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Man, Myth, Marquis:
A Historiographic Essay on the Marquis de Lafayette
By Courtney Eileen Bowers '08



It is the common condition of men to strive to be remembered. They wish to contribute to or detract from society and leave it changed, whether it be through virtue or vice, or through some way that creates lasting monuments to survive the subsequent generations. They can only do so much; it is up to following generations to interpret those works and deem their significance and staying power, if any. One critical group of such revisionists would be academia, specifically writers and historians. It is their privilege to look upon the person in question and his actions with the clarity of hindsight. From the safety of the future they can choose to exonerate or condemn; they may hail or disparage the actions, motives, morals, circumstances, and character of the figure(s) in question. The tactics of these elite vary widely, being colored by their own time, experiences, nationality, preconceived notions, and also greatly by what others have said. Such is the case when examining the life of the Marquis de Lafayette, about whom there is much information (and misinformation) and whose accepted portrait is constantly in a state of change as historians continue on their process of discovery and revision.

The Marquis de Lafayette, or properly Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roche Gilbert du Motier, was considered unequivocally one of the most important men of his time, a distinction which did not fade for quite a few generations. He was beloved, achieving a god-like status, by Americans for all he had done for their causes of Liberty and Independence. Arguably, they held him in even higher esteem than any of their own Founders due to his tireless devotion to a country and cause that were not his own, and his ceaseless use of personal money without expectation of reparation to clothe and feed his men, whom he loved and valued greatly. By his own people, the French, he was in turn exulted and reviled for his contributions to their society and his hand in their Revolution. The whims of the frenzied mob transformed him varyingly into a mythical knight on a crusade and a power-hungry madman driving the State to ruin. He counted

among his friends and enemies the greatest names in Western culture of his time: several Kings (and their courts) of France and Austria, Benjamin Franklin, the Founding Fathers of America (among them George Washington was the closest), Robespierre, and Napoleon Bonaparte were only some of his many excellent connections.

Of all the people of his time, he was probably one of the best documented, if not the most accurately. He was an extremely prolific writer, and due to his importance as a figure in his time many others wrote extensively about him. Harlow Giles Unger states in his preface that “Everything about the man—everything he said and thought, along with his motives—is on paper, in writing, on hundreds of thousands of pages. An early (1930) bibliography listing all the work written by and about Lafayette at that time runs more than 225 pages.”¹ Still more sources, some in his own writing, have since surfaced and changed the perceptions of this effective and significant man. Still, many other sources have existed but did not survive the weathering of time, especially due to revisionists who did not want certain knowledge or depictions of situations to “get out,” and also largely due to the wars that ravaged America and Europe since they were authored. Each source is vastly different, depending on the time and country in which it was written, its purpose and invariably the motives of its writer. The interpretation of these sources has been a trial for scholars for several reasons. First, they are hand-written in an archaic style, which is often difficult to read and terribly faded. Second, the style of French used in many of the sources is different from that used today, and often the translations and interpretation of these documents are wrong due to the change in idiom. Third, because there are so many sources, most scholars will rely on the versions published by their colleagues rather than return to these primary sources.²

It is the challenge of historians to give the most accurate picture of Lafayette, but even this endeavor becomes a point of contention when deciding how to present this vision. Limited abilities and resources play an important factor, as do the writings of those who are held to be most knowledgeable about this subject. So too does the movement in historical writing at the time play a major role. Certain sources are accepted or rejected as accurate or relevant depending on the slant from which the piece is being written. Depending on the era, accounts have been romantic, cynical, dry and factual and psychoanalytic. This makes for an interesting historiographical depiction of a man about whom there is so much primary documentation and yet so much debate. Historians for the most part cannot help but to try to analyze the character of their studies and the implications of his motives within his time frame. The Marquis de Lafayette has been subject to some of the best and worst of writing, and has enjoyed a position both as a great hero of his time and a terrible villain to be relegated to the shadows of history. After a time, he faded in importance, and so was largely ignored or forgotten by recent generations of academicians. Only now, with the emergence of many hereto hidden documents and the desire of scholars to reexamine the known primary sources is the

¹ Harlow Giles Unger, *Lafayette* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002), xxi. On the previous page he mentioned, “Not only did Lafayette compile his own voluminous memoirs, but both the French government and the American Congress commissioned enormous compilations of every document each nation produced during the American Revolutionary War.”

