The Great Little Madison Short Guide

The Great Little Madison by Jean Fritz

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Overview

"However history may judge Madison on his political performance, no one can say that he did not stand up for freedom of the press and freedom of religion whenever he had the chance," declares Fritz. According to Fritz, "Nothing made James angrier than to see men punished for their religious views," so he argued for religious tolerance all his life. The Great Little Madison is an account of the life of a man who devoted himself to the public welfare and who lived the ideals he preached. When he was slandered in the press or by political opponents, he refused to use his powers as president to suppress his enemies; when called upon to declare a national day of prayer, he wrote his proclamation so that all faiths were included. This biography is about how Madison helped to shape the United States with hard work and a determination to put U.S. ideals into practice.

About the Author

Jean Guttery was born in Hankow, China, on November 16,1915. Her parents Arthur and Myrtle Guttery were missionaries for the YMCA. She and her family left China around 1928 to escape the warfare that swept through China as part of the aftermath of the revolution that removed the old monarchy and replaced it with a fragile civilian government. While in China, Jean Guttery kept a notebook of her thoughts and observations that later served as a basis for writing about China. Jean Guttery's writings about her own life reveal nostalgia for China.

After she graduated from Wheaton College in 1937, Guttery took a job with an advertising agency in New York but left it to work for a textbook publisher, Silver Burdett Company. She married Michael Fritz on November 1,1941, just in time for him to be called to military service and sent to San Francisco, after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, marking the U.S. entrance into World War II. Eventually, in 1953, she and her husband and two children (a son and a daughter) moved to Dobbs Ferry in New York. There, she found a job as a librarian, creating a children's literature section.

During the 1960s, Jean Guttery Fritz researched the history of the American Revolution, which resulted in a work intended for grownups but suitable for teenagers, Cast for a Revolution (1972), and several works for young readers, such as Will You Sign Here, John Hancock? (1976), that have gone through many printings, including one of all of them in 1999. Although she has written distinguished fiction, Fritz is plainly drawn to biography, particularly lives presented in the context of the history of their times. Having been nominated in 1982 but not winning, in 1986 she received the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award for her lifetime of writing. Although published after Fritz won that award, Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers may be the most universally praised of her books. Certainly it and subsequent publications have been of the same high quality.

Fritz has been nominated many times for awards such as the National Book Award, winning some of them. The Children's Book Guild gave her its honor award in 1978 for her many historical writings. In 1982, her autobiography Homesick: My Own Story was named a Newbery Honor Book and a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book, and it won the American Book Award (what was known briefly as the National Book Award).

The Double Life of Pocahontas won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Nonfiction Award for 1984, and The Great Little Madison won the same award for 1990. The Madison biography also received the Orbis Pictus Award from the National Council of English Teachers.

Setting

Madison was not a soldier, even though he played important roles in two wars, which means that most of The Great Little Madison takes place in meeting rooms. Probably the most important meeting place was in Philadelphia. There, delegates from the states had sent representatives to work out changes in the Articles of Confederation in order to make the United States more secure from internal conflict. Madison had been arguing for a new constitution for the government that would give the federal government the power to tax and to regulate commerce. He helped lead the faction that would turn the meeting into the Constitutional Convention. Madison took detailed notes during the convention, and these notes form the better part of what is known about what happened at the convention. In a hot room, with window shades drawn so that no one could look inside, Madison and other delegates hammered out the system of checks and balances among three branches of government that exists today as the basic structure of the U.S.

government.

Fritz states that at first Madison did not support the Bill of Rights, and with others said that the Constitution would allow itself to be amended to include a bill of rights.

Later, he became an advocate of the Bill of Rights. He campaigned through his home state of Virginia, debating opponents and arguing in particular for freedom of religion. He wanted the amendment protecting religious freedom to be worded more broadly, to be more explicit in the limits it placed on government than the one that eventually made its way into the Constitution. A weakvoiced, slightly built man, Madison found outdoor campaigning difficult, but it brought him in touch with people who would later become his constituents. Given the raucous, often slanderous, political campaigning that typified much of the new United States of America, Madison's campaigns were usually examples of civility. He even spent one campaign traveling with an opponent from place to place to give speeches.

