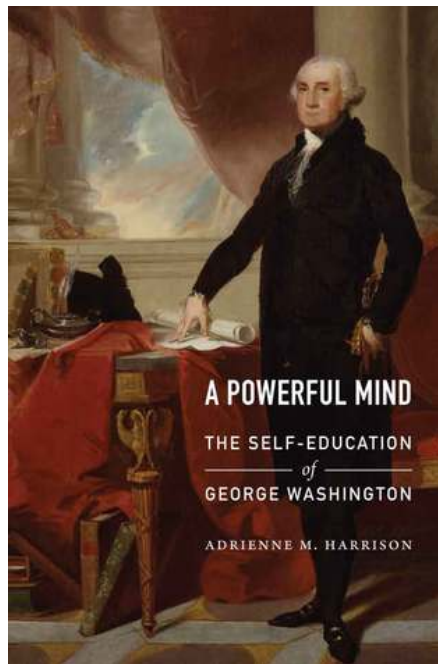




A Powerful Mind: The Self-Education of George Washington

Adrienne Harrison

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His formal schooling abruptly cut off at age eleven, George Washington saw his boyhood dream of joining the British army evaporate and recognized that even his aspiration to rise in colonial Virginian agricultural society would be difficult. Throughout his life he faced challenges for which he lacked the academic foundations shared by his more highly educated contemporaries. Yet Washington's legacy is clearly not one of failure.

Breaking new ground in Washington scholarship and American revolutionary history, Adrienne M. Harrison investigates the first president's dedicated process of self-directed learning through reading, a facet of his character and leadership long neglected by historians and biographers. In *A Powerful Mind*, Harrison shows that Washington rose to meet these trials through a committed campaign of highly focused reading, educating himself on exactly what he needed to do and how best to do it. In contrast to other famous figures of the revolution—Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin—Washington did not relish learning for its own sake, viewing self-education instead as a tool for shaping himself into the person he wanted to be. His two highest-profile and highest-risk endeavors—commander in chief of the Continental Army and president of the fledgling United States—are a testament to the success of his strategy.

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Melissa says

The research itself was excellent. I thought, however, the most interesting part of the book was learning that Washington had little of the European education that the remainder of America's Founding Fathers had themselves. He was in part a self made man by necessity. His education was also not so much based in theoretical concepts that were held by the more formally educated of his day, but rather based on much more practical education. He was humble man though considered by many to be our greatest President. He was indeed a unique man among the Founding Fathers of America. Worth a read to observe how his rise and Presidency were indicative of his autodidactic lifestyle.

Joan says

I was quite charmed by this book. While it is obviously a repackaged PhD thesis, I found it a really easy read and more like a long visit with the world's biggest George Washington nerd.

It does well enough to paint a portrait of Washington as a complex person who did what he could to fill in his knowledge gaps. I found it peculiar that the only real mention of slavery is where the author chooses to point out that Washington had some pamphlets about abolition and anti slavery in his collection and the freeing of slaves in his will. Throughout the book it's barely mentioned that he owned human beings for his entire adult life, only that he freed them in his will. Even if this was unusual for the time, nearly an entire chapter is devoted to how Washington read about agricultural innovations, he did not spend any time reading about how to make the most efficient use of the human beings he owned?

That being said, I will engage on what the book does, rather than what it does not. It does give you a really nice background on who Washington was as a person and a learner. I don't know what lessons can be extracted from it, other than "Read."

A kalinchuk says

It was interesting for how it laid out another man's reasoning process when making the decisions that would affect millions of people. I liked it much, although as far as the description of Washington's house, well, I could give a good goddamn what kind of self-trained architect he was.

Robert B says

Well done examination of Washington's "lifelong program of self-directed reading." Washington was not as widely read nor as classically educated as Jefferson or Adams, but his reading was directed at gaining the knowledge to solve practical problems from farming to military leadership. Harrison does a nice job of seeing Washington's achievements in light of his reading. Her chapter on the architecture of Mount Vernon seems a little too far afield from the main topic, but it is nevertheless interesting.

Alex Linschoten says

‘A Powerful Mind: The Self-Education of George Washington’ tells the story of Washington’s reading habits (and how they benefited him). You can read only the introduction and get the main message: he read a lot and the things he read allowed him to grow as a military and political leader. The rest of the book is a detailed exploration of this thesis alongside some of the supporting evidence.

