

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 25
Issue 3 *September*

Article 7

September 1989

Many Gracious Providences: The Religious Cosmos of Martha Laurens Ramsay (1759-1811)

Joanna B. Gillespie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 25, no.3, September 1989, p.199-212

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Many Gracious Providences: The Religious Cosmos of Martha Laurens Ramsay (1759–1811)

by JOANNA B. GILLESPIE

Oldest surviving daughter of a leading pre-Revolutionary War Charlestonian (Henry Laurens was the only Southerner to serve as President of the Continental Congress, 1778–79), Martha was educated by her brothers' tutors. Her oldest brother, John, aide to Washington and Lafayette, was a war hero—killed in one of the last battles of the Revolution (1782). Her adolescence was spent with a little sister (the mother died as Eleanor was born) in the household of Papa Henry's childless brother and wife, while Papa took her three brothers, John and two younger brothers, Henry, Jr., and Jamie, to England for schooling (1770–74). Uncle James's failing health transplanted that household to England; stranded there by the outbreak of war, Martha eventually moved with them to France, where living was less expensive and there was less hostility toward Americans. At the end of the war she served as her father's hostess and secretary during his appointment as one of the Peace Commissioners for the new nation (1782–84).

In 1785 Martha and the remaining Laurens family (one brother, HL, Jr., her sister Eleanor, the child Frances orphaned by brother John, the widowed aunt, and a lifelong English friend, Miss Futerell) followed Papa back to war-ravaged Charleston. Two years later, already aged 27, Martha married Dr. David Ramsay, a physician, historian, and civic leader who was ten years her senior; having just buried his second wife, he brought his infant son, John Witherspoon Ramsay, to their household. During twenty-four years of marriage, Martha and David had eleven children, eight of whom were living when she died in June 1811.

MARTHA Laurens Ramsay mapped the boundaries of her religious cosmos, probably quite deliberately, on June 20, 1808, with the phrase “the many gracious providences I have experienced.”¹ Her diary

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 1988 meeting of the Western Women Historians Association.

1. David Ramsay, M.D., *Memoirs of the Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, 4th ed. (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1814 [Armstrong's 2nd ed.]), p. 166. Hereafter references from the *Memoirs* itself will be indicated by page numbers in the text. Other materials from which I have reconstructed the events referred to in her diary include her father's collected papers at the University of South Carolina, *Henry Laurens Papers*, 10 volumes, and her husband's papers, “David Ramsay, 1749–1815,” ed. Robert L. Brunhouse, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 55, Part 4 (1965), 1–250. This essay is part of a larger study of her life and times.

meditations, blending self-analysis and scriptural quotation, sometimes neglected the specifics of the event precipitating a particular reflection, but this last entry carefully explained her profound feeling of deliverance: their house had not burned to the ground in a fearful neighborhood conflagration. The “dry situation of these wooden buildings, with their appurtenances,” might have resulted in the three townhouses on Charleston’s Broad Street, “so nearly connected,” being consumed “in less than fifteen minutes,” given the tumultuous winds. Fortunately the storm had struck before ten in the evening, so the neighborhood was “yet up and awake”; human action in the “timely discovery” of the blaze “before the fire had arisen to a great height” was the providential agent. Martha and her family had survived and could record the ageless lesson that “God, who is rich in mercy, is better to us than our fears. . . .” Characteristically, the entry concluded with self-application:

May the recollection of this goodness keep my heart quiet and submissive under the various cares that, at present, torment it . . . whatever anxieties assail me, *may this and the many other gracious providences I have experienced, silence my fears, encourage my hopes, and enable me to go on.* . . . (166, emphasis added)

Martha Laurens Ramsay—and others whose mental horizons had been shaped by the same sermons, books, conversations, and images, exposed to the same buffetings of fate and concerns about experimenting, in a new country, with a new form of civil government—inhabited a world in which each eventuality was a subject for theological interpretation. To take one example, alert, thoughtful women raised in the tradition of moral guardianship found the role of citizen/wife anomalous. Martha was unusually independent among her peers while at the same time profoundly dutiful. In the emotional *solar plexus* of such a progressive female, caught between old and new structures and responses, Providence had to be an operative concept.

A contemporary English fictional heroine could caution herself, “it is the office of Religion to reconcile us to the seemingly hard dispensations of Providence,” and readers like Martha knew exactly what she meant. Novelists like Mary Wollstonecraft in *Mary, A Fiction* [1788] translated the providential metaphor into popular meaning.² Before that, seventeenth-century devotional literature had treated it as an important mechanism of religious rationalization.³ Providence served as a bridge between theological doctrines and the exigencies of daily living, an explanatory idea for high-minded women like Martha or the fictional Mary who would struggle “to discern what end her various faculties were destined to pursue.”⁴ In the uncertainties and hopes of late eighteenth-century America,

2. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788; New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 96.

