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# Landon Carter

*An Inquiry into  
the Personal Values and  
Social Imperatives  
of the Eighteenth-Century  
Virginia Gentry*

Jack P. Greene

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*Merui, sed intus  
tantum fruor.*

*In spite of my merit,  
I have only  
inward satisfaction.*

## Preface

EXCEPT for a few minor changes in wording and citations and the addition of a brief epilogue, this book is simply a reprint of the Introduction to *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752–1776* (2 vols., Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1965). It had then and has now three intimately related objectives. First, and most obviously, it is intended as a plausible psychological and intellectual portrait of Landon Carter, an effort to delineate his central character traits and personal values; to call attention to some of the things that motivated him; to determine what major problems he encountered, how he sought to solve them, and how well he succeeded; and to analyze his responses to the major public events of his life—in short, to look at his world in much the way as he must have seen it. Second, and, from my point of view, vastly more important, it is presented as an inquiry into the personal values and social imperatives of the eighteenth-century Virginia gentry, as an attempt to identify through Carter the ideas and assumptions that gave structure and coherence to both the private and public worlds of that extraordinary group. Finally, if largely only implicitly, it is offered as a case study in the relationship between individual and collective psychology and of the ways individual, even highly idiosyncratic and partially antisocial, behavior may illuminate broader social values. What it is not intended to do and what can only be done by a lengthy series

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of comparative investigations is to determine which, if any, of the largely traditional values held by Carter and the gentry received a special or peculiar emphasis that helped to distinguish Carter from other individuals or the gentry from other comparable groups in the eighteenth century.

Among the several individuals whose aid I acknowledged in the Preface to the diary and whose assistance in preparing this essay must be mentioned again here are W. W. Abbot, Keith B. Berwick, Robert M. Calhoun, Charles R. Crowe, Emory G. Evans, Norman S. Grabo, Sue N. Greene, Winthrop D. Jordan, Frank Rosengarten, Jean Paul Smith, and Thad W. Tate, Jr., all of whom read and criticized the original introduction, and Francis R. Bliss and Donald R. Laing, Jr., who helped in identifying and assessing the importance of the classical allusions in Carter's writings. Marvin B. Becker requires special thanks for helping over the past eight years to sharpen my understanding of the possibilities and importance of this kind of historical enterprise.

J. P. G.

*Baltimore, Maryland*  
*November 30, 1966*

*Landon Carter: An Inquiry*

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# I Vita

Few children in colonial America were born with greater advantages than Landon Carter. His father, Robert "King" Carter, was one of the wealthiest Americans of his generation and perhaps the most prominent and most successful of that remarkable group that rose to dominance in Virginia during the last decades of the seventeenth century and provided the foundations for the famous Virginia gentry of the eighteenth century. By the time Landon—his fourth son, the third by his second wife, Elizabeth Landon Willis—was born on August 18, 1710, King Carter was already one of the most commanding figures in the colony, distinguished both by his enormous wealth and by a political career that stretched back over three decades and included service as justice of the peace for Lancaster County, vestryman in Christ Church Parish, speaker of the House of Burgesses, treasurer, and councilor. As agent for the Northern Neck proprietary after 1703, King Carter added those quantities of land to his already extensive holdings that would total some 333,000 acres at his death in 1732.<sup>1</sup>

That Landon, like his four brothers, would have an

<sup>1</sup> The best published treatment of Robert "King" Carter is Louis B. Wright, *The First Gentlemen of Virginia: Intellectual Qualities of the Early Colonial Ruling Class* (San Marino, Calif., 1940; reissued Charlottesville, 1964), 248–85, but see also the short sketch in Louis Morton's excellent study of King Carter's grandson, *Robert Carter of Nomini Hall: A Virginia Tobacco Planter of the Eighteenth Century* (Williamsburg, 1941), 3–31. A contemporary estimation of King Carter's wealth is in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, II (1732), 1082.