Extensive and deep reading alike were important throughout his career. In one of the most fascinating subsections, Harrison shows how Washington’s military campaign benefited from some of the latest military theories of the day, both in terms of tactics and strategy.

I benefited from the way the book proceeded chronologically through Washington’s life, not being familiar (at all) with the events of the American Revolution and the time period being examined. One of my first questions to other readers (over on Goodreads) was the extent to which someone not immersed in this American history could read this book without trouble, and I’m pleased to report that relative newbies like myself shouldn’t find much issue.

This book is repurposed from a PhD thesis, and it tells. The narrative is sometimes diverted to a discussion of sources or the evidence on which certain claims rest. This is all fine and proper, though it disrupts the flow. I wonder whether those discussions might not have been relegated to an appendix. That said, I also occasionally felt that too much was made out of the baseline evidence on which the book seems to rest, i.e. the records of which books were owned, annotated and/or read by Washington. Harrison writes a lot about the various ways we can deduce what Washington might have been reading at period X or Y, but as a reader myself I felt disappointed that somehow we hardly ever seemed to actually catch Washington directly in the act.

One of the points that I found most interesting was how Washington seemed to go about selecting his books. There were fewer titles at the time, so he seemed to have more opportunity or necessity for deep reading (annotating copies line-by-line, for example) than in the present day where it’s probably easier to develop habits of wide/extensive reading that are ultimately shallow. A fascinating section in this respect was where Washington decides he needs to overhaul his farm and agricultural practices, and Harrison shows how he used what he read to take a risky but ultimately profitable decision to reform and overhaul how he managed his land.

Diana says

Interesting information and powerful message about the value of self-education through reading. Very repetitive. I don't know if it's my lack of experience with this type of book, but it reads more like an academic paper than a book.

Jono says

Great book.

I skipped large parts of the minutiae about American history, but the core message of how much direct, intense reading can lift one up to levels you wouldn't believe rang through clearly.

Rohit says

- place higher importance on reading for practical stuff
 - find a spot where you can read in your life and sanctify it
 - read multi disciplinary (going against point 1)
-

Matt says

Washington was by no means a scholar in the same vein as formally educated Jefferson or Adams, nor did he reach the same level of intellectual development as Benjamin Franklin, another informally educated founding father, but make no mistake, he took active measures to educate himself regularly. Washington's reading and education were almost always for practical purposes. I find him a great example of how to use knowledge for power. Too much focus on knowledge without practical purpose becomes a terrible waste of time.

I find Washington the least interesting of the founding fathers because of his over concern with status and the fact that he never really even had an intellectual conversation because he was too afraid to look inferior. Still, I have a fair amount of respect for him, and I like the fact that he tried to educate himself.

The book does a good job talking about Washington's education, and I learned about some historic battles that I didn't realize existed. I found this book highly valuable because it develops my own vision for own education and how to slant things toward practical knowledge, at least up to an extent.

?Misericordia? ~ The Serendipity Aegis ~ ?????? ✨❤️ says

The -1 star due to that this material could have been a bit more restructured to be less reminding of a school thesis. Still, it's only a minor gripe of mine. The research is outstanding, even though a bit skewed to Mr. G.'s reading side.

Free your own slaves.

Q:

This chapter also explores one specific example of how Washington's reading led him to make a momentous decision that would separate him from his fellow southern founders: in his will Washington emancipated his slaves. He was the only founding father to do so. (c)

I think it's a very cool example of 'do as you say not say what you do'.

Q:

Just as Washington's staged aloofness enhanced his reputation and the mythology surrounding him, the carefully shaped distance between the approach road and the house heightens the mansion's aesthetic appeal to visitors. (c) And his 'aloofness' let him keep under the wraps whatever shortcomings he thought he had, I'm sure. Win-win.

Q:

What is most interesting about this fact is that the majority of Washington's admirers, even those who were somewhat close to him, were largely unaware of the extent of his self-directed reading and the significance that it played over the course of his long life in the public spotlight (c) It, actually, made his charisma shine brighter. Does it comfort public that its leader has learned just this morning, from some book, whatever he's telling them to do? Never.

