

Mason Locke Weems Biography

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Biography

Mason Locke Weems (1759-1825) was an American Episcopal minister, book salesman, and popular writer.

Mason Locke Weems was born in Anne Arundel County, Md., on Oct. 1, 1759. He was admitted to the priesthood in 1784, serving in Maryland parishes until 1792. In 1795 he married Frances Ewell; they had 10 children. For 31 years Weems roamed, gypsylike, from New York City to Savannah selling books. He was a star salesman for Mathew Carey of Philadelphia, the nation's leading publisher.

As compiler, editor, and original author, Weems revealed a good knowledge of the Bible and general literature. He was an interesting combination of preacher and entertainer. Intellectuals ignored his writings, but the mass of people seemed not to get enough of them. Weems had a remarkable ability to give the populace the untarnished heroes it craved. He ardently believed that books should be uplifting. He wrote moral tales--*The Drunkard's Looking Glass* (ca. 1812), *God's Revenge against Adultery* (1815), *God's Revenge against Murder* (1827)--and others.

The histories and biographies then being written of men noted during the American Revolution were sober tomes. Weems's fictionalized biographies, which mixed pleasant myth with fact, were better known than the writings of any other American in the first half of the 19th century. More than a million copies of his books were sold, and they are still being reprinted. His books inculcated the prized virtues of industry, temperance, and frugality.

Weems wrote biographies of Benjamin Franklin, William Penn, and Gen. Francis Marion, but his fame rested mainly on *The Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* (1800). A strong supporter of Jefferson, Weems wanted to prevent Federalists from monopolizing Washington's fame. The Father of His Country, said Weems, was no aristocrat "but a pure Republican." In its fifth edition, Weems added the story of the cherry tree, which soon entered the national folklore. "George," said his father, 'do you know who killed the beautiful little cherry-tree yonder in the garden' This was a tough question and George staggered under it for a moment.... 'I can't tell a lie, Pa, you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet.'"

Weems's biographies contained many inaccuracies. Yet his clear, simple, warm, enthusiastic writing revived the human presence of men grown austere and remote. The endearing mythmaker died in Beaufort, S.C., on May 23, 1825.