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excellent education and a generous inheritance was never open to doubt. In late 1719 or early 1720 when he was nine he went with two older brothers, Robert and Charles, to London, where he received at the private school of Solomon Low the usual classical education given to young gentlemen in England. At school he demonstrated so good a memory and such a strong inclination for learning that his father, already disposed to "make learning" an important "part of his portion," allowed him to stay on at school for four more years after his brothers had returned home in 1723. When he returned to Virginia in May 1727 at age sixteen, his father discovered him to be "a lad of good morals and of an agreeable, obliging behaviour," "well advanced" in his education, and "very well qualified to enter upon any business." His father thought for a time of apprenticing him to a London business house "to breed him up a Virginia merchant" but eventually decided to teach him the business of plantation management so that he could follow in the footsteps of himself and his three older sons.<sup>2</sup> After at least a brief stay at the College of William and Mary,<sup>3</sup> Landon lived with his father at the family seat at Corotoman and apparently managed some of his father's Northumberland lands until 1732, when his father died. In the same year Landon, age twenty-two, married Elizabeth, daughter of the late John Wormeley, scion of another leading Virginia family, of

<sup>2</sup> Robert "King" Carter to William Dawkins, July 14, 1720, in Louis B. Wright, ed., *Letters of Robert Carter, 1720-1727* (San Marino, Calif., 1940), 25; same, Jan. 28, 1724, as quoted in *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XXXI (1923), 39-40; to Landon Carter (hereafter L. C.), July 5, 1723, in Robert Carter Letter Book, 1723-1724, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond; to John Falconar, May 16, 1727, and Dec. 16, 1727, and to James Bradley, May 17, 1727, in Robert Carter Letter Book, 1727-1728, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; Robert Carter Diary, May 25, 1727, Alderman Lib.

<sup>3</sup> *A Provisional List of Alumni, Grammar School Students, Members of the Faculty, Members of the Board of Visitors of the College of William and Mary in Virginia, from 1693-1888* (Richmond, 1941), II.

Rosegill in Middlesex County across the Rappahannock from Corotoman.<sup>4</sup>

King Carter left Landon a bounteous legacy. Through both his wife and his brothers and sisters, Landon was as well connected as any man in the colony. His sisters had married into the Burwell, Harrison, Page, Braxton, and Fitzhugh families, and his oldest two brothers into the Hills and Churchills.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, his father had provided him with a sizable estate. He already owned over 15,000 acres in the western part of the Northern Neck, his share of two large grants of 41,550 and 50,212 acres made by his father in 1724 and 1730 to Landon, his younger brother George, and seven of Landon's nephews.<sup>6</sup> In addition, his father bequeathed to him as least eight fully equipped and operating plantations: Round Hill in King George County; Bloughpoint, Jones Place, and Old Place in Northumberland County; and Hickory Thicket, the Fork, Mangorike, and Lansdowne in Richmond County.<sup>7</sup> Landon chose Lansdowne for his temporary seat. Taking "an old brick building tore down in many places and at an expence of some hundreds" repairing it, he appears to have moved there sometime in late 1733 or early 1734.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Jack P. Greene, ed., *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1776* (2 vols., Charlottesville, 1965), May 12, 1776, II, p. 1039; Walter Ray Wineman, *The Landon Carter Papers in the University of Virginia Library: A Calendar and Biographical Sketch* (Charlottesville, 1962), 47.

<sup>5</sup> Morton, *Robert Carter*, 21-29.

<sup>6</sup> William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia* (13 vols.; Richmond, 1823-35), V, 300-2.

<sup>7</sup> Will of Robert Carter, Aug. 22, Oct. 11, 1726, Sept. 12, 1728, June 9, July 23, 1730, and inventory of Robert Carter [1732], "Carter Papers," *Va. Mag. of Hist. and Biog.*, V (1897-98), 409-28, VI (1898-99), 1-22, VII (1899-1900), 66-68.

<sup>8</sup> *L. C. Diary*, Aug. 9, 1777, II, p. 1123. L. C. was still living in Lancaster Co. in May 1733 but had moved to Richmond Co. by September 1734. See Indenture of lease between Edward Barradall and L. C. "of Lancaster County," May 28, 1733, Sabine Hall Collection,

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For the next two decades Carter devoted himself primarily to raising a family, improving his estate, and establishing himself as one of the leading men in Richmond County. Altogether, he had seven children that survived into adulthood. Elizabeth bore him four, Robert Wormeley, Landon, John, and Elizabeth, before her early death at age twenty-seven in January 1740. His second wife, the fifteen-year-old Maria, daughter of Councilor William Byrd II of Westover, lived only a little over two years after their marriage in 1742 but bore Carter another daughter, Maria. His third wife, whom he married in 1746, was a neighborhood spinster, Elizabeth, daughter of the deceased Thomas Beale. She bore two daughters, Judith and Lucy, before she died in the mid-1750s.<sup>9</sup> Through his marriages Carter added to his landholdings. His first wife brought him a thousand-acre plantation, Rings Neck, on the York River in King and Queen County,<sup>10</sup> and his second, a tract in Charles City County. By purchase he added several pieces in Richmond County and one in Westmoreland County,<sup>11</sup> and with the death of his brother George in 1741 he fell heir to two lots in Williamsburg, additional land in the western part of the Northern Neck, and two plantations: Ripon Hall in York County and the Park in Stafford County.<sup>12</sup> At the same time he was increasing the number of his slaves and

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Alderman Lib., and H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia* (5 vols.; Richmond, 1925-45), IV, 331 (Sept. 5, 1734).

