

Thomas Jefferson and Us

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Jefferson: Architect of American Liberty. By JOHN B. BOLES. New York: Basic Books, 2017. 638 pages. Cloth, ebook.

"Most Blessed of the Patriarchs": Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination. By ANNETTE GORDON-REED and PETER S. ONUF. New York: W. W. Norton/Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016. 399 pages. Cloth, paper, ebook.

The Founding Fathers have had quite a run in the last few years. Starting in the early 1990s, books about the founding generation began to appear among the hottest publishing topics in nonfiction. Publishers rushed to bring out more and more accounts about the Founders in their various guises—as revolutionaries, as constitutional architects, as family men, and as literary participants in the wider republic of letters. Soon some historians were lamenting what H. W. Brands labeled “Founders Chic,” the peculiar phenomenon in which the eighteenth-century Founders were deemed au courant gurus who supposedly provided cures for all contemporary ailments. But such complaints largely fell on deaf ears. The adulation has continued unabated.¹

And yet there has been one key exception to this general celebration, one Founder who has seen his reputation plummet to an almost unimaginable depth. Thomas Jefferson used to be singularly revered as the author of the Declaration of Independence. Starting in the 1960s with the black freedom struggle, some critics began to see Jefferson as a more general symbol of the hypocrisy of the United States. Though he proclaimed that all men are created equal, he owned hundreds of slaves. An unseemly rumor held that those few he freed were his children, borne by his slave Sally Hemings. Still his reputation among many historians remained resilient. In 1974 when Fawn M. Brodie published *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, a psychobiography concluding that Hemings was in fact his concubine, most of Jefferson’s latter-day scribes remained unconvinced.²

¹ H. W. Brands, “Founders Chic: Our Reverence for the Fathers Has Gotten Out of Hand,” *Atlantic*, September 2003, 101–10.

² Fawn M. Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York, 1974). For a general discussion of Jefferson’s falling reputation, see Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, “The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in American Memory, 1943–1993,” in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville, Va., 1993), 418–56.

But in 1997 Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* broke through the resistance. Employing a lawyerly sense of evidence and burden, she documented the way that many of Jefferson's biographers, so committed to a specific image of the man and so inclined toward a specific kind of written (and therefore white) historical record, had denigrated other evidence that pointed toward Jefferson's long-term sexual relationship with his slave. The following year, DNA evidence showed that someone within the Jefferson line had fathered Hemings's last child. The most likely person to do that would have been Jefferson himself. In short order, many historians concluded that Jefferson was the father of all of Hemings's children, having entered into a concubine relationship with her as a forty-year-old man while she was in her early teens, possibly as young as thirteen.³

The revelation shredded Jefferson's reputation. Although not everyone would agree with Paul Finkelman's assessment that "Jefferson is one of the most deeply creepy people in American history," after Gordon-Reed's book few historians would embrace him without caveat as the sage of Monticello, the prescient voice from the past.⁴

Now come two books suggesting that the widespread condemnation has gone too far. The most vigorous defense is from John B. Boles in a new biography, *Jefferson: Architect of American Liberty*, that seeks to present Jefferson, as the author explains, "holistically and within the rich context of his time and place" (2). When seen in that context, Boles argues, Jefferson becomes a figure easier to understand and even to admire. "Jefferson challenges us more thoroughly than any other Founder," Boles writes, "but in the end, he is the most attractive, most elusive, most complicated, most intellectual, most practical, most idealistic, most flexible, and most quintessentially American Founder of them all" (5).

Unfortunately, Boles is so eager to rehabilitate Jefferson that many parts of the biography read like a brief for the defense. Regarding Jefferson's relationship with Hemings, Boles argues that their concubinage was likely characterized by "genuine affection—if not love itself" (153). He offers no evidence for this conclusion, nor for his later assertion that their entire relationship seems, retrospectively, "consensual" (265). These are debatable points that, for the most part, Boles declines to debate, instead gesturing to

³ Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, Va., 1997); Eugene A. Foster et al., "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child," *Nature*, Nov. 5, 1998, 27–28. For the change in scholarly consensus, see "Forum: Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings Redux," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 57, no. 1 (January 2000): 121–210.