² *Ibid.*, xix.

Marquis returning to his position of once undeniable importance and prestige among academia.

Certain facts of the life of the Marquis de Lafayette are undisputed. Gilbert du Motier was born 6 September 1757 at the Chateau de Chavaniac in the Auvergne section of southern France. His father was killed two years later in war, elevating him to be the Marquis de La Fayette, and his mother died when he was eleven, making him the inheritor of a vast family fortune in one of the most powerful families in France. He formally joined the King's Black Musketeers in 1771, in which he would gain a great many friends among the aristocracy of Paris, and at the age of thirteen the inheritance from the death of his maternal grandfather made him one of the richest aristocrats in all of Europe. He began his martial education at the Military Academy at Versailles, and two years later due to the influence of his future father-in-law, the duc d'Ayen, Lafayette became a part of the prestigious Noailles Regiment. This put him in touch with the King of France, Louis XV, and his son, as well as many of the future leaders of France.³ During all this schooling time, he became very familiar with the humanities, and developed a deep passion for the Enlightenment philosophies and the ideas of the rights of man. He developed a very strong sense of chivalry and deep ties to king and country, yet he was also enticed by the idea of brotherhood and became a Mason.⁴ At the age of sixteen, he married the fourteen year-old Adrienne d'Ayen, uniting his family with the arguably most influential families in France⁵, which were bound by blood and by oath to the King, who witnessed the marriage. A turning point came about in 1775, when he met the Duke of Gloucester, brother of King George III, while on maneuvers at Metz, France, from whom he learnt of the struggle of the colonists. Inspired by their cause and the Declaration of Independence, he decided to go fight with them, having never seen battle. In 1776 he secretly outfitted a ship and a regiment of fellow officers to go to America to fight, and was granted the position of Major General in the American Continental Army. It is debated whether the King through foreign minister Comte de Vergennes⁶ forbade Lafayette to go to America in fear of provoking war with Britain, but he did go without express permission.⁷ Though the King's men were sent to bring him back before he left, he rode onward and the people of the countryside viewed him as a dashing knight on a quest.

³ Oliver Bernier, *Lafayette, Hero of Two Worlds*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1983), 1-22.

⁴ Unger, *Lafayette*, 21. This was important, because most of the Founding Fathers in America were Freemasons, which helped him secure his position in the Army in the first place.

⁵ The Noailles and d'Ayen families.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-30. Vergennes had a plan for clandestine aid to America in the hopes of incurring their debt for use in trade agreements after the war, and Lafayette in his boyish enthusiasm spoilt these plans by his enlistment in the American army, signaling that the French would want war with Britain. There was also a plan between Vergennes and General de Broglie to have de Broglie take command of the American armies from Washington, and to place his top aide, "Baron" (which he was not) de Kalb in places of great power in America, ensuring America's debt to France. Lafayette, by not wanting power but simply to serve the cause, and through being falsely convinced by one of de Broglie's men that he had the secret desires of everyone but d'Ayen to go, destroyed these schemes and was the only one to secure any post of power at all in America, at the startling age of nineteen.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 392, note 34. Vergennes may have delayed ever writing or sending the formal request, so that the Marquis and de Kalb were out of his hands before he could officially stop them, but save his own skin with proof that he tried.