Madison's faint voice, which might have been of little value on campaigns, caused crowds to move in close and keep quiet as he spoke, they so valued his opinion.

Madison's marriage to Dolley Payne Todd changed his life, making him more at ease with company than he had been, and it shaped the environment in which he lived.

Dolley Madison had a good eye for design and art, and she made the president's residence in Washington a beautiful place, fit for entertaining dignitaries, yet comfortable for her husband who felt awkward in showy places. This house was burned down by British soldiers during the War of 1812, which was humiliating for Americans. Thereafter, Madison lived in a residence provided by the French ambassador in Washington, and later in another house in the city; he refused to give the appearance that the British had driven the U.S. government out of its capital city.

When not serving in Washington as a member of Thomas Jefferson's cabinet or as president of the United States, Madison lived at Montpelier, his Virginia home.

Before his marriage, the home served as a meeting place for American revolutionaries and political activists; after his marriage to Dolley Todd, it became a place in which the couple entertained distinguished guests.

Madison apparently was never fully comfortable with entertaining people and liked to keep to himself; politics was a duty for him, but he preferred to be at home. Dolley Madison drew him out and helped him enjoy his days of retirement at home after his second term as president had expired.

His estate included slaves, and Fritz says, "He [Madison] hated slavery, but the South was so deep into it, he didn't see how it could get out." Yet he owned slaves and sold them when he became strapped for money.

Social Sensitivity

The issue of slavery inevitably arises during a reading of The Great Little Madison.

It is an issue that nearly divided the American colonies at the outset of their war for independence, nearly divided them during the Constitutional Convention, and eventually resulted in the Civil War that claimed more battlefield casualties than had any other war before its time and more than the sum from all wars in which the United States engaged since, and which has left a legacy of anger and hatred that still troubles Americans. It is hard to look back on Madison, Jefferson, Washington, and others who proclaimed the rights of humanity and understand why they continued to own slaves, something they acknowledged to be a despicable custom. It was George Washington's belief that slavery was an antiquated economical model that would disappear within a generation of his own day; he had no way of knowing that the invention of the cotton gin would make a slavebased economy profitable in the future. As for Madison, Fritz states that he thought that slavery was so much a part of life in slave states that it could never be eliminated.

It is perhaps too easy from a modern perspective to see what would become of slavery, to see its horrors and condemn the American idealists who did not put an end to it at the birth of the United States. Fritz offers little explanation for Madison's conduct on the matter of slavery, although she notes that Madison evidently freed some slaves, preparing them first with skills to use as free men. Yet, in the end, short of money, he sold slaves, at their request says Fritz, to kind masters.

In her biography Why Not, Lafayette?, Fritz presents the life of a contemporary of Madison, a man who risked all his social privileges and even his life, who served years in prison for his beliefs—a man who was steadfast in his advocating human rights for all people. Madison, Washington, and Jefferson, like Lafayette, put their lives at risk for their ideals. Why were they not steadfast in their view that slavery should end? Perhaps it was because, unlike Lafayette's France, the United States of America often behaved as if it was several different countries, and just holding the states together was a mighty task. South Carolina, one of the first states to ratify the Constitution, was ready to split from the young country over the issue of slavery. Reading between the lines in The Great Little Madison, one may see the continuance of slavery as being one of the compromises made to hold the fragile union together, and Fritz notes that holding the union of states together was to Madison's mind essential if the ideals of the revolution were ever to be fully realized.

Fritz highlights two other significant social and political issues important to Madison. One was freedom of religion. He had seen Presbyterians and others punished for practicing their religious faith, and he was appalled. It was his view that no government, from local to federal, should do anything that seemed to suggest a preference for any religious practice. When as president of the United States he was urged to declare a national day of prayer, he refused to make any special mention of any religious practice;

instead, in a carefully worded document, he urged people to meditate according to their own preferences, if any.

His was a minority position in his day; most people expected politicians to speak of religious faith, and they expected prayer.