<sup>9</sup> Wineman, *Landon Carter Papers*, 46-48; Epitaph for Elizabeth Carter, 1740, Carter Family Papers, Folder 1, College of William and Mary Library, Williamsburg, Va.; *Tyler's Magazine*, IX (1928), 284.

<sup>10</sup> Surveyor's plat of "Ring's Quarter," King and Queen Co., 1729, Carter Family Papers, Folder 3.

<sup>11</sup> See Wineman, *Landon Carter Papers*, 9-24.

<sup>12</sup> Copy of will of George Carter, Jan. 2, 1741, Sabine Hall Col.; will of Robert Carter, Sept. 12, 1728, June 9, 1730, "Carter Papers," *Va. Mag. of Hist. and Biog.*, VI (1898-99), 11-17. See also *L. C. Diary*, Aug. 9, 1777, II, p. 1123.

livestock, building a mill and other outbuildings on his property, and seating his unoccupied lands in Prince William and Frederick counties.<sup>13</sup> By 1750 he possessed an immense, and still growing, estate, totaling over 35,000 acres in the Northern Neck alone.<sup>14</sup> As soon as he had the "wherewithall," he built, perhaps with the help of architect Richard Taliaferro, a dwelling house "of taste," an airy and elegant Georgian structure high on a hill that looked southward over six gardened terraces to the Rapahannock River one and a half miles below. This new family seat, which was completed sometime in the early 1740s, and the plantation surrounding it he called Sabine Hall.<sup>15</sup>

But Carter in the tradition of his fellow gentry did not spend all of his energies on private affairs. Like his father and his older brothers, he early assumed an important role in the public life first of his county and then of the colony. In September 1734, within a year after he had settled at Lansdowne, Lieutenant Governor William Gooch and the Virginia Council appointed him justice of the peace and member of the quorum on the Richmond County court.<sup>16</sup> In this position he helped to dispense

<sup>13</sup> See Wineman, *Landon Carter Papers*, 9-14, and petition of L. C., Feb. 2, 1736, Richmond Co. court Order Book 1732-39, X, 360 (Feb. 2, 1736), Richmond Co. Courthouse, Warsaw, Va.

<sup>14</sup> See L. C.'s Account of Lands to Lord Fairfax, Sept. 29, 1767, Carter Family Papers, Folder 3.

<sup>15</sup> An excellent description of Sabine Hall is in Thomas Tileston Waterman, *The Mansions of Virginia, 1706-1776* (Chapel Hill, 1946), 127-36, 422. Waterman suggests that the house was built by Taliaferro (*ibid.*, 103, 107). His further suggestion—and here he follows earlier historians—that Sabine Hall was built for L. C. by his father in 1730 is clearly wrong. The entry in the *L. C. Diary*, Aug. 9, 1777, II, p. 1123, shows that King Carter did not provide a dwelling house for L. C., and the letter of John Carter to L. C., Mar. 3, 1740, Sabine Hall Col., indicates that L. C. had not yet moved from Lansdowne to Sabine Hall.

<sup>16</sup> *Exec. Journals of Council of Col. Va.*, IV, 331 (Sept. 5, 1734); Richmond Co. court Order Book, 1732-39, X, 226 (Jan. 6, 1735), 1748-52, XII, 128 (July 4, 1748), XVIII, 23 (Aug. 4, 1777).

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justice and administer the county until his death over forty-four years later. Sometime during the following decade the vestry of Lunenburg Parish elected him to the vestry, and Gooch appointed him county lieutenant in command of militia. The former post he held until his death and the latter until new militia regulations that decreased his control over the troops prompted him to resign in early 1776.<sup>17</sup> He also held a variety of less important positions in the county as his colleagues on the bench designated him to supervise the building and repair of roads, the construction of a new courthouse, or the collection of a list of tithables.<sup>18</sup> Less immediately successful in securing elective office, he was rejected by the voters of Richmond County three times, in 1735, 1742, and 1748, before they finally returned him in 1752 to represent them in the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg.<sup>19</sup>

With his election to the Burgesses Carter's public career took a new turn. Thenceforth he operated at two levels, never neglecting his duties in Richmond County but increasingly concentrating his attention upon concerns of the colony as a whole. Immediately upon his entry into the Burgesses he became one of its most active members, and during a legislative career that stretched

<sup>17</sup> See Richmond Co. court Order Books, 1752-55, XIII, 22 (Mar. 5, 1753); L. C. to Lord Botetourt, Nov. 1, 1768, and to John Dixon and William Hunter, Jr., May 1776 (?), Sabine Hall Col.; and Norborne Berkeley, Baron de Botetourt, to L. C., July 31, 1769, Emmet Collection, 6197, New York Public Library, New York.