3. Martha’s reading about Providence included the then-popular English preacher, the Rev. John Flavel, *Complete Works, II* (1691; microfilm), plus such devotional classics as Isaac Watts’s *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* (1715), Richard Allestree’s *The Whole Duty of Man* (1695), Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, William Law’s *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728).

4. Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, p. 19.

a woman's religious cosmos needed the metaphor of Providence for active assurance and explanation, as well as for (sometimes seemingly fatalistic) refuge.

The portrait of Martha's religious cosmos available to us today, the 4" x 6" leather pocket-sized *Memoirs of the Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, was compiled by her husband from her diary, letters, and writings within three weeks after her death. Its 220 pages included Dr. Ramsay's forty-seven-page biographical introduction, ten pages of letters from her famous father during the War (sure to boost sales of the volume), other appendices containing her youthful Religious Covenant and various meditations, and sixty-seven pages titled "Extracts From Her Diary"; these reflected Dr. Ramsay's own republican-political notions of the virtues he wanted Martha to exemplify.⁵ Compiled memoirs in this era generally reflected both the voice of the editor and the person being memorialized; Dr. Ramsay's approach was typical, if freighted with his own patriotic ambitions. The *Memoirs* constituted literary apotheosis for an admired "mother of the republic"⁶ and one of his own last attempts to influence the new nation's character (he died in 1815).

America needed heroes and symbols to fill its recently-vacated horizon, ones that combined and evoked the unique blend of Protestant Christianity, republican idealism, and emerging nationalism. Hastily rejecting the symbols of *Brittania*, the artists and literati of the new nation (Dr. Ramsay among them) constructed new icons, visual and print—apostrophes to *Columbia*, "deification" of the Father of his Country. In 1811 David Ramsay's unique contribution to the pantheon of national heroes was a memorial to a female, a personal tribute to his wife cast in the form of prescription for the new American woman.⁷ (For example, any wit or whimsy Martha might have possessed was thoroughly edited out in order to fit the Protestant-republican cultural standard of "seriousness."⁸)

5. The original of the diary has apparently long since been lost. Internal evidence indicates that while Dr. Ramsay was selective in choosing the extracts that advanced his editorial and political bias, he respected her too much to put words in her mouth, or pen; the language is hers. The *Memoirs* was widely reprinted and circulated among religious readers, women in all parts of the new country treating it as one of many (predominantly British) pious memoirs of Protestant women heroines. E.g., Sonia Krause, a young Moravian woman in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, talked about it in her unpublished diary, #11, Tuesday, April 10, 1832 (Barbara Wright, *Pilgrim in Bethlehem: American Moravian Piety and the Identity Formation of a 19th Century Woman*, Diss. Drew University Theological School, Madison, New Jersey, forthcoming).

6. Though in fact the memoir idealizes motherhood as her citizenly contribution to the new nation, the phrase is Linda Kerber's, (*Women of the Republic* [Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1983]), and was never used by either Martha or David; they would, however, have been pleased with its implications.

7. For visual imagery in this period, Phoebe Lloyd Jacobs, "John James Barralet and the Apotheosis of George Washington," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 12 (1977), 115-38; for the importance of myth-creating in certain historical periods, Warren Susman, *Culture as History* (1973; New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). The popular literary journal in the early nation, *The Columbian Magazine*, published in Philadelphia from 1786 to 1792, to which David was a friend and contributor, reveals the mental and visual ideals and images honored by people like Martha and David. See Lawrence J. Friedman, *Inventors of the Promised Land* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 3-44; and William J. Free, *The Columbian Magazine and American Literary Nationalism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968).

8. Basic background for this era is Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (1969; New York: W. W. Norton, 1972).

Dr. and Mrs. Ramsay belonged in the company of late eighteenth-century Protestant ideologues. The year after the Constitution was written, Dr. Ramsay proclaimed that "Heaven [itself had] smiled on their deliberations and inspired [the constitutional] councils. . . ," a view shared by their friends. In 1804, in an oration celebrating accession of the Louisiana Territory, he went even further: "Our present form of government is the very best on earth for a great country; . . . our federo-national system is an improvement on all the governments that have gone before it."⁹ Such rhetorical exuberance was the Revolutionary War generation's version of American exceptionalism or "chosen nation" imagery—an identity first traced in Increase Mather's record of strange and remarkable providences.¹⁰ Readings of Providence, a rhetoric of biblical concepts and images superimposed on and intertwined with events in New World history, were educed by the Calvinist Puritan's need to decipher God's attitude in signs and events; they attempted to reconcile what they saw as divine intervention in the real world with the new scientific understandings of Nature and Reason. The activity of tracing the hand of God, or Providence, became a current in all religious perspectives and the theme for countless theological tomes and sermons as well as a popular usage in fiction.¹¹