Although Madison himself was a faithful man who prayed, he insisted that politics should never involve itself in religion. His open-mindedness regarding religion may have been one of his attractions to his future wife Dolley Todd, then a Quaker. Willing to marry outside her own faith, she trusted that in Madison she had a man who without pretense accepted her religious practices.

Freedom of the press was also important to Madison. Washington had been fairly tolerant of publications that attacked him and opposed his political views, but the second president of the United States, John Adams, pushed laws that made it illegal to criticize the president. One of Jefferson's actions as the third president was to pardon the people who had been punished under Adams's laws. Although John Adams supported Madison throughout Madison's presidency, many of Adams's political allies did not. Particularly in New England, where these individuals slandered Madison, called him foul names, and insisted that he was a criminal. Although often urged to take action against newspapers that lied about him, Madison always refused. According to Fritz, the principle of freedom of the press was too important to him to take action even when most people would have said he was justified, even though, Fritz reports, Madison was disturbed by the cruelty of the attacks and would stay up nights worrying about them.

The link between freedom of religion and freedom of the press seems to be that they both involve the intellect. Fritz notes that Madison was a thinker, notable for his carefully worded papers on social and political matters. Perhaps freedom of religion was, for Madison, about the freedom of the mind to find answers without fearing prejudice or punishment, and freedom of the press would be essential for people who wanted to use the written word to convey their ideas and ideals to others. In any case, The Great Little Madison is in part the story of Madison's lifelong struggle to see to it that Americans had the right to speak their minds.

Literary Qualities

Fritz takes a straightforward chronological approach to The Great Little Madison, although she says little about Madison's childhood and youth. She takes as the main interest of her biography Madison's work during the Revolutionary War, his efforts during the Constitutional Convention, and his life as president of the United States. As such, she gives The Great Little Madison three main movements, each with its own beginning and end. Although her account of Madison's life during the Revolutionary War and the Constitutional convention are interesting, her account of his life in Washington may be the most interesting part of the biography, due in part to Dolley's irrepressible presence.

In this third movement, Fritz's concise phrasing that summarizes large ideas in small spaces is at its best. For instance, there is Madison's attitude toward war: "Peace with justice as long as possible; war if the nation's honor was at stake." It says much about Madison, especially about how much he valued U.S. honor. On the other hand, Fritz states: "And if there was one thing that Madison dreaded more than any other, it was talk of a standing army. Any government with a standing army had more power than could easily be controlled." This tells of the man's complexity. War, if necessary, seems tempered by a distrust of a government's military power. And what was the U.S. problem with England? Fritz summarizes, "Indeed, Great Britain not only disregarded America's sovereignty, it simply did not bother to abide by the peace treaty both nations had signed at the end of the war." None of this was necessarily good for the United States, but Madison was a fighter all his life—not in war but in the political world where laws are made and a society formed. Therefore, Fritz observes, "And President Madison himself, who had no experience in war, had a temperament more suited to reasoning than to fighting. But he was dogged, conscientious, and determined."

He was "dogged, conscientious, and determined," and these qualities enabled him to hold the union together in spite of threats to secede among New England states over the war with England and to see his country through a war in which the British burned cities and towns to the ground and subjected Americans to other barbarities.

Themes and Characters

Fritz says, "James Madison was a small, pale, sickly boy with a weak voice." Although five feet six inches tall, his slight build and weak voice made him seem smaller; in fact, "people were forever remarking on his littleness." Furthermore, "All his life he suffered from fever, bilious attacks (liver upsets), and from occasional seizures in which for a few moments he would stiffen and lose control of his mind." These seizures were probably caused by epilepsy. A weak voice, slight stature, and chronic illnesses make Madison seem to be a very unlikely choice for political leadership, yet he would eventually be elected president of the United States.

Disturbing in his early years was his treatment of Americans who opposed the revolution against England. In 1774, he and his father were elected members of the local Committee of Safety, which oversaw the tarring and feathering and other despicable punishments of Tories, the term applied to those people who wanted to remain English subjects. This behavior seems inconsistent for the man who would eventually become a staunch advocate of civil liberties and who would tolerate even the cruelest attacks on himself by political opponents for the sake of freedom of the press.