<sup>18</sup> See Richmond Co. court Order Books, 1732-39, X, 636 (July 4, 1738), 1748-52, XII, 194 (Aug. 7, 1749), 1756-62, 336 (May 5, 1760).

<sup>19</sup> Richmond Co. poll, July 21, 1735, Fairfax Papers, Brock Collection, Box 227, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.; Henry R. McIlwaine and John P. Kennedy, eds., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia* (13 vols.; Richmond, 1905-15), 1742-49, 34-35 (May 24, 1742); Richmond Co. court Order Book, 1748-52, XII, 353; Lucille Griffith, *Virginia House of Burgesses, 1750-1774* (Northport, Ala., 1963), 83-90, 222-23.

over sixteen years until 1768, when he finally failed of reelection because, as he put, he did not "familiarize" himself "among the People,"<sup>20</sup> only Speaker John Robinson, Peyton Randolph, Richard Bland, his brother Charles Carter of Cleve, and Edmund Pendleton consistently played more important parts in the counsels of the House.<sup>21</sup> At his first session he secured appointment to the powerful standing committees for privileges and elections and for propositions and grievances, and after 1756 he was usually chairman of the standing committee on courts of justice.<sup>22</sup> As a writer of some reputation he helped prepare formal addresses, and along with Richard Bland he became the public defender of the House, publishing pamphlets and newspaper essays upholding its stand on the pistole fee, paper currency, and the Two-Penny Act.<sup>23</sup> A strong advocate of vigorous measures against the French during the French and Indian War,<sup>24</sup> he also con-

<sup>20</sup> *L. C. Diary*, Apr. 1, 1776, II, pp. 1008-9.

<sup>21</sup> See Jack P. Greene, "Foundations of Political Power in the Virginia House of Burgesses, 1720-1776," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XVI (1959), 486-506.

<sup>22</sup> See *Burgesses Journals*, 1752-58, 1758-61, 1761-65, 1766-1769, *passim*; Hening, ed., *Statutes*, VI, 454, 524, VII, 13, 76, 276, 289, 568.

<sup>23</sup> See Jack P. Greene, "Landon Carter and the Pistole Fee Dispute," *Wm. and Mary Qrtly.*, 3d Ser., XIV (1957), 66-69, for the establishment of L. C.'s authorship of both *A Letter from a Gentleman in Virginia, to the Merchants of Great Britain, Trading to that Colony* (London, 1754) and an essay in the *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis), Oct. 24, 1754. His authorship of *A Letter to a Gentleman in London, from Virginia* (Williamsburg, 1759), a defense of the paper currency act passed by the Virginia Assembly in 1758, is indicated by obvious similarities of style and organization to his other writings. Other evidence for his authorship of this tract is presented by John M. Hemphill, II, in *Wm. and Mary Qrtly.*, 3d Ser., XV (1958), 410. L. C.'s two pamphlets on the Two-Penny Act are *A Letter to the Right Reverend Father in God, the Lord B——p of L——n* (Williamsburg, 1760) and *The Rector Detected* (Williamsburg, 1764).

<sup>24</sup> See L. C. to George Washington, Apr. 27-29 (?), 1756, in Stanislaus Murray Hamilton, ed., *Letters to Washington and Accompanying Papers* (5 vols.; Boston and New York, 1898-1902), I, 236, and *L. C. Diary* Aug. 22, 1754, May 14, 1755, I, pp. 111-12, 123-24.