This essay is focused on the Providence-reading (within her religious cosmos) that enabled Martha Ramsay to survive her chaotic times. As people do after major upheaval, Americans yearned to get "back" to what they remembered as normal. But in Martha's hometown, post-war inflation devoured income, making fabrics, spices, and books costly; children had to be educated without public schools; refugees from the French Revolution needed charity. Also in the 1790s Americans like Martha confronted new standards of who and what was "important"; Martha's aging father might have been a legend during the Revolution, but center stage was now filled with young men who had no memory of the War. The woman in the *Memoirs*, sophisticated and well-trained by virtue of her father's social and international stature (her contemporary, Abigail Adams, was among the few women of that era with similar cosmopolitan seasoning), experienced her adult life as a tumult of financial and emo-

9. David Ramsay, *An Oration on the Cession of Louisiana to the United States*, May 12, 1804, St. Michael's Church (Charleston: W. P. Young, 1804), p. 19. John F. Berens, *Providence & Patriotism in Early America, 1640-1815* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1978), p. 102, quotes his "Oration for Delivery to the Inhabitants of Charleston, 1788."

10. Increase Mather, *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (Boston: S. Green, 1684; Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977); a more recent collection of historical manifestations of providence is John Demos, *Remarkable Providences, 1600-1760* (New York: George Braziller, 1972).

11. Two of many Providence-tracing sermons in the John Hay Library (Metcalf Collection), Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, are by a British clergyman, Henry Stebbing, "Discourse Concerning the Governing Providence of God" (London: L. Davis and C. Reymers, February 6, 1756), and an American, Joseph Lathrop, "The Constancy and Uniformity of the Divine Government," April 7, 1803 (Springfield, Massachusetts). For a summary of Puritan historiography, David D. Hall, "On Common Ground: The Coherence of American Puritan Studies," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44, No. 2 (April 1987), 193-229.

tional disappointments. Martha's mind was the kind that realized itself through periodic spiritual introspection; keeping a diary was her resource for exploring and interpreting her limitations, for coping, and for trying to discern meaning.¹² The one explanatory system, the one analytic method available to an educated woman who was determined to use her own abilities in religious self-management, was her seamless religious cosmos. She viewed her world whole, so to speak, each aspect of her responsibilities and *persona* constituting the authorization for and source of the others; her physical world was also whole—human social order and nature, all under the purview of Providence. Unlike twentieth-century life that separates out religion as a distinct component of personality and life, Martha's view of wifely role, Christian nurture, household management, even knowledge itself, was unitary. This is the more astounding, even retrograde, in our eyes since those religious structures from which she derived this integrated psychic structure, and of which she was a model member, were themselves in flux.¹³

Martha Ramsay's lifespan (1759–1811)—the era of revolution, constitution, and nationhood—has often been characterized as a period of religious decline. Before and just after the Revolutionary War, churches in the new states were believed to be at low ebb in terms of membership, the Episcopal church in which Martha had been raised dwindling to near extinction. Bonomi's *Under the Cope of Heaven* has recently challenged that contention with a concrete and functional picture of church membership and religious relationships during the pre-War period.¹⁴

More recently, historian Edwin Gaustad has noted that American religion and its institutions were experiencing reorientation and restructuring in this era, rather than decline. He identified at least four significant currents rearranging American religious institutions and mind-set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: the disestablishment of a dominant church in a given locale—abrupt for Anglicans in the South, gradual for Congregationalists in New England; an increasing anti-clericalism that was the religious counterpart of Americans' challenge to British governmental regulation; the pervasive climate created by European Enlightenment thought that undergirded challenges to inherited and traditional religious sources of authority, particularly the Bible and revealed religion; and competitiveness among denominations plus the

12. Ann Janine Morey, "American Myth and Biblical Interpretation in the Fiction of H. B. Stowe and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman," *Journal of American Religion*, 55, No. 4 (Winter 1987), 747–60, explored the use of scriptural self-interpretation by nineteenth-century women as their means of dealing with circumscribed social and marital boundaries. Martha was similarly impatient with some of the limits on her actions but directed much of her energy into educating her young and helping her husband with his writing (*Memoirs*, pp. 27–28).

13. Martha had been raised in the prominent Anglican church in Charleston, St. Philip's. After marriage she joined her husband's independent congregation known as the Circular Church (a church blending Presbyterian and Congregational polities but unaffiliated with either).

14. Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society & Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford Press, 1986).

emergence of new denominations and new voluntary associations within and across denominational lines.¹⁵

Some of the harshest Calvinist doctrines, such as infant damnation, were being supplanted by child-rearing goals over which parents themselves had some control—like the ideal of republican virtue that could be cultivated.¹⁶ New forms of church and charity were evolving for women; for example, in Charleston (1804) a Woman's Society for Distributing Books and Starting Schools was organized, as was a woman's prayer group a few years earlier. The basic work of "hands-on" benevolence to neighbors, slaves, and sick relatives continued to be carried out by women, but interdenominational organizations, where women wrote and administered their own "constitutions" as their husbands wrote new structures of government, were the emerging form of religious activism. In a time of religious, national, and personal redefinition, then, Martha Ramsay's religious cosmos offers us glimpses into the power of religion that persisted in people's private lives, whatever may have been taking place institutionally.¹⁷

The specific lens on women's history provided by personal religious experience focuses on Martha's texts—writings and life—as her meaning-constituting system, her religious cosmos. Providence was what made everything fit, even the anomalies and jagged edges. In her dialogues with Providence we can decipher the various institutional arrangements around marriage, education, gender, parental responsibilities, citizenship, and church that organized her self-identity—and the ways in which such "meanings" were changing. For instance, implicit in her words were the ways she experienced various kinds of and attitudes toward power and authority (particularly domestic and religious).¹⁸ The written texts reveal those submerged points where the politics of her particular culture impinged on her religious symbolic language, in her carefully loyal references to marital stress and her meditations on spiritual submission. Male theologians of that era were struggling to articulate the place of religion in the Age of Reason; laity like Martha claimed the practicality of Providence as to spelling out and rationalizing the "correspondences" between

15. Comment, Edwin S. Gaustad, *Western Association of Women Historians* (Pasadena: May 1987), where the first version of this paper was presented.

16. Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750–1800* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984).

17. Gaustad, May 1987; David Ramsay, *History of South Carolina, 1670–1808* (1808; Newberry, S.C.: W. J. Duffie, 1858), II, 204. A similar interdenominational women's group appeared in Rhode Island in 1800, The Female Charitable Association (Archives, Rhode Island Historical Society). The Ramsays would have noted the varieties of religious "news" in *The Columbian Magazine* such as a poetic welcome to the Episcopal bishop, William Seabury of Pennsylvania, 1, No. 1 (September 1786), 44; an appreciation of the Moravian community in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 1, No. 10 (June 1787), 507; the preaching of a converted American Indian, the Rev. David Oakum, 2, No. 2 (February 1787), 116; an unusual defense of Roman Catholicism, 1, Supplement (1786), 872; and the announcement of the first anti-slavery society being established, 1, No. 5 (January 1787), 251.

18. Joan W. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: or, The Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, 14, No. 1 (Spring 1988), 33–50; Joanna B. Gillespie, "The Politics of Matrimony," paper, *Society for the History of the Early Republic*, July 1987.

life experience and the scriptural images filling her mental world. In a society where covenant (or the secular term, contract) was the dominant concept, Providence linked her intellectual processes and personal religious identity with the larger Source of meaning. Her diary, as preserved in the *Memoirs*, thus becomes a historical resource for eighteenth-century understandings of the term Providence and indicates one person's particular path within the larger religious context. (In this way the "memoir" serves as an example of so-called "minor literature" that is "almost as valuable as the classics"—but of course "without [the same] authority" as theology.¹⁹)

Martha invoked Providence on more than twenty-five occasions between 1791–1808. They were years of wifehood, childbearing and child-mourning, loss of father, sister, and friends to death, psychic depression, money shortages, failing health, and a brash new society replacing her ordered world of childhood and nostalgia. At one level, Martha's Providence merely reflected the accessibility of the term, the assumption of a divine presence known by a sort of intuition; she often ignored logic and theology (though she had read it), finding functional truths about God in practical, devout human beings (like her father) who relied on their own common sense rather than religious argument. The general drift towards Deism and Socinianism, even Unitarianism, was implicit in her "modernism," but she consciously warded off such heresies (171). The diary traces her inherited Calvinist perspective on life—constant spiritual "warfare" as it evolved toward a more existential tolerance of life's intractable complexities. She displayed little anxiety about the large question of salvation, writing instead about everyday insights and trials. While philosophers and theologians wrote authoritatively about Truth in Nature, women like Martha wrote with unself-conscious authority about discerning Providence in their own "bleeding footsteps"—transposing their experience into the language of scriptural abstractions.²⁰

At another level, however, Martha had been raised to honor Reason; she had grown up listening to Anglican sermons with their numbered paragraphs of rational, systematic argument. The version of religion she would have absorbed as a child may have seemed intellectually rigid but was actually moderate, crediting human works with religious motive, praising goodness over doctrine and virtue over narrow rule-keeping.²¹ At St. Philip's Episcopal parish, the principal church of the Charleston establishment (until 1786), she had learned toleration and enjoyment of the world's pleasures, in moderation, along with liberality of doctrine,

19. Hall, "American Puritan Studies," p. 214; Ernest Campbell Mossner, *Bishop Butler and The Age of Reason* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1936), p. xiii.