But the account is unvarnished; Fritz offers the good and the bad about Madison, although she leans in favors of the good.

Most of her book is devoted to explaining the complexity of Madison, who had other contradictions to his character. For instance, he hated slavery, yet he owned slaves and even had a slave manservant named Billey traveling with him as he worked out some of the fundamentals of American liberty.

"James Madison said that prolonging the slave trade was 'dishonorable to the American character,'" notes Fritz. By this, he meant the practice of buying slaves in Africa and transporting them to the Americas, not the established slavery within the borders of the United States. Even so, he knew slavery to be wrong but hesitated to do the honorable thing, which was to free the ones he inherited as part of his estate at Montpelier.

Fritz develops the theme of union throughout The Great Little Madison and uses it to offer some insight into why Madison sometimes contradicted his own ideals: "James might be a Virginian, but first and foremost he was and always would be an American pushing for a genuine union of the states."

This idea of holding together the union of the states as his first priority may explain why he did not push for the end to slavery in the United States; some slave states might have rebelled (as they would in 1861 over anti-slavery during the term of President Abraham Lincoln).

There seem to be many ways in which to live a great life. In Madison's case, his greatness was achieved through the power of the mind and the persuasion of words. Sickly and weak, Madison would have been poorly suited to military service and may

have joined the thousands who died of disease rather than battle wounds during the Revolutionary War. However, he was notable for articulating the ideals for which Americans fought and too often died. After the war, when the Articles of Confederation proved to be a failure, then during the Constitutional Convention, he came to be known for his leadership as "the Great Little Madison." According to Fritz, the fractious delegates would quiet themselves and move near Madison when he spoke.

Because Madison's thinking not only influenced the Constitution but the direction American politics would take for the next forty years, The Great Little Madison is a story about the growth of Madison's thought.

He was one of the co-writers of The Federalist Papers (along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay), which sought to explain to Americans what the constitutional government was about and why they should support it. It seems very much to have been Madison's preference to persuade with reasoned logic than to bully or harangue. In fact, Fritz says that Madison hated bullies.

This may be one reason why, after thinking it unimportant, he chose to change his mind and support a Bill of Rights that would establish personal freedoms for American citizens. Fritz states that "Madison had become convinced that a Bill of rights was a good idea, not only because it would make people feel safer but because it would help the courts. If certain basic rights were specifically guaranteed (such as freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of religion), the courts would find it easier to protect minorities when they were oppressed by larger, more powerful groups." It was part of Madison's vision for the United States government that it would be limited in how much it could interfere in individual civil liberties and that it would be put in the position of protecting those liberties against a tyrannous majority.

When he became president, Madison tried to run the country according to his ideals, weathering both political and personal attacks without taking action to limit the rights of people to say and publish what they wanted. He disliked the idea of maintaining a standing army because he feared that a standing army would give the government too much power over its citizenry, which meant that the War of 1812 was especially painful for him. He had used his persuasive skills to try to settle disputes with England peacefully, but ultimately, the British government's violation of treaties with the United States became intolerable and he asked Congress to declare war, a power given to Congress by the Constitution Madison had helped to write.

Fortunately for Madison, he had someone close to him to buoy his spirits. Having devoted nearly all his life to public service, Madison had not cultivated much of a social life. Fritz states that he seemed withdrawn and even unfriendly to people. But near his home there lived a young widow, Dolley Payne Todd. Men were said to station themselves along her customary walking routes just to see her. Fritz writes that if Madison had been one of those men, "he would have seen a striking twenty-fiveyear-old with blue eyes and black hair, dressed in the plain clothes worn by Quakers. She was the same height as James and had such a friendly air about her that James would not have been intimidated." In fact, "Dolley was a warm person with a natural gift for making

people feel at ease," traits that would help Madison's gatherings with dignitaries and would help others feel at ease with "the Great Little Madison."