After a horrific voyage Lafayette landed in South Carolina on June 13, 1777. He received his commission in Philadelphia after some delay by a Congress that was fed up with foreign officers with no ability and experience. He quickly proved himself. He became an aide-de-camp to Washington and became quickly beloved by the forces. He was wounded in the Battle of Brandywine. After he recovered, he trained a crack team of reconnoiters that defeated a Hessian detachment in Gloucester, and he later won the support of the Iroquois nations for the American cause. After coordinating French naval help and securing a few brilliant victories, he returned to France where he was hailed as a brilliant representative of all the best of that which was French.⁸ The populace had been following his successes religiously and after he was received back into court⁹ he was the star of all aristocratic circles. He was put in charge of arranging a naval attack by combined French and American forces upon England, specifically in its great industrial center of Liverpool, but the entrance of Spain into the War destroyed this possibility.¹⁰ In France he also championed the American cause and received the promise of aid, and returned to Boston to help finish the American campaign. After some setbacks and more victories, Lafayette was instrumental in winning the battle of Yorktown and causing Cornwallis to surrender, effectively ending the Revolutionary War in October of 1781. From there he returned to France again a hero, and was crucial in drawing up the Treaty of Paris that ended the war.¹¹

One of the most celebrated men in Europe, Lafayette was hailed as the "Hero of Two Worlds." He became involved with the movement for French governmental reform when he was elected as a representative of the nobility in the Estates General. He worked tirelessly to gain support for his liberal ideas of universal male suffrage and the rights of the Third Estate (specifically through his Declaration of the Rights of Man), but consistently refused positions of ultimate leadership, saying that they were meant for better people.¹² It was at this time that detractors began to write against him because it was politically expedient. Nobles accused him of trying to destroy the old order; of not being faithful to the King but instead to his own liberal ideas and support for the commoners. Liberals such as Robespierre and Marat used him as a convenient scapegoat when he tried to moderate their fanaticism and power-hunger. They whipped up mobs against him with their powerful oratory, declaiming him for being an aristocrat and supporter of the King and saying that he was only out for power for himself. His refusal of positions of power based on loyalty to his principles, especially in 1792, ultimately hurt him and opened the way for radicals like Danton and Robespierre to win the crowds, secure power and rule with terror. Too, his attempts to neutralize the mobs using martial law and his own beloved status only worked for a short time, and his attempts to save the King and integrate him into a new government only added heat to the proverbial fire.¹³

⁸George Morgan, *The True Lafayette* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1919), 81-169.

⁹Unger, *Lafayette*, 95. For having disobeyed the King, he was placed on house arrest for a week, which served more of a symbolic function than anything else. During his time waiting to be forgiven and received back into court, he entertained the cream of society, including a passing meeting with Marie Antoinette.

¹⁰Noel B. Poirier, "Raids Target Western England," *Naval History* 17, no. 4 (2003): 33.

¹¹Morgan, *The True Lafayette*, 82-216.

¹²Lloyd Kramer, *Lafayette in Two Worlds*, (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 35-39.

Lafayette was forced to flee France by the government of Robespierre and Danton, only to be taken prisoner by Austria, which held an especial invective against him for being a proponent of revolution—anathema to all monarchies. There he was kept in solitary confinement in terrible conditions that destroyed his health and nearly killed him and later his family (who joined him). Through much political legwork by his wife and various American Founding Fathers, he was finally released, only to be denied for some time entrance into France by Napoleon.¹⁴ Under this new regime his persistence in liberal undertakings kept him in a precarious position, but he chose to live the life of a gentleman farmer, as his idol Washington had always dreamt of doing. His wife, with whom he was madly in love and who had recovered much of the family fortune by herself, died in 1807, leaving him terribly depressed. He continued to farm and practice husbandry, some of which made him extremely successful and respected.¹⁵ From 1814 to 1824 he sat in the Chamber of Deputies and worked to support the common people through his liberal policies. He then traveled to America on invitation of the Congress to make a grand tour, and arrived on August 15, 1824. His tour was long and extremely busy but a great success, as Americans absolutely worshiped him. As Gottschalk states,