20. Mossner, *Bishop Butler*, p. 14; Hall, p. 219; Morey, p. 749.

21. William J. Welsh, David C. Skaggs, and Donald K. Enholm, "In Pursuit of the Golden Mean—A Case Study of Mid-18th c. Frontier Anglican Preaching," *Anglican & Episcopal History*, 57, No. 2 (June 1988), 176–88.

stability of custom.²² Thanks to her book-importer uncle she was unusually well read in religious self-help books such as Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*—from which she copied out and dedicated her own “Covenant” as a teenager.²³

Encouraged by her father (her mother died when Martha was eleven) to master religious and historical literature as well as the classics she studied with her older brother, meanwhile not neglecting the plum puddings and needlework that were woman's part of the household equation, Martha was the intellectual peer of her fellow citizens, including those who invoked Providence as a politico-religious rationale for independence from Great Britain. But gender made her apply it differently—domesticate it, so to speak. She was capable of phrasing her religious questions in sophisticated theological discourse, but Providence most often emerges as a basic psychic tool, a cry from the heart.

Providence first appeared in the diary when little Patty was preserved from a horror haunting any mother of a two-year-old. “By God's good providence,” Martha had been nearby when Patty fell into the fireplace and was able to pull her daughter to safety (107). That was November 1791; her husband was away, having left that day to serve in the South Carolina House of Assembly in the new capitol city of Columbia, so the diary alone received her fulsome relief.

A third living daughter, Catherine, had been born in 1792, the same year Henry Laurens died and was cremated at his plantation.²⁴ Her father's death was the end of an era for Martha psychologically and spiritually, in more ways than the passing of a patriarch usually affects his descendants. Father and daughter had been almost psychically connected after her mother's death; she was the apple of his eye as a bright, achieving youngster and his favorite secretary (in Europe, 1782–84). However, the death of this major figure on her personal landscape may also have been, in some ways, a release. After 1792 she no longer named her little daughters with both her father's names, a potent symbolic shift; before then, Eleanor Henry Laurens Ramsay, Martha Henry Laurens Ramsay (Patty), Frances Henry Laurens Ramsay (Fanny, the infant who died), and Catherine Henry Laurens Ramsay had been christened in an obvious salute to, and claim on, Grandpa Laurens.

Another little girl, Sabina Elliot Ramsay, was born in 1793, the same year that Martha's only sister Eleanor (Mrs. Charles Pinckney) died—an “exceeding heavy stroke of thy Providence,” she wrote, from a “heart . . . too full to write on this subject” (110). After losing one infant to

22. Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 75.

23. For lists of her uncle James's imports, Hennig Cohen, *The South Carolina Gazette* (Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1953), p. 145.

24. That a statesman of his renown had specified such a barbarous burial gave rise to speculation. Professor Irene Quenzler Brown, University of Connecticut, called my attention to a report of it in the *Panoplist* (February 1807), p. 403, a New England religious journal edited by David and Martha's friend, Jedediah Morse.

death, the fourth daughter's safe negotiation of the dangerous time of weaning was a time of thanksgiving. Martha's patriotic identity expressed itself in breast-feeding all her infants "without the aid of any wet nurse," her husband proudly recorded. Their fellow New England moralist and designer of a distinctively American education, Enos Hitchcock, linked that type of maternal patriotism with quintessential republicanism: "in America, there are comparatively few mothers so unnatural as, of choice, to put their children out to nurse."²⁵

A year later, 1794, Martha used the diary to argue herself out of what her rational self told her was unwarranted melancholia. She was experiencing a rebelliousness that could not be quelled or rationalized—a tumult of doubt and humiliation caused by money shortage, deaths, intractable relatives, and general resentments. She made what she hoped would be a list of changes in her habits:

I would wish to be more diligent in self-examination, more watchful to prayer, more steady in resisting temptation, more careful in the instructions which I give my dear children and in the example I set before them, and more attentive to providences. . . .

Evidently her internal dialogue was therapeutic; after listing what should be different in the future, she wrote, "Lord, I am not sufficient for these things—." But, seemingly automatically, her litany of reassurance followed: "hold thou me up . . . and my feet shall not slide to fall" (109).