⁴ Paul Finkelman, quoted in Jennifer Schuessler, "Some Scholars Reject Dark Portrait of Jefferson," *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/27/books/henry-wienceks-master-of-the-mountain-irks-historians.html?mcubz=0>.

the far more nuanced discussion in Gordon-Reed's book *The Hemingses of Monticello*, and leaving it at that.⁵

Boles's treatment of Jefferson's politics and political career is admiring, even fawning. Since Jefferson's own day, many critics have seen in him a nearly fatal inability to stick to a position. John Quincy Adams was not alone in considering Jefferson's career "one tissue of inconsistency." That inconsistency has meant that pretty much everyone—small government libertarians, democratic activists, abolitionist sympathizers, and slaveholding states' righters—could, and did, invoke Jefferson in support of their political positions. Six years after Jefferson's death, during an extended debate about which party faction was his rightful heir, an exasperated writer for *Niles' Weekly Register* complained: "What principle in the political ethics of our country might not be *sustained* and *refuted* by the writings of Mr. Jefferson?" He was so contradictory as to sustain all factions.⁶

To the extent that Boles acknowledges Jefferson's different positions, he seems to regard them as evidence of Jefferson's suppleness of mind. Confronted with Jefferson's initial opposition to the constitutional process, his defense of the Articles of Confederation, and his attempts to aid the Anti-Federalists before he eventually supported the new Constitution, Boles turns these vacillations into a commitment to liberty and a laudable willingness to learn from his friend, James Madison. When dealing with Jefferson's disputes with Alexander Hamilton, Boles depicts Hamilton as an "imperial" aggressor who trampled Jefferson's "conciliatory" (213) nature. Yet Jefferson's conciliation proved to be limited. Jefferson became convinced that many in George Washington's administration, led by Hamilton, John Adams, and Washington himself, were engaged in a monarchical plot. Boles notes Jefferson's concerns about the administration without ever quite admitting that this typically Jeffersonian fantasy misrepresented both the administration's actual positions and the effect of its policies. Boles dutifully reports on Jefferson's party-building activities, which were far in advance of anyone else's, but for the most part he places the onus of the partisan spirit on Madison. When Jefferson retired from the Washington administration and ostensibly from public life, Boles takes Jefferson at his word that he sought the solace of family life, arguing that Madison actually built the party while keeping Jefferson in the dark about his plans. This is an odd claim, since Madison consistently deferred to Jefferson and they exchanged

⁵ Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York, 2008). Boles references this book in all three passages in which he discusses Jefferson and Hemings at any length (542 n. 64, 560 n. 44, 588 n. 31).

⁶ John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795 to 1848*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Philadelphia, 1876), 8: 272 ("tissue"); "Nullification," [Baltimore] *Niles' Weekly Register*, Apr. 7, 1832, 92 ("What principle").

constant letters about the direction of the Washington administration, about the Democratic-Republican protests against that administration, and about the ways that these protests could be harnessed in party building. Boles's displacement of party activity onto Madison serves as an important shield against yet another charge of inconsistency on Jefferson's part: that he violated his professed disdain of political parties through the actual and unstinting efforts to build one.

Boles's Jefferson is not a states' rights man. Of Jefferson's authorship of the 1798 Kentucky Resolutions and his affirmation that states can void federal law, Boles simply says that Jefferson changed his mind once he read Madison's more careful Virginia Resolutions. When Jefferson finally entered office as president in 1800, Boles represents him as moving from triumph to triumph. In fact, that was the point at which Jefferson's contradictions boiled over and his political sloganeering met the realities of governance. Jefferson's compromises of his constitutional principles and his past affirmation of states' rights caused the Republican Party to begin to fracture beneath him and anticipated the coming, more consequential fracture that would end in the Civil War. Of this fracture, and of Jefferson's future role as a symbol of slavery's expansion in the Missouri Crisis, as a nullifier in the nullification controversy, and as a states' rights representative during the sectionalism of the 1850s, Boles says nearly nothing. It is as if these interpretations, which are perfectly justifiable given at least one part of Jefferson's political career, were complete misrepresentations of the man. Instead, the only contradiction that Boles seems willing to grant is the obvious one involving his personal embrace of slavery in spite of his theoretical opposition. It is that contradiction that Boles refers to in the last two lines of the book, when he argues that "despite his limitations" Jefferson provided the essential architecture of "the nation's highest ideals" and "will always belong in the American pantheon" (516). This is great man history, unapologetically papering over tensions and incoherence in the service of praise.

More successful is *Most Blessed of the Patriarchs* by Gordon-Reed and Peter S. Onuf, though it also has problems. The book is styled as an inquiry into Jefferson's imaginative life, out of which he sought to fashion himself, the new nation, and the New World. The authors lament the long-held assumption among some critics that there was something shady about Jefferson's character or, as Henry Adams put it, that "the shifting and uncertain flicker of its semi-transparent shadows" (xvii) made Jefferson unknowable and slightly suspect. They counter that all human beings have multiple selves, voices, and roles, particularly if they live as long and as varied a life as Jefferson did. To represent Jefferson in his kaleidoscopic selfhood, Gordon-Reed and Onuf present a series of roughly chronological essays on various aspects of his life—his upbringing, his sense of home and

plantation, his travels and political development, his devotion to music, his religious ideals, and so on.

