



# Carlyle House

## *Docent Dispatch*



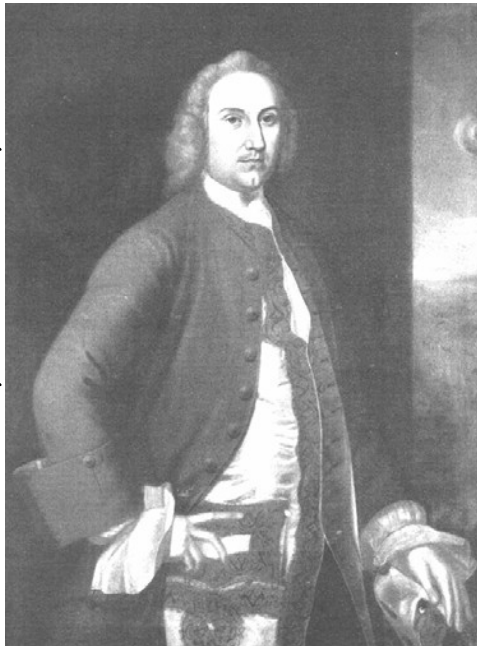
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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

### LANDON CARTER'S UNEASY KINGDOM

Book Review by Henry Desmarais

Rhys Isaac's new book, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom*, tells the story of the life and times of Landon Carter (1710-1778), a wealthy Virginia planter and near contemporary of John Carlyle. The book is primarily based on the extensive diaries kept by Carter himself, with surviving volumes covering 1752-1758, 1764, 1766, 1767, and 1770-1778. Like John Carlyle, Carter lived in a grand Georgian House (Sabine Hall), situated on the banks of a river (in Carter's case the Rappahannock), owned a number of plantations, was a major slaveholder, served as a justice of the peace and a colonel in the Virginia militia, and had the misfortune of losing more than one wife (in Carter's case, three). Like Carlyle, he even had his portrait painted by John Hesselius and this portrait graces both the book's dust jacket and its front matter. Unlike Carlyle, Landon Carter was Virginia-born (the son of Robert "King" Carter), although he spent about eight years in England getting what Carlyle would have agreed was a fine education. Carter also differed importantly due to his elected service in the Virginia House of Burgesses and as a vestryman for a nearby Church of England parish.



*Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall  
By John Hesselius early 1750s*

In his book, Isaac quotes very extensively from the Carter diaries, with excerpts italicized and re-formatted in a reader-friendly manner. This review will similarly italicize quotes from Isaac's book. Isaac's stated goals in writing his book were to *open for readers an understanding of Landon Carter's world* and to *show the [American] Revolution as personal experience from*

*the stories of rebellion that began to multiply.* It is also quite significant, I think, that the author notes that his daughter urged him to address *the eons-old race, class, and gender exploitation that still continues everywhere.* By the way, Rhys Isaac was born and raised in South Africa, now lives in Australia and, among other things, serves as Distinguished Visiting Professor at the College of William and Mary and Research Associate of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Isaac's book certainly brings alive 18<sup>th</sup> century Virginia plantation life, the ever-present dangers of bad weather, agricultural pests and illness, and the problems inherent in a system that relied so heavily on an enslaved workforce. Chapters discussing the politics in the Virginia House of Burgesses during the French and Indian War (*Landon Legislator*) and Carter Landon's often prickly relations with others, such as the country doctor, the local parson, and fellow magistrates at the county court (*Duties Betrayed*), were personal favorites. The book also vividly portrays the strong emotions and interpersonal conflicts--on both sides of the Atlantic--brought on by the American colonies' rebellion against Britain. It also devotes

**CARLYLE HOUSE**  
Mary Ruth Coleman, Director  
Jim Bartlinski, Curator  
Cindy Major, Curator of Education



considerable space to documenting Landon Carter's squabbles with his children, their spouses, his in-laws, and even some of his grandchildren, especially those with his eldest son, Robert, his son's wife Winifred, and Landon III, his grandson, all three living under Carter's roof at Sabine Hall. Extensive excerpts from Landon Carter's diaries provide essentially moment-by-moment accounts of these near-continuous conflicts. And please note that Carter apparently would leave his personal diary lying around so others could read for themselves exactly what he thought of them, often with predictably disastrous results. Unfortunately, we see the Carter family conflicts primarily from the perspective of Landon Carter himself, with Isaac offering us little help (perhaps due to source limitations) in determining for ourselves whether, for example, Robert and Winifred really were *a wastrel son* and his *demoniac wife* or whether Landon Carter had simply become a cantankerous old man.

Isaac's account, while highly readable and most entertaining, seems somewhat hampered by his obsessions, especially with the issue of patriarchy. Patriarchy explains EVERYTHING, and some variant of the word (patriarch, patriarchal, patriarchy) appears on almost every one of the book's 336 pages (or so it seems)! Isaac also attempts, but in my opinion fails to establish a causal link between the American-British conflict during the revolution and Carter's own difficulties with his children, their spouses, his grandchildren, and his in-laws. For example, Isaac argues that *[t]he patriots' defiance of the king intensified into a father-son conflict on a cosmic scale; the reverberations showed in the escalation of father-son clashes at Sabine Hall* and that *[w]ith deep unconscious, Landon, in effect, took upon himself the role of King George vis-à-vis his subject son's claims to autonomy*. In this regard, Isaac's frequent allusions to the image of the *father-king* would not have been quite so tidy had the British monarch at the time been not a George, but an Anne, a Mary or even an Elizabeth. Also, it is most "convenient" for Isaac that Landon Carter's three wives are "all out of the way" before the intra-family conflicts really heat up, thereby depriving us (and Isaac) of a female parent's views (even if indirect) about the goings on at Sabine Hall. On the other hand, Isaac is certainly on safer ground in emphasizing that *the times were sweeping away due respect for rank, age, and seniority*. For example, this is believed to be one of the reasons that Alexandria's oligarchy of trustees was replaced by an elected council

in 1780. Nevertheless, in my humble opinion, Landon Carter would have clashed with his family, whether or not there was a revolution in progress. Finally, Isaac makes extensive and, in my opinion, somewhat questionable use of 1930s reminiscences of ex-slaves to *balance the one-sided, harsh account* in Landon's diaries of the 18<sup>th</sup> century enslaved population at Sabine Hall and other Carter family plantations. Of course, all of the above comments by this white male reviewer might well be disputed, perhaps with considerable vigor, by others.

In sum, Rhys Isaac's new book tells a great 18<sup>th</sup> century Virginia story. However, the author's obsessions, especially with the issue of patriarchy, do become tiresome. More importantly, perhaps, the story he tells is a sad one, as its principal character, Landon Carter, is mainly portrayed as a terribly unhappy, lonely, and angry old man trying to cope with the unique stress and strain of an historic revolution. This leaves Isaac's book with no happy ending or really satisfying moral, and his readers depressed, even exhausted. As I closed the book, I couldn't help but hope that life at Carlyle House during the American Revolution had been a whole lot better than that at Sabine Hall.

**This book is available in the docent library**



*The first Mrs. Carter  
(nee Elizabeth Wormeley)  
Robert Wormeley Carter's mother  
by William Bridges*