Q:

When considering that Washington consistently occupied positions wherein he was surrounded by individuals who were more qualified than he was, his achievements take on a greater significance. Reading was the way that he compensated for his limited childhood education, and for the most part it served him well.

This book demonstrates the value that Washington placed on reading. Over time Washington absorbed the knowledge that he gleaned from his reading material, and he effectively put it to use. He also learned another lesson from his reading, however, that was equally as important: Washington came to understand the power of the printed word and how that power influenced society and current events. (c)

Q:

This book begins with the question of why Washington developed certain reading preferences. Losing his father at age eleven cut short Washington's educational career, and from a young age he had to make his own way. As such, he was careful, especially in his earlier years, to keep this shortcoming hidden from those he was trying to impress. Although Washington could not have known it at the time, his never having had the chance to study abroad the way his older half-brothers did was actually a blessing, for Washington then took a very practically oriented path in terms of his intellectual development that served him well.

Washington was driven. He was always ambitious and was relentless in the pursuit of his goals, a personality trait that never diminished with the passage of time. After his father's death, he set about mastering the knowledge required to become a surveyor so he could earn money and purchase land. His older half-brother Lawrence mentored the young Washington and whetted his appetite for a military career. As a militia officer, Washington turned his intellectual energies briefly toward the rapidly emerging field of the military arts, for he recognized that he was completely unprepared for the rank and position he held. He began reading the books that his British counterparts read; however, when tasked with raising a new Virginia Regiment, Washington turned away from military history and theory in favor of more practical texts on tactics and small unit organization. When it became clear that he was not to get the British commission he had pursued so desperately, Washington abandoned military studies forever, or so he thought.

Instead of military science, Washington developed a keen interest in the science of agriculture, which became one of his great passions. (c)

Q:

His shortfalls as a commanding general forced him to arrive at what was the correct strategic conclusion: he did not have to win the battles in order to win the war. As Washington was aggressive by nature, he might have been prone to let his fighting spirit rule over his common sense if he had had the European military educational pedigree. The secret to his strategic thinking was that thanks to his lack of a European military education, he was able to evolve into a general who went against the grain of eighteenth-century military convention. (c)

Q:

He watched as Thomas Jefferson, his former secretary of state and the soon-to-be vice president, wearing a simple blue suit, made his rather unceremonious entrance. Finally the new president John Adams arrived, appearing more than a bit awkward in a pearl-colored suit with wrist ruffles, a powdered wig, and a cocked hat. Adams already looked as though he was not getting any sleep. His appearance must not have been a reassuring sign to those gathered in the chamber to watch the first ever transfer of presidential authority in the brief history of the United States. Adams glanced over at Washington, who by contrast looked positively tranquil, as if the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. Adams later wrote to his wife: "A solemn scene it was indeed, and it was made affecting to me by the presence of the General, whose countenance was as serene and unclouded as the day. He seemed to me to enjoy a triumph over me. Methought I heard him say, 'Ay! I am fairly out and you fairly in! See which of us will be happiest!'"¹ If Washington did not say it, he ought to have, because this day marked the beginning of his longed-for

retirement. After decades of public service, Washington was at last taking his final leave of public life and heading back to Mount Vernon. (c)

Q:

This chapter also explores one specific example of how Washington's reading led him to make a momentous decision that would separate him from his fellow southern founders: in his will Washington emancipated his slaves. He was the only founding father to do so. (c)

Q:

The following passage was the most extraordinary aspect of Washington's manumission plan:

[The children who] have no parents living, or if living are unable, or unwilling to provide for them, shall be bound by the Court until they shall arrive at the age of twenty five years; and in cases where no record can be produced, whereby their ages can be ascertained, the judgment of the Court, upon its own view of the subject, shall be adequate and final. The Negros thus bound, are (by their Masters or Mistresses) to be taught to read & write; and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of Orphan[s] and other poor Children... (c)

Q:

Washington crafted a very particular slave clause for his personal servant, William Lee:

And to my Mulatto man William (calling himself William Lee) I give immediate freedom; or if he should prefer it (on account of the accidents which have befallen him, and which have rendered him incapable of walking or of any active employment) to remain in the situation he now is, it shall be optional in him to do so. In either case, however, I allow him an annuity of thirty dollars during his natural life, which shall be independent of the victuals and cloaths he has been accustomed to receive, if he chuses the last alternative; but in full, with his freedom, if he prefers the first; & this I give him as a testimony of my sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War.

