

REVIEW BY BRIAN HANLEY

*Putnam: An Essay on the Life of the
Honourable Major-General Israel*

by David Humphreys

William C. Dowling, ed.

Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000

BIOGRAPHY SEEMS TO BE POPULAR with the public these days but one is left to wonder if this type of writing hasn't suffered as a result. There is, for example, an "award-winning" *Biography* program and a *Biography Club* that caters for dedicated viewers, both produced by the *Arts & Entertainment* network. Thick books on the lives of famous people—Harry Truman, Benjamin Franklin, Joe DiMaggio—disappear rapidly off the shelves of the chain bookstores, prompting several additional printings. So prevalent is the idea of biography that no topic seems off-limits. The illogically titled *Zero: the Biography of a Dangerous Idea* is still in print five years after it first appeared.

The indiscriminate popular appetite for the details of another's life has obscured the traditional end of biography, which is to emphasize the connection between character and achievement and, ultimately, to inspire emulation. The *Biography* television program is a perversion of the term—it does nothing more than appeal to low curiosity and endorse celebrity worship. The biographies retailed by the major publishers are on the whole an indifferent lot. A good biography, for example, doesn't need to be any longer than 200 pages or so—and plenty of fine biographies take up far fewer pages than that. But many recently published biographies are swollen beyond all reason. They are over-stuffed with details of private life and quotidian affairs to the point where the subject's genuine accomplishments are thrown out

of proper perspective. And often the style either does not transcend humdrum journalism—thus failing to reflect the gravity of the subject’s accomplishments—or the writing is crippled by the conventions of the academic world: jargon-laden prose that apparently aims at bedazzling a Ph.D. committee rather than pleasing and instructing the ordinary educated reader. What is more, many biographies nowadays—Tripp’s *The Intimate Life of Abraham Lincoln* is an example—seek either to diminish their subjects or pressgang them in the service of some modern-day issue, doing violence not only to the subject’s reputation but also to the idea of biography and history.

David Humphreys’ *Life of Israel Putnam*, originally published in 1804 and reproduced in a fine edition by *Liberty Fund* under the editorship of William C. Dowling, reminds us of the noble end and traditional method of biography. The first part of Humphreys’ narrative focuses entirely on character traits in the young Putnam that foretell his later greatness. The latter half of the book illustrates the extent to which Humphreys’ character shaped the destiny of a nation devoted to ordered liberty.

A word should be said here about the quality of the *Liberty Fund* edition. The cloth-bound version, with its high-quality illustrations, sewn bookmark, and easy-on-the-eyes print set on sturdy paper, would adorn anyone’s bookshelf; at eighteen dollars, the *Liberty Fund* edition would be a good buy at double the price (a very good paper edition is available for ten dollars). The *Liberty Fund* edition also includes a couple of bonuses: a speech by Humphreys, “An Oration on the Political Situation of the United States of America in the Year 1789,” and a letter from George Washington to Putnam, in regards the debt the newly created nation owes its first veterans.

Major-General Israel Putnam (1718-90) is best known today for an utterance he supposedly made during the battle of Bunker Hill, “don’t fire ‘til you see the whites of their eyes,” but his fame ought to rest on a more substantial foundation—which is something Humphreys sought to create with his biographical account. Humphreys (1752-1818) served as Putnam’s aide-de-camp during the American Revolution. Much of the material here comes from either Humphreys’ own observations or from Putnam himself. But the greatest influence on this book is Plutarch (*fl.* 80 A.D.), whose biographies of Greek and Roman statesmen and soldiers were much admired in the eighteenth century English-speaking world. Colonial Americans drew inspiration in particular from Plutarch’s depiction of political and civic virtue which Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Jay, and like-minded citizens believed would find fullest expression in an independent American republic.

Putnam was a fitting subject for biography in the tradition of Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians & Romans*. Born into modest circumstances in rural New England nearly sixty years before Jefferson penned the *Declaration of Independence*,

Putnam's thrift, husbandry, and diligence allowed him to prosper as a farmer. His first military service was as a company commander in the Connecticut militia at an age—Putnam was thirty-seven—when most men would have been content to build on their achievements rather than take up arms against a savage and resourceful enemy. Putnam performed with great skill and courage during the Seven Years War; his captivity at the hands of the French and Indians is a harrowing episode and worth reading by itself. Colonel Putnam returned to civilian life in 1763.

When war broke out between the American colonies and Great Britain Putnam—by now approaching sixty years of age—was one of the first to join the fight:

All eyes were now turned to find the men who, possessed of military experience, would dare, in the approaching hour of severest trial, to lead their undisciplined fellow-citizens to battle. For none were so stupid as not to comprehend, that want of success would involve the leaders in punishment of rebellion. Putnam was among the first and the most conspicuous who stepped forth.

From this point forward Humphreys' account of Putnam is a catalogue of his subject's valor, and that of the troops he led, in the face of unrelenting privation and long odds.

Modern readers should not allow themselves to be put off by the scarcity of details about Putnam's private life, or by Humphreys' elevated prose style—which is meant to project the solemnity of his subject matter. Unlike many of today's biographies, Humphreys cared little for the workings of Putnam's psyche or the ways in which Putnam in his personal habits might have resembled ordinary folks. Recorded here are the heroic deeds of a man who deserves a place in history alongside the founders of the Roman Republic.

Humphreys' portrait of Putnam may strike modern readers as aloof or, at worst, lacking in humanity. But for Humphreys' generation biography was never meant to be an exhaustively intimate exposition of a life. Readers turned to biography for inspiration—they sought examples of excellence in all its variety. Humphreys' *Life of Israel Putnam* is thus an ambassador from another time, not only for the vivid picture it gives of the kinds of men who delivered to posterity the American republic but also because the book shows how biography ought to be written.