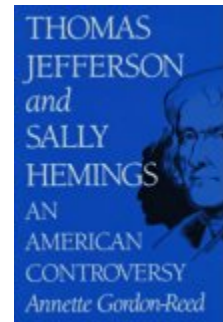


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Annette Gordon-Reed. *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997. xx + 288 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1698-9.

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Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy

In his unfinished essay, "The Jefferson Scandals," Douglass Adair sermonized that the "research historian follows an ancient and standard method" when confronted with conflicting evidence and contradictory claims: "The technique for extracting or distilling the creditable items from a report that may be full of error is to seek independent corroboration, detail by detail." [1] Consequently, Adair weighed the testimony of two "prejudiced witnesses," Sally Hemings (through her son Madison Hemings) and Thomas Jefferson Randolph (through historian Henry S. Randall) against the "neutral statistics" (p. 179) of Jefferson's *Farm Book* and the written testimony of another key witness, Jefferson's overseer, Edmund Bacon. Along the way, Adair introduced seemingly incontrovertible assertions about Jefferson's "known character" (p. 182) that were gleaned from his private correspondence and public pronouncements. Adair concluded that "it is possible to prove that Jefferson was innocent of (James) Callender's charges that Jefferson cohabited with Sally Hemings" (p. 169). Gavel down, case closed.

Of course, the case never has closed. In "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in American Memory, 1943-1993" [2], Scott A. French and Edward L. Ayers reviewed the scholarly and popular literature about Jefferson and Hemings, before and after Adair's influential essay. They showed how ideological trends and current events influenced accounts of whether a liaison between Hemings and Jefferson occurred. These days, Jefferson's historians cannot hide from journalists

like Ben Wattenberg and documentarians like Ken Burns who are seeking up-to-the-minute verdicts about miscegenation at Monticello. [3]

The most recent book on the subject, Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, is the best so far. It is a thorough and arch "critique of the defense which has been mounted to counter the notion of a Jefferson-Hemings liaison" (p. xiv), with genealogical tables, endnotes, an appendix of capsule biographies, and four other appendices of documents crucial to the argument.

No doubt Gordon-Reed, trained in the law, bristled at Adair's legal language, which helped to rationalize his undocumented theory about Sally Hemings. According to Adair, Sally Hemings, spurned by lover Peter Carr (Thomas Jefferson's nephew), seized on James Callender's calumny against Jefferson and "this wench Sally" to wreak havoc on the Jefferson family which, excluding Peter, treated her clan so well for so long, given that they were slaves and all (pp. 61, 204). Gordon-Reed adapts the legal concepts of "procedural fairness" (p. xvi), "direct evidence," (p. 213), "extrinsic evidence," and "burden of proof" (p. 215) to refute the "bad history" (p. 16) about Hemings and Jefferson. She claims that historians such as Douglass Adair, Dumas Malone, Virginus Dabney, and Charles Chester Miller have compensated for the absence of "absolute proof" (p. xv) by deploying "every stereotype of black people" (p. xiii) in their quest to absolve Jefferson of miscegenation. (However, late in

life Malone conceded to *The New York Times* that Jefferson might have slipped once or twice; Gordon-Reed, pp. 156-57). According to Gordon-Reed, the net effect has been that the story of the Hemings family has not been told fairly. The “real scandal” is that history and the people who read it have been ill served (p. xvii). Gordon-Reed’s book is an indictment of the “authority of white male scholars” of Jefferson (French and Ayers, p. 419) who have labored to keep “the consideration of the Sally Hemings story...in a time warp,” untouched by contemporary Southern historiography and revisionist views of Jefferson’s career (Gordon-Reed, pp. xii-xix).

Gordon-Reed’s effort to rehabilitate the reputation of *The Memoirs of Madison Hemings* (pp. 245-48) exemplifies her method. While Merrill D. Peterson found much of Madison’s story “vivid and accurate”[4], Adair compared it to a “lurid novel” (*Fame*, p. 171). According to Gordon-Reed, others like Dabney, Malone, and Miller argued that its polished language indicated that S. F. Wetmore, to whom Madison Hemings told the story, took liberties (pp. 8-22). Either Wetmore’s sympathy with the freedmen or Madison Hemings’s “pathetic wish” to elevate his station or both made *The Memoirs* unreliable, not trustworthy direct evidence (Peterson’s phrase, quoted in Gordon-Reed, p. 82).

