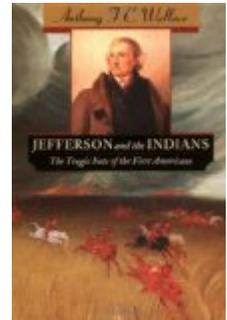


Anthony F.C. Wallace. *Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans.* Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999. ix + 394 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-00066-7.



Reviewed by Peter S. Onuf

Published on H-Law (May, 2000)

There must be hundreds of studies on "Thomas Jefferson and..." (fill in the blank). Many make valuable contributions to our understanding of the subject in question, and none more than Anthony Wallace's excellent new book on Jefferson and the Indians. But Jefferson himself is left dangling on the other side of the "and." Wallace says that the American "people" were Jefferson's "alter ego, a projection of his own self" (p. 15). The American people return the compliment, projecting their own concerns onto Jefferson. Not surprisingly, the historical Jefferson remains elusive.

In recent years, the Jefferson image has been increasingly recast in terms of race and slavery. If Jefferson "invented America," the land of the free, how could he have been a slaveholder? How could the enlightened apostle of natural rights have been such a virulent racist? How could the white supremacist have engaged in a long-term miscegenous relationship with one of his slaves? Shifting our attention to the Native Americans whose lands Jefferson so coveted, Wallace's book nicely complements the extensive critical litera-

ture on Jefferson and slavery. Yet, for all its evident animus, *Jefferson and the Indians* is no hatchet job. The edge of Wallace's indictment becomes progressively blunter as his multifaceted analysis becomes more richly complex.

It would be convenient for us if we could simply blame Jefferson for the Indians' "tragic fate" -- their removal from their ancestral lands, their devastating depopulation, their virtual cultural obliteration -- in the comfortable knowledge that we could never commit such crimes against humanity. But history is not something we can so easily put behind us. As Wallace writes, "The racial and religious wars of the twentieth century are the global product of the same kind of moral dilemma that bedeviled white Americans in Jefferson's time" (p. 338), the dilemma of nationality, of creating and sustaining unity in a world of alien and often hostile peoples. If sustaining diversity is the highest value, as we are now inclined to think, the American Revolution itself was a mistake. The pre-revolutionary British empire could much more easily accommodate ethnic and racial diversity in a multiplicity of quasi-au-

onomous political forms than could the new American federal union. Indeed, the contemporary quest for Indian "sovereignty" can be seen as an effort to reverse the outcome of the Revolution, making it possible for native peoples to secure territorial and political rights under the guarantee of a strong central (imperial) government that could control subordinate state (colonial) jurisdictions. It is no coincidence that it has been in Canada, the part of British North America that was spared a republican revolution, not in the United States, that the political claims of Indian peoples have been most fully constitutionalized. Wallace concludes his study with the wish that "Jefferson and Madison had also applied their considerable intellectual powers to the writing of a second set of Federalist Papers, one that devised institutions capable of weaving together the strands of ethnic diversity in the republic, instead of pulling them apart" (p. 338).

But there was no "middle ground" for republican revolutionaries. Americans chose national unity, not imperial diversity. Wallace comes closest to holding Jefferson responsible for the Indians' fate in his opening chapters. If, as Jefferson exulted in his First Inaugural Address, there was "room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation" in this "chosen country," there was "no place for Indians as Indians" in his vision of the American future (p. 11). Jefferson's imaginative obliteration of the Indians deflected attention from the brutal, ongoing process of displacement and removal that opened the west to white settlement. Taking his cue from Joseph J. Ellis's *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (1997), Wallace offers a psychological explanation for Jefferson's visionary flights, and his uncanny ability to suppress or deny unpleasant realities. The "central paradox" of his character was that this "apostle of liberty, had a deeply controlling temperament." The American citizenry was a great "happy family...capable of an orderly pursuit of happiness ... because they had internalized his values." Anyone

who failed to "accept his definition of a happy family had to be coerced" (p. 14). This was the choice he presented to his Native American "children": become civilized, republican Americans, by embracing these family values, or face extermination. "In war, they will kill some of us," Jefferson wrote, but "we shall destroy all of them" (p. 313).

Wallace's language may be anachronistic, but he is certainly right that Jefferson saw the new nation as a kind of "ethnic homeland" for "a culturally homogenous" American people (pp. 17, 18). It is not too much of a leap, then, to accuse him of "ethnic cleansing" (p. 20) when he sought to clear Indians from the western hinterland or to send former slaves back to their own "homeland" in Africa. At this point, Wallace's animosity comes close to overflowing, pushed to its limits by Jefferson's professions of admiration for Indian virtues (epitomized by the eloquence of Chief Logan's lament, memorialized in Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*) and his solicitude for the future of the race.

