a respectable Gentleman of very great fortune, in the state of Virginia; by him she had had a Son, who at his death left three Daughters & one Son. Of these Children General Washington & his Wife took charge. When we reached America, the two eldest Ladies were married, the youngest & most beautiful girl, & the Son, made part of the General’s family (as did at that moment the Son of the Marquis la \textit{Fayette} \& his French Tutor) \& were treated like his own Children.

Washington left his Fortune to his Nephews. They were all by Sisters, except Bushrod Washington one of the Judges of the United States; to him he left Mount Vernon \& the greatest part of his property.

\textsuperscript{11} Martha Washington died on May 22, 1802.