The form leads to some problems. Lacking a sharp narrative line, the book sometimes meanders, as for example when the authors shoehorn a discussion of Jefferson's greater affection for one of his daughters into a wider chapter supposedly about music. When dealing with his public affairs, the authors tend to presume knowledge of political events and of Jefferson's biography, which leads to a disembodied quality in the exposition. Many specifics are omitted entirely: his party activities, the Kentucky Resolutions, the particulars of his presidency.

There is also a persistent desire to soften any critique. The authors note Jefferson's "mental evasions" (147) in dealing with slavery. They acknowledge that his rhetoric about the "monocrats" or the supposed betrayal of republicanism by his opponents was "in retrospect . . . hyperbolic and hypocritical" (192). And yet throughout the discussion of his public life there is an undercurrent of exculpatory justification that tends to honor the purity of his motives. Of his overblown rhetoric in the 1790s, which injected a mode of paranoid self-righteousness into the nation's politics, the authors write: "Jefferson never doubted his own pure intentions—or those of the people. His sense of himself reflected his powerful and enduring identification with the nation-making generation of 1776" (192).

The best parts of *Most Blessed of the Patriarchs* deal with Jefferson's private life. Here there is less justification of his actions and more detached, almost clinical, analysis. Particularly gripping are the account of his life in France, the unpacking of his relationship with the Hemingses (especially Sally), and the discussion of his religious life after his retirement. The narrative line comes into sharp focus in these sections, and his actions are shown in specific detail. The result is a powerful psychological portrait of a man for whom the public presentation of self-mastery and self-control were deeply important. He is not a particularly likeable man, but he is fully embodied and at odds with himself.

Still, Gordon-Reed and Onuf cannot resist trying to find something to hold Jefferson together. They acknowledge at the end of their book that they have "taken Jefferson apart" (311) in their essays about his various selves, but beneath these selves lies a fundamental coherence, they claim, insofar as Jefferson was engaged in a self-fashioning project that arose out of his imagination. The fact that such sensitive interpreters feel the need to search for Jefferson's core impulse suggests that beneath this search is an even deeper one. Early in their defense of Jefferson, Gordon-Reed and Onuf note that his personal interests and career were so multifarious that they have generated "a veritable industry of 'Jefferson *and*' books" (xviii)—Jefferson and music, Jefferson and religion, Jefferson and slavery, and more. But the most important relationship, and the one that sustains the entire

effort to understand him, is the one least analyzed by Gordon-Reed and Onuf. That relationship is Jefferson and us.

Part of the enduring allure of Founders Chic is the assumption that to know the Founders is to begin to understand the nation that they helped create. To find Jefferson, then, is to find ourselves. He has become a repository of national ideals, so much so that a biographical treatment of Jefferson almost always becomes an excavation of national character, an analysis of constitutional design and practice, and, in the most admiring treatments, a moment of national self-celebration. As Gordon-Reed and Onuf say of Jefferson, "It is impossible to understand eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America—and the country the United States has become—without grappling with him and his legacy" (xxv).

But on those grounds Jefferson is and will always be a problem. He testifies to the deeply contradictory nature of the American experiment because his contradictions become, on some level, the nation's. Both of these books struggle with that conundrum without a satisfactory resolution. Boles simply affirms Jefferson's greatness—and, by extension, the nation's—in spite of his inability or unwillingness to live up to his supposed ideals. Gordon-Reed and Onuf are more qualified in their praise, but in the final analysis they too look to Jefferson as an affirmation of American possibility. He becomes a symbol of "the restless, ever transforming spirit of American democracy" (xviii), a generative figure who "had been born in one world, and helped to make a new, more expansive one" (xxii). Their claim is only partially accurate, or rather it is accurate only so long as one acknowledges that the "new, more expansive" world that he helped create also involved an enlargement of the scale and scope of suffering—by slaves, by Native Americans, and by others. Although Gordon-Reed and Onuf do acknowledge that fact, the veneer of celebration remains.

One response would be simply to reject that an understanding of Jefferson has anything to do with understanding ourselves. There is much to be said for such an approach. But there is perhaps as much to be said for accepting that project while shifting the generic frame within which it is carried out. Boles opted for the epic frame—Jefferson as the hero of American liberty, to which we are heirs. Gordon-Reed and Onuf adopted an ironic/comic frame with a postmodern gloss—Jefferson as a man of human foibles and multiple selves, to which we are heirs. But the most appropriate frame to understand Jefferson and us might well be the tragic. To look at Jefferson's life through the lens of tragedy is to understand that his failings, and those of the country that he helped create, were not the inevitable result of his time and place—were not, in other words, the result of external factors that can provide an excuse. The essential power of tragedy, particularly of the Greek variety, is that it requires us to look within because only there is the source of failure found.