...

For Washington, this act of justice was in return for the more than thirty years that Lee had served him faithfully as a personal slave. Washington's motive was not likely affection, for no other evidence anywhere in the written records indicates that Washington considered Lee a favorite. Washington maintained different degrees of aloofness from just about everyone except his wife, so it would not make sense that he shared an exceptionally close friendship with a slave. However, almost above friendship, Washington valued loyalty, and by offering Lee immediate freedom or care for life, Washington reciprocated it. (c)

Q:

How, where, and what people read reveal a great deal about their attitudes toward the significance of reading as an activity. Do they read in public or otherwise in front of others, thumbing through the materials casually for the sake of entertainment, or do they read in private for the sake of concentrated study? Is there music or other noise that might be distracting? Are they willing to share their materials with others? Do they feel confident enough in their skills as readers to take part in discussions about their reading? What do they read? Why do they choose to read certain types of material and not others? Do they make marginalia or notes? With the extant evidence of how Washington expanded Mount Vernon over the years along with the list of the contents of his private library, it is possible to answer these questions and thus develop a new understanding of Washington's reading and how it contributed to his intellectual development. (c)

Q:

When I was young, the stories of Washington's dangerous exploits in the wilderness and on the battlefield were the most captivating. The details about how Washington survived a plunge into an icy river only to then escape a would-be assassin while returning from his first-ever military mission, how he had four horses shot from under him during Braddock's defeat, and how he personally led his army across the Delaware River one fateful Christmas morning — all were endlessly fascinating and made him seem larger than life. As I grew older, my interests and questions about Washington continued to evolve. Over time I became more interested in how he rose to such prominence in his lifetime and how his popularity endured long after his death. When I was a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, my senior thesis centered on Washington's tour of the southern states in 1791 and argued that he used the tour to shore up faith in the

federal government and demonstrate his tacit support of Alexander Hamilton's funding and assumption plan. I was, however, not done with Washington after I earned my bachelor's degree. My thesis experience left me with several lingering questions that I kept in the back of my mind as I packed my books away and headed off to begin my career as an army officer.

There was no doubt that my classmates and I, commissioned in 2002, were destined for service in Afghanistan and, as was to become evident in early 2003, Iraq. I served three tours in Iraq and all in successive leadership positions: platoon leader, company executive officer, and finally company commander. During those long, seemingly endless days in combat, my fellow soldiers and I each did what we could to maintain a sense of normalcy in our lives by devoting the odds and ends of free time we had to hobbies that passed the time and kept us connected to our homes halfway around the world. (c)

Q:

Given that I have spent the majority of my life studying Washington, I freely admit that I have a deep and abiding respect for him despite his faults. His natural talent for leadership was remarkable, and he had a keen understanding of how to perform in a manner that magnified his strengths while simultaneously camouflaging his weaknesses. Over the course of his long career in the public light, Washington had more failures than successes, yet he inspired loyalty from those around him and retained his hold on power even in the face of mounting criticism. Moreover, he mastered the art of relinquishing authority, thus ensuring that the institutions he helped to establish would endure after he was gone. All of that said, Washington had a volatile temper and was incredibly thin skinned. Many of his contemporaries thought his natural aloofness signaled a wooden or even an icy personality. He lacked self-confidence and obsessively sought approval from those around him. Ambition drove him in all of his pursuits, and he was aggressive in matters of business. In other words, Washington was flawed. The real Washington, whom historians have relentlessly pursued since he rose to international prominence after America gained its independence, had his positive and negative character traits, much as we might rationally expect. In the nineteenth century, historians and biographers, buying into the idea of Manifest Destiny, tended to portray Washington as a demigod and duly gave him pride of place in the pantheon of American heroes. Over time, however, the experience of two world wars, the emergence of the United States as a superpower that nonetheless experienced serious a setback in the Cold War with the loss of Vietnam, and the social upheaval wrought by the civil rights movement collectively reshaped the lenses by which more modern historians viewed the early American past. The result was an emphasis on interpreting history from the perspective of the populace, sparking a wave of revisionism that tended to minimize the role of the founding fathers, including that of Washington. (c)
