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Melanie Randolph Miller, *Envoy to the Terror: Gouverneur Morris and the French Revolution*. Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, 2005, xiv + 285 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$30.00 U. S. (hb). ISBN 1-57488-786-6.

Review by Barry Shapiro, Allegheny College.

Reflecting a recent revival of interest in some of the more conservative of the American Founding Fathers, [1] Gouverneur Morris, a trusted diplomatic agent of George Washington who became deeply involved in French revolutionary intrigue, has suddenly emerged as the subject of no less than three biographical studies in the past two years. Like the two full-length treatments of the life of this New York patrician published in 2003, [2] Melanie Randolph Miller's more focused account of Morris's tumultuous sojourn in France between 1789 and 1794 seeks to rescue him from the scholarly neglect to which he had apparently been consigned by American historians, and, in Miller's words, to "refurbish his place of honor in our history" (p. 239). [3] Indeed, prospecting the same vein as William Howard Adams, who claims that Morris should be situated in "the top rank of international nation builders struggling through two epochal revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic," [4] Miller contends that her protagonist belongs "in the pantheon of America's political thinkers" (p. xi), and she is especially insistent that his understanding of the French Revolution was vastly superior to that of a shallow-mindedly pro-revolutionary Jefferson (p. 81). But even a reader more generally inclined than this reviewer to seek out studies so heavily invested in an attempt to measure the "stature" of a given historical figure will need to take into consideration the extent to which this lively and engaging brief for Morris seems to have been shaped by what might be described as the author's fierce sense of loyalty to her subject.

Having practiced for many years as an attorney before taking up graduate studies in American history, Melanie Miller's primary aim in this book appears to be to uphold the posthumous interests of her client. Though Morris himself is portrayed as a rather laid-back and surprisingly non-vindictive individual who was not overly concerned about what contemporaries thought of him or what posterity would think of him, Miller is unremittingly vigilant throughout her study in defending him against a wide variety of supposed slights and affronts. Indeed, in characterizing the failure of contemporaries and historians alike to give what she would consider proper credit for Morris's efforts, as American ambassador, to save a number of people from the guillotine as an "insulting dismissal" (p. 241), Miller seems to indicate a degree of emotional involvement in her project that should, at minimum, give the reader pause. In particular, with Morris's judicious and wise "moderation" and "pragmatism" contrasted throughout with the destructive zeal of the revolutionaries, one might have thought that an admirer of what is presented as the New Yorker's nuanced and reasoned approach to revolutionary politics would have brought a little more detachment and a little less reflexive defensiveness to the historical enterprise.

As part of her efforts to disperse the clouds of "disrespect" that purportedly surround Morris's name (p. 240), Miller invests a not insignificant amount of energy in casting aside exaggerated and ill-informed characterizations of him as "an 'anachronism' who wanted a return to prerevolutionary France" (p. 132). Yet, by her own account, Morris's activities on behalf of the version of "enlightened constitutional monarchy" that he saw as "the only hope of avoiding anarchy and eventual despotism" make it quite clear why it is accurate to view him as essentially hostile to the French Revolution (p. xiv). Thus, for example, in September 1791, Morris sent a memo to Louis XVI suggesting that the king couple his

acceptance of the just-completed Constitution with an explicit denunciation of certain of its provisions, a memo which put the soon-to-be American ambassador in the position of advocating greater resistance to the work of the Constituent Assembly than the monarch himself would be prepared to undertake (pp. 86-88). In fact, as Miller relates, Morris condemned Louis's unconditional acceptance of the Constitution as "unmanly" (p. 88). But with little apparent interest in the political context of fall 1791 and with little feel for the political dynamics of the situation, Miller seems oblivious to the palpably counter-revolutionary implications of advising the monarch to publicly criticize the Assembly at this particular moment in revolutionary history. Treating the memo in question as a kind of academic exercise in which her hero demonstrates his astuteness on the subject of constitution-making, she seems reluctant, despite the evidence that she presents, to recognize just how far to the right, in terms of revolutionary political geography, Morris had situated himself.

Despite this reluctance, Miller is unable to avoid acknowledgement of the blatantly counter-revolutionary nature of Morris's most dramatic endeavor on behalf of "enlightened constitutional monarchy," his participation in various plots designed to allow the royal family to escape from Paris on the eve of the monarchy's fall in August 1792. Yet, even here, the author seeks to portray the New Yorker, "whose compassion," she has somehow determined, "was the driving force for some of his most censured actions" (p. 90), as acting for humanitarian as much as for political reasons. Thus, his conspiratorial activities during this period are attributed to a desire "to save the monarchs' lives" as well as to a wish "to salvage a constitutional monarchy" (p. 165). Above all, notwithstanding some obvious squeamishness about the rather undiplomatic behavior of the recently-installed American envoy (Morris took up official ambassadorial duties in early 1792), Miller insists on the "uprightness" of her client's intentions (p. 165). Indeed, given her depiction of him as a man whose "sensibilities led him to try to help what he more than once acknowledged was doomed to be the losing side" (p. 92), and her contention that his story is, in some undisclosed sense, "an *American* story for Morris was thoroughly American in all he said and did in France" (p. xiii [author's italics]), one wonders what stopped her from asserting that Morris's efforts to save the monarchy were fundamentally rooted in what we used to be told was the American tendency to sympathize with the underdog.

