

Lafayette: His Extraordinary Life and Legacy

Donald Miller

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This is an insightful and well-researched biography of a man known in the United States primarily for his role in the American Revolution.

Donald Miller's biography of the Marquis de Lafayette chronicles the pivotal events of his life from birth to death. *Lafayette: His Extraordinary Life and Legacy*, while packed with historical detail, also offers insightful observations about his quixotic personality.

Born in 1757 to a wealthy family in southern France, Lafayette aspired from an early age to emulate the knights of his ancestry. An arranged marriage at age sixteen brought him an appointment as second lieutenant in an elite military corps and into the same circles as the future King Louis XVI. By 1777, the ambitious but inexperienced aristocrat crossed the Atlantic to help American colonists fight the British for independence. His advocacy of freedom for everyone continued after the war when he returned to France for its own revolution, wrote his treatise on the rights of man, endured imprisonment, and later toured the United States as its honored guest.

Rich historical detail enlivens this narrative of the "general," a title Lafayette ascribed to himself after he returned to France and rejected his inherited title of marquis. During his imprisonment in Austria, men sympathetic to him and his liberal ideas worked out a complicated plan for his escape, using a seventeenth-century method of subterfuge to communicate by means of the books they had delivered to his prison cell. Miller writes, "Notes written in lemon juice on page margins could be read faintly when warmed by a lamp or sunlight."

Miller was a career newspaper editor before his retirement. His factual writing style reflects extensive research and creates a realistic sense of time and place.

This biography successfully reveals surprising contradictions in Lafayette's personality that are not generally attributed to him. Miller portrays a man who relishes being the center of attention but lacks the desire to take control at crucial political turning points. Specifically, after rallying the French commoners to take a peaceful approach to the revolution, he failed to lead them on that path. Annotated endnotes explain points referred to in the text but are occasionally incorrectly numbered or have no comparable endnote. This well-researched narrative is dense with the titles and given names of the many participants in Lafayette's long life and may confound less attentive readers.

Lafayette: His Extraordinary Life and Legacy provides Americans, who know "the hero of two worlds" primarily for his participation in their revolution, a more complete version of his life. Both amateur and professional historians will also benefit from reading this book.

MARGARET CULLISON (October 1, 2015)

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