Late in 1794 she was already pregnant again (it would be her first son, after four living daughters), when a young friend, a bride of only twelve days, died very suddenly. Martha's shock produced an awed commitment to study such inscrutable happenings: "God grant that no such awful and awakening providence as the removal of a young person, so lately full of life and health . . . should pass without some . . . earnest desire to have my loins girt, and my lamp burning" (110). Unexpected death was a constant companion in the eighteenth century. "Our Taper of life is not always consumed by its own Flame," Charles Drelincourt, a seventeenth-century French pietist Martha often read, warned; "many unkind Blasts and showers often extinguish it."²⁶ Even though women were used to handling death, bathing and laying out the corpses and sprinkling them with petals, it challenged Martha's psychic and emotional balance.

The central portion of her diary (the year 1795), the most passionately expressed and the most difficult to reconstruct, reveals a running dialogue with Providence. At the age of thirty-two Martha was forced to come to terms—at first resisting to the point of nervous collapse—with serious losses in financial and social standing. As she, a Charleston "first family" heiress, assimilated this terrible blow to her self-esteem, the fateful

25. Enos Hitchcock, *Memoirs of the Bloomsgrave Family* (Boston: Thomas & Andrews, 1790), p. 79.

26. Charles Drelincourt, *The Christian's Defence against the Fears of Death. With Directions How to Dye Well* (Boston: Fleet & Harrison in Cornhill, 1744), p. 40; "She found great satisfaction in reading Drelincourt on Death and Watts' World to Come. . . ." (*Memoirs*, p. 43).

Mediator with whom she pleaded and raged, and the thread from which her sanity depended, was Providence.

Though Providence delivered both “mercies” and “judgments,” good and bad, Martha had schooled herself to discern its positive and chastening power in the midst of spiritual and physical depression. During the course of her agony the one negative Providential reference was a musing about the desertion of friends who had been glad to know them in more affluent times: “the grave covers most of those with whom I kept up much intimacy; and various providences have changed the hearts of some who yet remain” (157).

Once, also, Martha summoned the popular scientific Providence—the Great Engineer, the Clockmaker in the Sky, who had inscribed the amazing laws of Nature in the minute perfection of a feather. . . . Her words echoed the psalmist: “O God whose *providence is over all thy works* . . .” (112). A widely reprinted sermon, typical of many she might have read, expanded on the Enlightenment optimism fed by “the development of the Arts and Sciences.” Enlisting mechanical imagery in his exhortation, the preacher warned: “As a Clock will shew the Hour of the Day without any further interposition of the Artificer that made it,” thoughtless and lazy humans might delude themselves that “Nature may and does produce every Effect which we see about us without any further Interposition of God.” Such foolhardy confidence ignored the fact that a clock had to be kept in motion by its “weight of lead”; his cautionary question was: “in the great Machine of the World who . . . shall hang on its weights?”²⁷ One of the constants in Martha’s religious cosmos, and part of her depression, was her sense of responsibility “to hang the weights”—to assume the moral and physical care of her wide-spread family, as well as guardianship of the virtue of the new nation.²⁸ Nature and reason were, to the mind-set of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the explanatory systems that evolution and psychology have become for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁹

However, during 1795, that “worst year of my life,” nature and its order, reason and its satisfactions, were unavailing. Martha besieged Providence—for God’s self-disclosure, for rescue from her dark night of the soul: “clear up my darkened skies by thy Providence”—March 1, 1795 (113); “remind me of your providential dealings with me” over these troubled three years—July 3, 1795 (124); “please make a special interference of Providence in the life of one for whom I pray so earnestly”—Sept. 7, 1795 (133); and thanksgiving that through providence the cloud of darkness had somewhat lifted—Jan. 3, 1796 (135). The depression seemingly would not lift, leaving her

27. Stebbing, “Discourse Concerning the Governing Providence,” pp. 2–4.

28. Joanna B. Gillespie, “Relative Duties—Citizenship for Martha Laurens Ramsay in the New Republic,” paper, *Society for the History of the Early Republic*, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1988.

29. Mossner, *Bishop Butler*, p. xiv.

exercised with inward conflicts and sorrow of heart under which I have groaned for near eleven months past, and which from some peculiar circumstance have *exceeded* in kind and continuance *all the other sorrows of my life*. . . ." (135, emphasis added)

(We today might identify physical and emotional factors in what she called spiritual darkness: post-partum psychosis, lack of calcium, unresolved grief for father and sister.) By the beginning of 1796 Martha was well enough to assign a providential interpretation to her debilitating realities. She had experienced healing (she called it "surrender") during a communion service at church and felt her spirit strengthened and deepened through "coming into relationship with reality"³⁰—acceptance of life as it was at the hands of Providence, not as she wished it could be and had imagined it would be.

