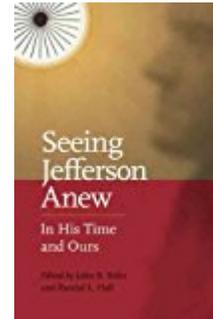


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John B. Boles, Randal L. Hall, eds. *Seeing Jefferson Anew: In His Time and Ours*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010. 224 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2993-4.



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Thomas Jefferson in the Flesh

When thinking about our culture's ever-shifting perspective on Thomas Jefferson, consider the nickel. Jefferson's first appearance on the five-cent piece came in 1938, a time when Jefferson was embraced by Franklin Roosevelt and his party as a symbol that ours was a government for the common people. Jefferson appeared in a staid profile based on Jean-Antoine Houdon's bust. Though there was a cruel irony in this initial appearance on minted currency—Jefferson and his Monticello displaced the Native American and the American bison—there was also a more satisfying historical coincidence. The designer of the Jefferson nickel was a German-born refugee artist named Felix Schlag, a fitting representative of the appeal that Jefferson's message of equality and religious liberty held for the immigrant, in his time and long since.

In 2006, Jefferson turned to look at us. The redesign of the nickel included a forward-facing, almost three-dimensional Jefferson, holding a more emotional expression captured by Rembrandt Peale in 1800. Historians had been focusing, for quite some time, on Jefferson as an idiosyncratic and deeply flawed man—as an exemplar, not

merely or even primarily of a political philosophy, but of personal characteristics that were worthy of scrutiny, of pity, of scorn—and U.S. currency appeared at last to have caught up with how we had come to view Jefferson. He was not to be seen in profile but looked full in the face.

In a remarkable essay collection edited by John B. Boles and Randal L. Hall and featuring seven essays and an afterword by a who's who of Jefferson scholars, we are asked to look directly at Jefferson the man. With a few exceptions, there is little indication in this volume of Jefferson the lawyer, party leader, or cabinet member, and there is a direct acknowledgment in one of the essays (Peter Kastor's) that scholars have neglected even Jefferson the president. Readers will gain no new insights into Jefferson's Embargo (it is never mentioned) or his views on foreign policy, for example. But, in what is a remarkable accomplishment for a multiauthored volume deriving from a 2007 symposium, many of the contradictions and mysterious multiplicities of Jefferson as a man come to appear somewhat less imposing and less puzzling.

Peter Onuf's contribution is a provocative think piece regarding Jefferson's views on democracy and nation-

hood. He seeks to historicize the concept of “democracy” as Jefferson understood it, emphasizing Jefferson’s view of democracy as decidedly cultural, resting on national self-determination, cultural homogeneity, and the enlightenment and education of the common man. Thus, Jefferson could not accept the idea of a multiracial republic; and, thus, he could not and would not push for an abolition of slavery that did not arise naturally from the sense and sentiment of the people.

Onuf is especially insightful in his depiction of how Jefferson has fared in historiographical judgment, noting that, as scholars have become more interested in the future of democracy, Jefferson’s stock has risen. He also notes how the emerging consensus about Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings has tended to alleviate some of the tension between Jefferson as apostle of liberty and Jefferson as slaveholder. As he notes, “Jefferson as lover—no matter how unequal the lovers’ power—is a more sympathetic character than Jefferson the owner and exploiter of his fellow human beings” (p. 15).

Hemings appears early and often in this book: she is discussed as early as the second page of the first essay (Onuf’s), and she figures prominently in three of the remaining six contributions. She has as many page citations in the index as Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and Jefferson’s wife, Martha—combined. Clearly, we have entered a new phase in Jefferson studies, and Hemings has a lead role.

Jefferson as public figure, however, is not entirely neglected in this volume, thanks primarily to the two essays by Eva Sheppard Wolf and Kastor. Wolf, in an essay titled “Natural Politics,” explores how Jefferson’s experiences as a politician helped to shape his political thought. Charting his growth from a snobbish twenty-something to the widely heralded “Friend of the People,” Wolf shows ultimately that, because he did not intend to create a modern politics and held instead to ideas that “combined democratic and aristocratic sensibilities,” his actions and words speak to us as across a chasm (p. 55). For Jefferson, “the voice of the people revealed itself through the natural process of elections,” and their voice elevated a few to lead the many (p. 60). Despite his wariness of electioneering and his faith that there was a natural order of things, in which natural leadership would and should find its way to the top, Jefferson’s ultimate faith in the wisdom of the people has allowed his political philosophy to become part of the warp and woof of American democracy.

Kastor, in “The Many Wests of Thomas Jefferson,”

introduces a conceptual framework for understanding Jefferson’s views of the American West that has great promise for future work on the subject. “In geographic terms,” observes Kastor, “Jefferson wrote about not one West but two, both literally and figuratively”: a Near West (between the Appalachians and the Mississippi), which held great promise and little threat for the Republic; and a Far West that was more troublesome and even frightening for Jefferson and other contemporary observers, both before and after 1803 (p. 67).