Fritz describes Dolley Madison's passion for the arts, entertaining, and clothes, lightening her narrative in The Great Little Madison. For example, she describes what Mrs. Madison typically wore while living with her husband in Washington: "For the morning Dolley would wear a long-trained dress of fine white cotton (she would always wear white on state occasions) and on her head she would have a white plumed bonnet. In the evening her gown would be plain buff-colored velvet, but her turban would be a confection of velvet and satin topped with the waving feathers of a bird of paradise." Apparently, Dolley especially loved turbans and wore many different ones at different occasions. Fritz says that Dolley Madison was sometimes called a "queen," but out of affection not rancor.

Her passion for shopping and her good taste resulted in a presidential residence (not yet the White House as it is known today) that was attractive and enjoyable.

As far as Fritz is concerned, Dolley Madison had a positive effect on her husband.

She took his mind off his troubles, she brought pleasure into his life, and he was heartened by her presence even when he was working. She even helped him exercise. Fritz notes that even late in life she and James would race on their front porch, remarking, "Even when she reached sixty Dolley was a fast runner and proud of it."

Thus The Great Little Madison evolves from a story about a slight frail man's influence on American life to a probing portrait of the man's spirit, which depicts his happy love affair with his wife Dolley in order to reveal the fullness of the man's character.

Topics for Discussion

1. What effect might having a weak voice have had on Madison's personality?

2. In what ways does Fritz explain Madison's attitudes toward slavery? Evaluate the effectiveness of her explanation.

3. According to Fritz, "James Madison said that prolonging the slave trade was 'dishonorable to the American character'," yet he owned slaves. How does Fritz explain this? Is the explanation she gives convincing? Why or why not?

4. When is Madison first called "the Great Little Madison"? Why was he called "the Great Little Madison"? What positive or negative effect did this label have?

5. How did Dolley change Madison's life?

Evaluate her influence, good or bad, using evidence supplied in this biography.

6. Why would Dolley delay her escape from the invading British to save the portrait of George Washington? What does this decision reveal about her character and values?

7. If, as Fritz says, "All his life he suffered .. . from occasional seizures in which for a few moments he would stiffen and lose control of his mind," why would people be willing to elect Madison president? Would Americans in the twenty-first century make a fuss over selecting a candidate who loses "control of his mind," even for short periods?

8. At five feet six inches, Madison was not very short for a man of his time, so why was he called "little"? How did he compare in stature with the presidents who came before him?

9. What is a "standing army"? Why did Madison oppose having one in the United States?

10. How did people react to Madison's small size?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Fritz writes, "James Madison said that prolonging the slave trade was 'dishonorable to the American character'," yet he owned slaves. In Madison's time, there was a distinction between the "slave trade" and slave ownership.

What was the "slave trade" and how was it stopped?

2. The Federalist Papers are often required reading in schools. Why are The Federalist Papers considered so important? What are American students expected to learn about them?

3. Which of The Federalist Papers were written by Madison? What form of government does he say the United States should have? Does today's U.S. government resemble what Madison envisioned?

4. How accurate is Fritz's portrayal of the Pennsylvania Quakers of Dolley Madison's era?

5. If everyone voted in November 1808, why would the results of the presidential election not be known until January 1809?

6. Read about the War of 1812. Explain the outcome of the War of 1812.

7. Why were the British able to march on Washington and burn the city?

8. Why would anyone in the United States support England over France in Madison's day?

9. What was Madison's role in writing and passing the Bill of Rights? Fritz says that his opinions shifted from opposition to support for the Bill of Rights.

Is this true? If so, explain how and why his thinking changed.

10. Many Americans of his day and historians since have viewed Madison as someone who stood up for the little guy.

What evidence in this book supports that assessment of Madison?

11. What has been Madison's influence on U.S. society?

12. What were Dolley Madison's views of the status of women in the United States?

For Further Reference

Halter, Jon C. Boys' Life, vol. 82, no. 19 (February 1992): 19. Halter praises The Great Little Madison.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Fritz's Why Not,Lafayette? covers the same period that The Great Little Madison does.

Lafayette appears in The Great Little Madison, first as a war leader and later as the guest of Madison and the United States. The Great Little Madison notes Lafayette's immense popularity in the United States and his warm friendship with Madison himself.

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