Spiritual lessons, however, are never learned once and for all; an agonized entry once again begged for "a gracious revival, a merciful, providential lifting up"—Nov. 29, 1797 (142). Martha had engaged in bargaining with God over another infant hovering between life and death, a daughter named Jane Montgomery—spending every hour she "could spare from nursing, prostrate before him." She had pitted the infant's survival against her own value in God's eyes.

I thought that if the life of the child should be granted me, it would be an evidence that the Lord, for Christ's sake had forgiven me those things. . . . I had bewailed before him. . . . [But] My child was taken, and I was plunged into . . . a double sorrow. (139)

Since she was the one who had enlarged the canvass of the struggle, her loss included God's favor as well as the child. She had made herself ill. "Since the death of this baby . . . [there have been] other trials of a temporal nature I have also undergone at this time; even now many things seem to be going against me." The only possibility remaining was to reinvoke the power she had found in her youthful covenant: "enable me O my God to walk as under the bonds of the covenant, and in all sorrow, to take hold of covenant consolations. . . ." (140).³¹

Feb. 3, 1799, found Martha "hanging on Providence for the events of the next two days" (144). Those events combined the death of yet a third infant daughter with unbearable anxieties about her husband's "worldly perplexities"—lawsuits, money shortages, general contentiousness, public rejection. She reiterated her sustaining motto:

In God is my trust; in his hands are the hearts of all men. I will not then fear what man can do. May he enable us to be just and upright to all, and not permit any to oppress and be hard to us. (145)

This veiled reference is the only hint that her brother, Henry Laurens, Jr., had filed bankruptcy proceedings against her husband.³²

30. Joanna B. Gillespie, "1795, Dark Night of the Soul for Martha Laurens Ramsay," *William and Mary Quarterly*, forthcoming; Carol Ochs, *Women and Spirituality* (Totowa, N.J.: Allan Rowanheld Press, 1983), p. 6.

31. Wood, *American Republic*, p. 118.

32. David Ramsay, Petition and Schedules of Insolvent Debt, 1798, 16A, Charleston Court Records, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina.

The Ramsay finances never did improve although Dr. Ramsay continued to hold public positions in Charleston, e.g., as president of the first neighborhood Fire Company, as a trustee of their church, as organizer of relief for French refugees.³³ Martha's next conversation with Providence, in March 1802, was both a thanksgiving and a lecture to herself about some temporary financial deliverance—a positively didactic correspondence between event and Holy Writ. While despairingly searching her Bible one day, “my mind wandered to the state of my finances . . . with my house full of dear children, what am I to do?” Then she took herself in hand, reprimanding such faithlessness. “What do you read your Bible for, but to fetch from it instruction and consolation, suited to all your circumstances!” Very shortly, her husband handed her a sum of money more than sufficient to lift their debts momentarily, an action she recognized as “but one instance of the manifold interventions of Providence.” She apologized to the diary for “not having recorded other manifestations . . .” but this intervention was unmistakable. “Now let an infidel call this a lucky chance” (148), she wrote, as if scoring a debating point.

Her husband also credited Providence—for her graceful survival during her physical debilitation in her last two years. He saw the hardships she endured with grace and dignity as, in the end, forging “a secret connexion with our future and most important destinies,” as “necessary links in the chain conducting from earth to heaven” (42). To illuminate that claim, he described an especially intimate scene (a formulaic element of all heroic memoirs) from her last twenty-four hours.

First, her pain-wracked body was tenderly lifted into a warm bath. Having studied her Drelincourt thoroughly those last months, Martha undoubtedly compared her diseased body, “this rotten Lodge,” with the anticipated “Palace of Immortality” she would inhabit after death and could pray, with pleasure rather than disgust, his Prayer for Mortality: “Let my Bed remember me that I must shortly lie in a Bed of Dust.” The soothing water symbolized the moment “when Death comes to break the strings of this wretched Body,” and “the Soul enters into the River of Living Water, into an Ocean of Celestial Felicity.”³⁴ The last bath was her end-of-life sacrament, comparable with baptism at the beginning of life; both were initiations into membership, in the Christian life and the Next Life.

Second, she called for a treasured artifact from her youth, the time of hope and possibilities—a hymnal given her by the Countess of Huntingdon, a great English Evangelical who had loved young Martha. In her watery suspension, the hymn she requested drew ineffable sweetness and

33. Michael E. Stevens, “The Vigilant Fire Company of Charleston,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 87, No. 2 (April 1986), 130–35; Dr. Ramsay was president in 1791. Notice of charitable efforts for French refugees in Charleston, Dr. Ramsay, president (*Providence Gazette*, September 1, 1804, 16, No. 2122, Rhode Island Historical Society).