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sistently and adamantly opposed British encroachments upon American rights after 1763. He claimed the distinction of first raising the alarm against the Stamp Act in the Burgesses and of inspiring that body in the fall of 1764, six months before Patrick Henry's famous resolutions of the following May, to protest that measure in petitions to the King, Lords, and Commons.<sup>25</sup> Over the following decade he poured forth a steady stream of essays in support of the American cause.<sup>26</sup> From September 1774 through the middle of 1775 he was chairman, usually by "unanimous" election, of the series of committees that administered the county in the months after the breakdown of

<sup>25</sup> On this point see *L. C. Diary*, July 14, 25, 1776, February 23, 1777, II, pp. 1057, 1063, 1082-83; L. C. to George Washington, Oct. 31, 1776, in Peter Force, ed., *American Archives* (Washington, 1837-53), 5th Ser., II, 1304-07.

<sup>26</sup> L. C. published mainly in the *Virginia Gazette* both under his own name and under a variety of pseudonyms, including C—R—, L—C—, B—E—, Honest Buckskin, An American, An Associating Planter, Experience, and probably others. Political pieces in the *Gazettes* that can be definitely identified as his either from manuscript drafts in the Sabine Hall Col. and Carter Family Papers or through pseudonyms known to have been used by Carter are in Alexander Purdie and John Dixon's *Va. Gaz.*, Apr. 4, Aug. 1, Oct. 17, Nov. 6, 1766, Apr. 20, July 13, 1769, Mar. 22, 1770, Oct. 3, 1771, and July 28, 1774; William Rind's *Va. Gaz.*, Sept. 1, 1768, June 1, Sept. 14, 1769, Apr. 26, June 14, Dec. 13, 1770; Nov. 11, 1773, and Apr. 7, May 12, 1774, and Purdie's *Va. Gazette*, Feb. 12, 1775, Mar. 28, 1777. Pieces in the *Md. Gaz.* are in the issues for Oct. 24, 1754, and May 8, 1766. In addition there is evidence that L. C. may have published essays in the *Maryland Journal* (Baltimore) and the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia) in 1777. (See Francis Lightfoot Lee to L. C., Feb. 28, Apr. 15, 1777, Lee-Ludwell Papers, Va. Hist. Soc.) He also published at least one piece and probably more in London (*L. C. Diary*, undated 1774, II, p. 917, and Francis Lightfoot Lee to William Lee, April 6, 1770, Brock Col., Box 4). That he wrote and undoubtedly published many other essays on the debate with Britain is clear from the numerous manuscript drafts scattered in the various collections of his papers. In the Sabine Hall Col. alone there is the draft of a long pamphlet on the Stamp Act, dated Nov. 30, 1765, plus at least twelve shorter essays ranging over virtually every important issue between 1765 and 1776. There are three other pieces in the Carter Family Papers (Folders 3 and 104) and one each in the Wellford Collection in the library at Sabine Hall, Warsaw, Va., and in the Brock Col. (L. C. to Joseph Royle, June 3, 1765).



royal authority and enforced the Continental Association.<sup>27</sup> Though he sharply disagreed with Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, preferring to be compelled to independence rather than to seek it actively, he continued to give wholehearted support to the American cause after the Declaration of Independence, his spirits rising and falling with the tide of American fortunes in the war.<sup>28</sup>

When Carter died on December 22, 1778, at the age of 69,<sup>29</sup> a eulogist could have pointed to the accomplishments of a full and active life. He had obviously been more than an ordinary man. A devoted and tireless public servant, he had played a significant part in every important political event in Virginia during his career in the Burgesses between 1752 and 1768 and through his writings had perhaps helped sustain the determined resistance to Britain over the succeeding decade. He was almost certainly the most prolific and most published author of his generation in Virginia and perhaps in any of the colonies south of Pennsylvania, producing at least four major pamphlets and nearly fifty essays for the *Virginia Gazettes*, *Maryland Gazette*, and other newspapers in both England and America. His scientific writings had won for him election to the American Philosophical Society in 1769 and to the Virginia Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge when it was founded in 1773.<sup>30</sup> All of his children had made acceptable marriages, and he had provided for them

<sup>27</sup> *Va. Gaz.* (Purdie), Feb. 17, May 19, June 2, 1775, (Dixon), Jan. 14, 1775; Robert Wormeley Carter Diary, Sept. 22, 1774, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

<sup>28</sup> See *L. C. Diary*, June 14, 1776, II, pp. 1049-50; L. C. to George Washington, July 30, 1777, Washington Papers, LII, 101, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>29</sup> Family Bible, Sabine Hall.

<sup>30</sup> *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Held at Philadelphia, for Promoting Useful Knowledge* (Philadelphia, 1884), XXII (July 1835), Part III, No. 119, 19-20 (Nov. 15, 1768), 35 (Apr. 21, 1769); and *Va. Gaz.* (Rind), Apr. 14, 1774.