Equally useful are two other dichotomies that Kastor posits. First, Kastor finds that the West we find in Jefferson’s letters, policies, and reports as administrator and governor (as governor of Virginia, as secretary of state, and as president of the United States) differed greatly from the West as *described* by Jefferson in writings, such as his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. As Kastor puts it, “How he governed the West was a result of his job. How he described the West in writing was a result of genre” (p. 74). Thus, while “Jefferson the public administrator focused on securing federal sovereignty within confined geographic spaces, Jefferson the public communicator made expansion appear easy and inevitable” (p. 89). Second, Kastor drives home the point that Jefferson’s role in securing the Northwest Territory from the expansion of slavery is properly contrasted with his no less direct role—again, as public administrator—in securing the American Southwest for the spread of slavery.

Adam Rothman’s essay, “Jefferson and Slavery,” develops the theme of contradiction and painful juxtaposition even further. For Rothman, Jefferson’s thinking about the problem of slavery was consistent from the 1780s through his death. Equally notable was Jefferson’s consistency on the question of abolition and the impossibility of an integrated republic. He just could not imagine the successful integration of African Americans as citizens, and the underlying causes of Jefferson’s inability, for Rothman, have the same roots as historians’ long-lasting deafness to black voices in understanding Jefferson. Just as a relationship with Hemings was, according to Jefferson biographer Dumas Malone in a famous passage, “virtually unthinkable,” so too was Jefferson simply unable to contemplate “the real desires of enslaved African Americans,” to be free and to remain in the land in which they had “sunk deep roots in the ground” (pp. 120, 117).[1]

Two essays focus largely on Jefferson and women. Andrew Burstein does so through the lens of Jefferson’s understandings of the human body, in a contribution de-

rived from observations in his 2005 book *Jefferson's Secrets: Death and Desire at Monticello*. He asks us to look closely at Jefferson's medical reading list (specifically, the writings of Swiss doctor Samuel Tissot on nervous energy and bodily systems) as a way of understanding several aspects of Jefferson's worldview, including Jefferson's ideas regarding gender roles and, more disconcertingly, his sexual interest in Hemings.

Jan Ellen Lewis attempts to grapple with the "misogynist streak" in Jefferson's social and political outlook, a personality trait that appeared more fully blown at some times than at others. She provides a great deal of insight into his notions of the United States as a "gender utopia" compared to the Old World, and she brilliantly dissects his thoughts regarding women and work (p. 162). But it is almost hard to remember those points when, on the final pages of the essay, she postulates that Jefferson's misogyny ultimately disappeared as a consequence of his "liaison" with Hemings: from the period of his return to France until his death, she contends, "the connection to [Hemings] afforded him sufficient contentment that he could rhapsodize about domestic happiness rather than rail about the female sex" (p. 168). Jefferson's relationship with Hemings is being put to new and greater uses in the study of the man: the relationship has become not merely indicative of his character and complexity, but explanatory.

The most exciting essay is the contribution by Thomas Buckley. In twenty-some pages, he explores Jefferson's views regarding religion in the new Republic: he was no secularist, but rather "an architect of American civil religion" (p. 137). But the more stimulating aspect of the essay comes when Buckley offers a new set of key influences on the young Jefferson. He spec-

ulatively explores what we can know about his "earliest real education as a teenage boy in the home of the Reverend James Maury," the Anglican minister (p. 131). From Maury's firm defense of reason as the foundation of all belief, including religious belief, to the minister's refusal to segregate black and white baptisms—a moral stand likely witnessed by a sixteen-year-old Jefferson—we have in Buckley's essay something nearly akin to a new discovery about the "lost years" of William Shakespeare. Our view of the youthful Jefferson has become considerably clearer.

So many of the essays in this collection stand as provocative and imminently valuable contributions to our understanding of *why* Jefferson acted and believed in the ways that he did. Boles and Hall have done a tremendous service here, though their initial plans for the project may not match perfectly with the book that went to press. Fully conscious that Jefferson "lives today because of what he wrote about and achieved on behalf of political and religious freedom," the editors aimed to bring together authors who would "probe the applications and implications of Jefferson's key principles to modern life with full attention to the context out of which those principles emerged" (p. 6). Yet it must be acknowledged that, in these works, attention to context—intense and sustained attention to Jefferson as a three-dimensional, flawed, sexual being—prevails over the study of those principles that have made him worthy of our sustained study in the first place. We cannot seem to help looking Jefferson full in the face.

Note

[1]. Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, vol. 4, *Jefferson the President: First Term, 1801-1805* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), 214.

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