34. Drelincourt, *Christian's Defence*, pp. 91, 38, 118.

light out of pain and decay. The theme of “sweet” providential transformation, repeated in each stanza, hallowed her gradual slippage into death:

. . . sweet to look inward and attend / The whispers of his love;
Sweet to look upward to the place / Where Jesus dwells above. . . . (46)

Her whispered word “sweet” assured the watchers that she was still conscious and in tune with the poet’s vision. Drelincourt had taught her that to “already feel Heaven in my Soul” was all the narcotic Christians needed.³⁵ In fact,

If such the sweetness of the streams, / What must the fountain be,
Where saints and angels draw their bliss / Immediately from Thee. (46)

Martha lived in a world where such belief transcended reality. As Drelincourt argued in that curiously contentious logic of early pietists, “If Life and Death were not in God’s hands, there would be nothing settled or constant . . . prophets would be found in grievous errors” [no one could trust holy scriptures], and “The Eternal Election would be totally abolished” [heaven and its promises couldn’t be counted on].³⁶ Circular as this may sound, it was utterly reasonable and airtight to Martha, sanctifying her final moments.

The sequence of rituals around her dying was planned as religiously (and we might say, administratively) as any ceremony around life landmarks in the twentieth century. She had chosen the scripture readings, the hymns to be sung, and the clergyman to officiate (her friend and David’s, the Rev. Mr. Hollinshead of the church in which they were pillars). She had ordered her own coffin, proudly specifying plain Carolina cedar. She had arranged for the family’s survival by preparing her daughters to care for the household, their father and brothers. And she had ensured her own memorial—by telling her husband, three days before she died, where to find her diary, a document whose existence had been unknown to him or anyone.

The last act in her drama, “about four o’clock in the afternoon of June 10th, 1811,” required that she ask the grieving family at the bedside if they were “willing to give her up.” Pious memoirs nearly always cited this question as the ultimate ritual; the pattern had been refreshed for Martha, three weeks before she died, when she read yet one more pious memoir (it made her eager to meet its centerpiece in heaven).³⁷ She had schooled herself for it with images such as Drelincourt’s: “give me grace so often to look on Death and the Grave that I may be acquainted with them, and that they may not fright but comfort me, Death being my entrance to the presence of my God.” The theology of nature and reason, Newton and Locke, was the language of comfort for her. “When a compound thing

35. Drelincourt, *Christian’s Defence*, p. 108.

36. Drelincourt, *Christian’s Defence*, p. 45.

37. The Rev. Montagu Pennington, *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Elizabeth Carter, 1717–1806* (Boston: Oliver C. Greenleaf, 1809).

comes to be dissolved, every part returns to its first principle; then when a man dies, his Body returns to Dust from whence 'tis taken, and the Soul returns to God who gave it."³⁸ Death held no terrors for her, only hope.

The grieving husband recorded that their children, ranging in age from twenty to nine, were made distraught by her question and begged her not to leave them. In the end it was Martha herself who capitulated; she "assured them that God had now made her entirely willing to give them all up, and in about an hour after, expired" (47). In her mind and the eyes of her witnesses, she thus fulfilled the vow of her youth, "to do honor to religion in that last finishing scene, and to glorify thee, dear Lord, with my expiring breath" (83).

Her husband summarized, totally without irony, "The subject of these memoirs was neither the first nor the last of the favorites of Christ whom he has led to heaven otherwise than by a path strewn with flowers." He comforted himself that the "storms of adversity" she faced were, in the end, "highly favorable to her improvement in the Christian virtues of patience and resignation" (42). And he pronounced an avuncular benediction: "The workings of her mind . . . as recorded in her manuscripts, prove her high attainments in the Christian life, and were probably one cause of them" (43). To him the *Memoirs* demonstrated conclusively that female virtue was her armor and Protestant Christianity had sustained her; if that cautionary model were to be heeded, the *Memoirs* could help the people of the new nation in all problems and confusion.

Martha's religious cosmos epitomized mainstream knowledge and belief in her time. The theology she lived and wrote was "a solvent of the intellectual and social climate of its period,"³⁹ an interpretive system that could make disaster and physical dissolution into vehicles of grace. Any reconstruction of the lives and minds of women in the early republican era must reacknowledge religion as women's cultural medium and Providence as women's special instrument.

38. Drelincourt, *Christian's Defence*, p. 38.

39. Mossner, *Bishop Butler*, p. 236, paraphrased.