More than any other man who had a claim to the gratitude of Americans, he belonged equally to all Americans. Washington was a Virginian. Franklin... was a Pennsylvanian. Adams was a New Englander. Every American seemed to belong to a state first, to a region next, and to the United States only afterward. But Lafayette belonged to no state or region.¹⁶

He stayed until September of 1825, whereupon his return to France he resumed his activities in politics. In 1830, he supported, vocally and financially, a revolution in Poland. At the same time Lafayette commanded the National Guard that helped overthrow Bourbon King Charles X and installed Louis-Philippe on the throne. He felt, wrongly, that Philippe would be of the same persuasion as he.¹⁷ Finally, on 20 May 1834 Lafayette died, and as one of only six people ever to be granted honorary American Citizenship¹⁸ was buried under soil he had taken back to France from Bunker Hill.¹⁹

The seventy-seven years in which Lafayette was alive were some of the most influential years of modern history. It was during these years that America was established and Western Europe survived the shocks of revolution and Napoleon. That Lafayette was influential is difficult to dispute, but the emphasis placed on his actions and the interpretations given to his motives continued to undergo the changes that had been so much a part of the political scene during his lifetime. One particular way to combat the false analysis of others was the posthumous publication of his memoirs (*Mémoires*) by his family.

¹³Unger, *Lafayette*, 240-297.

¹⁴Bernier, *Lafayette, Hero of Two Worlds*, 257-275.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 275-280.

¹⁶Louis Gottschalk, *Lafayette Between the American and French Revolution (1783-1789)*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 143.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 291-327.

¹⁸Winston Churchill, Raoul Wallenberg, William Penn and his wife Hannah Callowhill Penn, and Mother Teresa were the others.

¹⁹Unger, *Lafayette*, 380.

Not wishing to be associated with such partisan productions [those of self-serving Revolutionaries], Lafayette eschewed writing his memoirs. But wanting his side of the story told, he encouraged trusted authors to produce 'impartial' history by giving them access to his letters and documents and by providing them with his comments on early works on the Revolution.²⁰

There were several problems with these memoirs; one was that they were edited so as to not give offense to certain people or embarrass the Lafayette family. Another problem is that many of them were constructed from sketchy recollections, since much of the original documentation had been destroyed during the Revolution. Along with translation and publication problems, the editing and the political irrelevance of these works upon publication did not serve for the six-volume set being well received, and they represented at best an incomplete and dry work that "created a lifeless portrait that helped to confirm one of the caricatures of Lafayette as a simpleton."²¹

Why did Lafayette and his memoirs lose political usefulness so quickly after his death? The answer hinges largely on the fact that, for a time, the age of revolutions for France and America had ended and given rise to nationalism. In France, his reputation was again the victim of vicious politics. "Moderates and constitutional monarchists found Lafayette either outmoded or of limited usefulness to their contemporary concerns."²² Republicans did not want to use him as their hero either, seeing him as a traitor for not creating a republic in the 1830 Revolution; rather he had instead installed Louis-Philippe, who turned into another power-mad monarch.²³

Lafayette's image did not serve unambiguously the needs of either the government of the July Monarchy or of its republican or socialist opposition. Appearing at a time of rapid transformation of the meaning of the French Revolution, the *Mémoires* did not adequately address the new questions raised about Lafayette's place in history. In his memoirs, Lafayette had responded to royalists' criticism of his actions, but he had not addressed what the Jacobins said because he did not think that anybody would believe the Jacobins. Rediscovered by republicans and socialists, the Jacobins' interpretation of the Revolution and their criticisms of Lafayette have come to dominate historical writing. Yet their accusations went unanswered in the *Mémoires*.²⁴

Many biographies appeared over the decades that discussed the times and the man, giving factual accounts of his life based on the known documents. Charlemagne Tower published what was considered to be a definitive two-volume edition in 1894. It was American, and so presented a very romantic view of the figure who had been hailed as "Our Marquis" both during the Revolutionary War and during his triumphant return in

²⁰ Sylvia Neely, "Lafayette's *Mémoires* and the Changing Legacy of Two Revolutions," *European History Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2004): 372.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 379.