Though evidently comforted by her conviction that Morris's intentions were upright, Miller remains troubled by the spectacle of the American ambassador's clandestine machinations against the established revolutionary regime, behavior which she sees as "certainly not in accordance with the ordinary definition of the role of a diplomat" (p. 165). Nonetheless, she rallies to his defense with the contention that, being cut off from any possibility of receiving timely instructions from his government, "he acted on America's behalf in what he believed to be in France's best interests" (p. 165). Now in the absence of any general discussion by Miller of late eighteenth-century diplomatic norms and practices and how they might have differed from those of later periods, the reader is not provided with a broader context in which Morris's behavior might be situated. Still, in contemplating Morris's story, this reviewer was struck not so much by the idea of a representative of a foreign power intriguing against an established regime (any number of recent examples come rapidly to mind) but rather by the extent to which Morris seemed to feel that he was indeed free to act, in Miller's telling words, on behalf of "what he believed to be in France's best interests." Whereas the "meddling" in another nation's internal affairs carried out in today's world, for example, by American agents is usually pursued in the name of what is at least conceived of as America's "national interests," such considerations do not appear to have played a significant role in shaping Morris's response to French revolutionary events. For Morris, caught up in the compelling drama and intensity of the revolutionary moment and perhaps reflecting the looser hold that national identity and loyalty appear to have exerted in that age in comparison with our own, seems to have acted in terms of a set of priorities and loyalties (whether ideological, humanitarian, or even personal and romantic) that, for better or worse, took precedence over any concern for what he might have thought of as the interests of his own nation. Or putting it another way, in the pressing immediacy

of the revolutionary whirlwind, far-off America must have seemed even further away than it actually was.

Such a conclusion would, however, be anathema to Miller, who shrinks from facing the implications of her own contention that, as a French revolutionary actor, Morris was largely focused on behaving in accordance with what he thought would be good for France. Minimizing the obvious difficulties that Morris's well-known anti-revolutionary stance posed for the possibility of smooth diplomatic relations with a series of revolutionary governments (the revolutionaries may not have known about his conspiratorial activities, but they were certainly aware of his views), Miller seeks to rebut the usual historical assertion that Morris helped contribute to a souring in American-French relations. Thus, conveniently ignoring the extent to which the very naming of an anti-revolutionary like Morris to be the American ambassador constituted a fundamental provocation, she writes that "it is a fact that the provocations were on the French side, and they were flagrant" (p. 240). Indeed, citing the pragmatic and conciliatory approach to diplomacy that he apparently adopted after August 1792, she suggests that Morris actually "*prevented* hostilities between the United States and France" (p. 240, [author's italics]). But this relentless defending of her client at every turn quickly becomes tiresome, especially when, as frequently occurs, defense takes the form of grandiose celebration. Clearly Morris became passionately involved in the gripping human drama that was the French Revolution and clearly he played his part in that drama with a certain degree of verve and intelligence. Do his French revolutionary activities enhance his claim, as Miller would have it, to a "place of honor" in American history? Rather than addressing that slippery and perhaps ultimately meaningless question, I would prefer to end with the more mundane observation that, notwithstanding his diplomatic credentials, Morris was lucky to escape the Revolution in one piece so that he could eventually go home and help to bring about the building of the Erie Canal and the laying out of a grid plan for the streets of midtown Manhattan.

NOTES

[1] See for example Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004); James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005); David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); and, in a comparative study that is particularly unfavorable towards Jefferson, John Ferling, *Setting the World Ablaze: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[2] William Howard Adams, *Gouverneur Morris: An Independent Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003); and Richard Brookhiser, *Gentleman Revolutionary: Gouverneur Morris The Rake Who Wrote the Constitution* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

[3] Not surprisingly, Morris's activities during the French Revolution have generally been of more interest to French than to American historians. See for example Adhémar Esmein, *Gouverneur Morris: Un témoin américain de la révolution française* (Paris: Hachette, 1906), and Jean-Jacques Fiechter, *Un diplomate américain sous la Terreur: les années européennes de Gouverneur Morris, 1789-1798* (Paris: Fayard, 1983), two studies which largely cover the same ground as Miller's. While Fiechter's book appears in Miller's bibliography, Esmein's quite comprehensive work unaccountably does not.

[4] Adams, *Gouverneur Morris*, xi.

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