Israel Jefferson’s corroborating *Memoirs* about Jefferson and Sally Hemings’s intimacy (pp. 249-53) was suspicious for similar reasons, historians have claimed. It, too, was told to Wetmore. But Gordon-Reed claims that none of the people who have discredited Madison Hemings and Israel Jefferson did sufficient research to find out that stories about Thomas Jefferson as the father of Madison and his brother Eston were circulating in Ohio, where the two men lived, decades before Wetmore published their memoirs (pp. 14-15). Nor did the discreditors consider why, if Madison’s story was fabricated, it did not include James Callender’s luridly famous claim about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings conceiving a mulatto “President Tom” during their stay in Paris (p. 24). Instead, Madison Hemings reported that his mother lost her first child, conceived in France, shortly after it was born in Virginia.

Indeed, Madison Hemings’s *Memoirs* reads “simply as a story,” not a cynical case, Gordon-Reed says (p. 27). For instance, he says that his mother extracted a “solemn pledge” (p. 246) from Jefferson to free her children at age twenty-one, but then he “makes no use of the specifics of this promise” (p. 24). He does not mention as confirming evidence the ages at which his siblings Beverley

and Harriet “strolled.” And although he does mention the provision in Jefferson’s will that he and Eston be freed at twenty-one, he does not link that back to the pledge. Also why, Gordon-Reed asks, would two demonstrably sane black men, Madison Hemings and Israel Jefferson, help to concoct stories that were more likely to inflame their neighbors than increase their social cachet (p. 12)? Or why assume without compelling evidence that they were feeble-minded pawns in the hands of white radicals (p. 11)?

As if she were cross-examining those chroniclers who have impeached Madison Hemings’ reliability, Gordon-Reed establishes doubt in their master narratives. This doubt opens space for believing Madison Hemings, Israel Jefferson, and even James Callender (though the last case is trying). She reminds us, for instance, that “exaggeration, rather than fabrication, was Callender’s journalistic flaw” (p. 62). While he claimed that Sally Hemings had five children, one of whom was the notorious “Tom,” he might not have known, as we know again now, that three had died by 1799. Either Callender or a source could have fabricated Tom out of knowledge about Beverley (born in 1798) and the persistent story that Sally conceived in France (p. 76). But the whole of Callender’s account, as extrinsic evidence, is not necessarily wrong.

The stories of Edmund Bacon, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Ellen Randolph Coolidge, and Henry S. Randall have been cited to discredit the accounts of a liaison. However, Gordon-Reed maintains that procedural fairness requires us to consider their pronounced fondness for Jefferson as disqualifying as the motives of Wetmore, Madison Hemings, and Israel Jefferson (p. 34). Other doubts arise, Gordon-Reed implies. Bacon reported that he often saw the person who was the father of Harriet Hemings coming out of Sally’s room in the morning, and this culprit was not Thomas Jefferson (pp. 26, 92-93). But according to Jefferson’s *Farm Book*, Bacon became overseer after Harriet’s birth.[5] Apparently, Thomas Jefferson Randolph told historian Henry S. Randall that he “had charge of Monticello” when Peter Carr and Sally were producing “the progeny which resembled Mr. Jefferson” (pp. 254-55). But Gordon-Reed points out that Thomas Jefferson Randolph was only a boy, and not in charge, during this time (p. 85). While Ellen Randolph Coolidge lamented that “it is impossible to prove that Mr. Jefferson never had a mistress or colored children,” she nonetheless wrote that her brother, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, believed Samuel Carr, not Peter, to be the culprit (p. 258). Did Randall or Coolidge misinterpret his statements, Gordon-Reed asks (pp. 87-88)? Or

was Randolph telling different stories to different persons? Randall claimed that he once confirmed, but then forgot how he did so, that Jefferson could not have been present when “the slave who most resembled him” was born (p. 255). But, as Gordon-Reed says, a comparison of the lists of slaves in the *Farm Book* with the chronology of Jefferson’s adult life shows that Thomas Jefferson was at Monticello in time to have impregnated Sally Hemings before her births (pp. 100-02). Of course, other historians have conceded this point, too, while still fingering the Carr boys (p. 99, n. 26; p. 265, n. 5; p. 266, n. 29).