²² *Ibid.*, 385.

²³ *Ibid.*, 383.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 386.

1824, and who had been mourned by an America that veritably shut down upon his death. Many of the biographies in subsequent years were American in origin, and followed along these same lines, such as the many volumes by Gottschalk, still heavily quoted by writers today. There was a departure in the mid-twentieth century for psychoanalysis, which reduced Lafayette (along with all other heroes of history) to a self-serving, egotistical man who was inextricably bound by his neuroses and so unworthy of adulation. Mostly, writing about Lafayette dropped off as writers felt that it had all been done and lost perspective of his importance in the grand scheme of his times. In 1996, the respected Lloyd Kramer published *Lafayette in Two Worlds—Public Cultures and Personal Identities in an Age of Revolutions*. This volume moved beyond the traditional analytical biography and into an in-depth analysis of the effects upon and by Lafayette at such a pivotal epoch in Western Civilization. It sparked an interest in the reexamination of the importance of such a figure as Lafayette on a relatively objective scale. Too, only in the last decade have new documents surfaced that were hidden in the family archives or in difficult to reach places, heretofore unexamined. James M. Perry wrote in 1997 in the *Wall Street Journal*

of an amazing cache of documents squirreled away about 200 years ago in the walls and closets of La Grange, Lafayette's chateau outside Paris, which is still occupied by one of his descendants, [the late] Count Rene de Chambrun. Those papers—maybe 25,000 in all—have been microfilmed and are now available for the first time in the manuscript reading room at the U.S. Library of Congress.²⁵

Using these sources, along with a reassessment of the primary sources, the Unger biography was written, which has received highest approval in its reviews by academia. "As a good journalist he has studied the witnesses' testimonies, compared their accounts, and only then has written his story."²⁶ He recounts in his preface the pitfalls of writing about Lafayette up until now: how Americans often badly translate the old French idioms, the missing or edited letters and works, the broken English of Lafayette when he first arrived, the false accounts written for political gain, the unwillingness of most to sort through the extreme amounts of sources, which are sometimes hard to reach, and the gross subjectivity of many authors whose works are then relied upon.²⁷ From the flurry of pending academic writing since this work was published, it may be surmised that Unger has rekindled an interest in this historical figure, especially in the scholarly world.

Though his total motivations can never be fully known, it is very difficult to deny that Lafayette was an important man in his time and continues to have significant historical relevance even today. Only such a consequential man could have inspired such awe and such vehement opposition among the people of his day. He was witness to some of the most important events of modern history, and almost no one's involvement in these proceedings was better documented than his. He was beloved by some of the greatest

²⁵ James M. Perry, "Gen. Lafayette: Man of (Many) Letters" *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 1997, sec. A.14.

²⁶ Robert Rhodes Crout, review of *Lafayette*, by Harlow Giles Unger, *The Journal of Military History* 67, no. 4 (2003): 1287.

²⁷ Unger, *Lafayette*, xi-xxiii.

figures of his time, becoming the veritably adopted son of George Washington and being hailed by Kings and philosophers, poets and politicians. During his lifetime, portrayals of Lafayette always held something of the mythic in them, from the gallant knight to the vile villain. Whatever the bent of the historian, they are faced with a character of monumental proportions which they simply cannot deny. It is the job of the historian to give the most accurate representation they can, though no historian can write entirely without bias. They too are human, and are just as subject to human triumph and error as the men and women whose lives they recount. Lafayette was not a perfect man, but he struggled to live unfalteringly by his principles, and this often cost him greatly and shows that was not the greatest of statesmen. Still, he is quite an example in a modern age of turmoil and upheaval. As recent return to favor shows, he is still rather interesting to modern minds and is quite worth the scholarly study of his achievements as a man and a legend.

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