In addition, Gordon-Reed marshals circumstantial evidence, but not clinching proof, that Jefferson could have been involved with Sally Hemings. However, her argument is not so much about what Jefferson actually did as it is about what historians, excepting a few like Winthrop D. Jordan, have not done (p. 3): present the circumstantial facts completely. Jefferson was at Monticello in time to father Sally Hemings’ children. His decision to let Beverley and Harriet stroll, in combination with his freeing Madison and Eston in his will, can be seen as a “partial performance” of the pledge that, according to Madison Hemings, Jefferson made to his mother, Sally, in France (p. 25). Sally’s Hemings’s children were, even for Hemingses at Monticello, treated unusually well. No other slave woman’s children, both male and female, either all went free or were allowed to go free, Gordon-Reed indicates (pp. 48, 218-19). In fact, soon after Jefferson’s death, Sally Hemings went free, too, although all the circumstances that accomplished this are not known (p. 219). The children of Sally Hemings had names that could be traced to Jefferson-Randolph family and friends (pp. 198-200). Neither Wayles nor Carr names predominate. Sally Hemings’s three sons all played the violin in some fashion, as did Jefferson; and at least one seems to have been a balloonist, an avocation that fascinated Jefferson (pp. 151-52). In sum, Gordon-Reed suggests that when “ordinary citizens” view these circumstantial facts alongside Madison Hemings’s direct evidence, Israel Jefferson’s corroborating testimony, and Callender’s extrinsic evidence, they likely will doubt the conclusions of many Jefferson historians (p. 231). “Let (circumstantial) facts be submitted to a candid world,” she might say.

Finally, we turn to character and the related issues of credibility and probability. According to Gordon-Reed, critics like Garry Wills, who have conceded the likelihood of a liaison, have been willing to compare Sally Hemings to a prostitute (p. 169). But they have been unwilling to characterize Tom as a John and rarely as a lover. Why sully Sally Hemings so, unless the motive has

been to preserve as unblemished as possible the Jefferson image in the American mind, Gordon-Reed implies? This image of the privately pure if not always the publicly consistent Jefferson recalls his grandson’s picture of a man as “immaculate...as God ever created,” who consistently put solicitude for his children and grandchildren ahead of his own wants (p. 255). This is the Jefferson who presumably lived out in private his public abhorrence of racial mixing and who turned away from women after his wife’s death (excepting a brief flirtation in Paris) to produce immaculate, intellectual conceptions: “the earth belongs to the living,” the Republican party, the presidency, the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark, the Embargo, Monticello, and the University of Virginia.

Gordon-Reed admits that one can construct a theory of why Jefferson favored Sally Hemings’ children without either maligning her groundlessly or, in Miller’s words, accusing Jefferson of a four-decade “cover-up” of his own miscegenation.[6] Historians generally concede that Sally Hemings was Jefferson’s wife’s half-sister and therefore that her children were his relatives (Gordon-Reed, pp. 128-29). In 1815, Jefferson calculated that, following Virginia’s law, mulatto children like Sally Hemings’, the product of three generations of crosses with white blood, were themselves white, even if they were still enslaved due to their mother’s status. Favoring and freeing Sally Hemings’s children, Jefferson could have been favoring and freeing white kin, Gordon-Reed suggests (p. 53).

This hypothesis falls short of what Gordon-Reed wants readers to consider seriously. While she discounts Fawn M. Brodie’s Freudian approach (a “club” in the hands of Brodie’s detractors, p. 4), she builds on the research of other scholars like Jordan (*White Over Black*, pp. 465-69) to suggest that the profiles of Jefferson and Hemings made a long-term affair thinkable—not “impossible to believe” because he was so immaculate and she so inferior (p. xiv). Sally Hemings was beautiful and intelligent, accounts say, and dependent on Thomas Jefferson for privileges. In France she learned a new language, lived in the midst of opulence, and observed different customs. As family, she was a known quantity. Might not Sally Hemings have seen being “mistress of a slave master a suitable role,” one which her mother also had filled (p. 164)? Might not Jefferson have been attracted to her?

And Jefferson, an immaculate man in some ways, was a creature of compulsion and habit, as well as a widower who promised his dying wife that he would not remarry, according to Gordon-Reed and many other schol-

ars. He professed to hate the scene of politics but returned to it frequently. He disdained British luxury and French dissipation but spent lavishly on consumables and art works (Gordon-Reed, p. 121). He extolled domestic quiet but raised and revised Monticello in quest of perfection (Gordon-Reed, p. 131). He despised the idea of slavery but held relatives as slaves; and he disdained racial mixing but included the children of miscegenation in his household (Gordon-Reed, 108-09). Do these facts and paradoxes either confirm, deny, or suggest a liaison? Does his racism disqualify him as a partner in miscegenation even though miscegenation was “a prevalent and inevitable part of slavery,” which certainly was a racist institution (Gordon-Reed, 128)?

Gordon-Reed does not believe that racism clears him preemptorily of the charge of miscegenation. Can we imagine Jefferson, champion of the diffusion of knowledge in Bill 79 and father of the University of Virginia, “treat(ing) his own flesh as slaves,” even educating them as slaves (Gordon-Reed, 148)? Can the man from Monticello be in this way but a planter? Reluctantly, Gordon-Reed can imagine him in this way. As Jefferson himself said when reviewing conflicting theories about how sea shells got so high up in the Andes, “There is a wonder somewhere...this great phenomenon is as yet unsolved.”[7]

For some time, influential writers on Jefferson, no matter their theories about the liaison, have acknowledged the difficulty of alchemizing adulterated and partial evidence into the gold of proof: Ellen Randolph Coolidge—“It is difficult to prove a negative” (Gordon-Reed, p. 258); Merrill D. Peterson—“No positive disproof” (*Jefferson Image*, p. 184); Winthrop D. Jordan—“Paternity can be neither refuted nor proved”[8]; Virginus Dabney on behalf of others—“The charges are in all probability false”[9]; Dumas Malone—“The perplexing question ... cannot be answered with finality” (*Jefferson the President*, p. 495); Andrew Burstein—“Nothing fully satisfies”[10]; Jack McLaughlin—“Jefferson’s records reveal nothing about...the allegations”[11]; and Paul Finkelman—“The issue remains an open question.”[12] To this Gordon-Reed adds that there is no absolute proof. However, in a mirror image of Dabney’s conclusion, she does suggest that “the likely nature of their relationship” was sexual and amorous (p. 231). Do we indict her for ignoring, as legions of others have, the agnostic dictum that “he is less remote from the truth who believes nothing, than he who believes what is wrong,” (*Notes*, p. 33)? I think not, since Jefferson, the believer in extant mammoths and megalonyx, wrote these words, thus showing

1) that evidence and theory entwine and 2) that to puncture some person’s theory of some other persons’ inferiority (remember Monsieur de Buffon on the inhabitants of the New World?), countervailing theories can be useful. Gordon-Reed implies as much in her “Preface” (p. xv).

Like Finkleman (*Slavery*, p. 142), Gordon-Reed implies the we will not be satisfied until (I take liberties here) Marcia Clark and Barry Scheck face off in court—power-points ablaze!—to parse the Jefferson, Randolph, and Carr genes in the Hemings descendents (p. xiv). But will we be satisfied even then, if this research were done? Can science satisfy the need to affirm or deny the existence of a primal scene of republican miscegenation? (Has science solved the assassination of JFK and silenced its theorists?) “Branded and bonded” like Hester and Dimmesdale (miscegenation compounding the sin of adultery), subjected to “public humiliation,” their clothes and speeches scrutinized for vague confession, Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson now are iconic.[13] Out of the few facts that we have, Gordon-Reed hypothesizes a humanizing story of the Hemings family without exaggerating her ability to meet the burden of proof.[14] Having humanized Sally Hemings, she will cause scholars and the reading public to reexamine their image of Thomas Jefferson.

[1]. Trevor Colbur, ed., *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays by Douglass Adair*, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., p. 178.

[2]. Peter S. Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993, pp. 418-56.

[3]. See, for instance, “Thomas Jefferson: Champion of Liberty or Dangerous Radical?” *Think Tank with Ben Wattenberg*, July 1, 1994, <http://www.thinktank.com/transcript.114.html>; and “Does Jefferson Matter?” *Thomas Jefferson: A Film By Ken Burns*, http://www.pbs.org/jefferson/frame_actions.htm.

[4]. *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 186.

[5]. See Malone’s different explanation, *Jefferson the President: First Term, 1801-05*, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1970, n. 7, p. 496.

[6]. *The Wolf By the Ears: Jefferson and Slavery*, New York: The Free Press, 1977, p. 168.

[7]. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1972, p. 33.

[8]. *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1977, p. 466.

[9]. *The Jefferson Scandals: A Rebuttal*, New York: Madison Books, 1981, p. 67.

[10]. *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist*, Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1996, p. 230.

[11]. *Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990, p. 121.

[12]. *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*, Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1996, p. 141.

[13]. Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1994, pp. 242 and 254.

[14]. Compare, for instance, Brodie's evidence and tendentious claims in *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, New York: Bantam Books, Inc., pp. 293-302.

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