Wallace broaches the charge of "duplicity," but leaves it in quotes (as if it were someone else's conclusion), conceding that it might be "too strong a word to characterize the contrast between Jefferson's actual methods of obtaining lands and the apparent benevolence of the civilization policy." In the same way, he tries "hypocrisy" on for size, but again backs off ("perhaps" the term is "unfairly critical"). Wallace then brings his interpretative dilemma to climactic resolution: "if Jefferson was guilty of insincerity, duplicity, and hypocrisy in Indian affairs, it must be conceded that this shiftiness, like his political ruthlessness, was a weapon in his struggle to ensure the survival of the United States as a republic governed by Anglo-Saxon yeomen" (all p. 20).

Wallace's meditation on the "character issue" is the least satisfying part of *Jefferson and the Indians*. We may join him in wishing that the revolutionaries had defined American nationhood differently, but we know that this was never in the realm of historical possibility. Happily, Wallace

quickly moves on to more interesting questions. Even as he weighs Jefferson's moral responsibility for the Indians' fate, he recognizes that the revolutionaries faced daunting geopolitical challenges. In a period of profound international instability and with potential enemies on all sides, the republic was always at risk. When Jefferson indicted George III in the Declaration of Independence for unleashing "merciless savages" on the American frontiers, he set the tone for the new nation's Indian policy. Jefferson was obsessed with British machinations with western Indians when he was governor of Virginia (1779-1781); during his tenure as Secretary of State (1789-1793), "all members of the administration assumed that the resistance of Native Americans in Ohio was...encouraged by the British" (p. 174). Nothing much had changed by the time of his presidency: a major goal of Jefferson's Indian policy, as set forth in his first message to Congress, was "to prevent the encircling British, Spanish, and French from subverting the all-too-corruptible savages and inciting them to war against the frontiers of the United States" (p. 207). Though fears about Indian attacks were often exaggerated and federal policy-makers were all too often incapable of distinguishing "good" Indians from "bad" or of protecting their Indian clients from the encroachments of land-hungry settlers, Jefferson's anxieties about the danger of counter-revolutionary alliances were amply justified, as the War of 1812 demonstrated. Jefferson and his colleagues knew -- and we tend to forget -- that the Union was subject to internal strains and pressures as well as external threats. This context of insecurity and instability fostered fear and hatred of "others" -- counter-revolutionary powers and their actual or prospective Indian, or black allies. "Racism" was thus less the predicate of national identity, an Anglo-Saxon cultural (or racial?) endowment that made revolutionaries oblivious to the claims of diversity, than it was the product of the nation-making process itself. A "people" defines itself against its enemies, real and imagined. The Americans

had plenty of real enemies, including Indians who would have remained friendly or neutral if the Americans had simply left them alone.

The deeper cause of Indian-white conflict on the frontier was the insatiable appetite of American speculators and settlers for Indian lands. Wallace shows that Jefferson's interest in western lands was not entirely disinterested: he had a speculative interest in about 35,000 acres. But in comparison to Patrick Henry, George Washington, or Benjamin Franklin, Jefferson was a "cautious speculator" and there is no indication that he ever "realized a profit" from his speculations (p. 49). Jefferson's role was not to accumulate land of his own, but rather to give a philosophical and ideological gloss to American land hunger. His agrarian apotheosis of the yeoman farmer, vanguard agents of republican civilization, enabled him to overlook a much more sordid reality on the ground. Jefferson knew that most frontier whites fell short of his exalted image, but was nonetheless convinced that they were putting western lands to better, "higher use" than the Indians ever could, and that the rapid growth of white settler populations was proof positive of their cultural superiority. In similar fashion, Jefferson knew that frontier loyalties were volatile and that under the right circumstances, opportunistic separatists could pursue their happiness right out of the Union. But the American Revolution had taught Jefferson to fear concentrated power: according to his "ethos of decentralization," the only union worth preserving was one based on equality and consent (p. 218).

Jefferson calculated that westerners were more likely to become good Americans -- and frontier farmers were more likely to live up to his yeoman ideal -- with the rapid formation of new states. Political self-determination on the periphery of Jefferson's empire would cement western loyalties, preempting separatist alliances with America's enemies. This meant, of course, that the federal government would lack the "political will"

and "military muscle" to enforce treaty agreements with Indians that were supposed to limit white encroachments on Indian lands. "Chary of infringing upon the rights of 'the people,' the states, of territorial governments," the Jefferson administration would never "exert deadly force against armed and violent frontiersmen and their families" (p. 218). Yet again, the price of union was the suppression of "diversity." Indians presumably would have been treated better by Jefferson's Federalist predecessors (though their differences should not be exaggerated), and better still had the Revolution never taken place and the imperial government had established direct, effective rule in Indian Country.

Wallace's sophisticated geopolitical analysis frames his account of the westward movement of the settlement frontier. Jefferson's Indian policy "was deeply constrained by the fears that dominated him: of external menace (from the British, French, Spanish, and scheming adventurers like [William] Bowles) and of internal assaults on freedom (from the monarchical Federalists)" (p. 221). These fears made the acquisition of Indian lands and their rapid privatization seem imperative; by 1803, his Indian policy was in essence little more than reached "a plan for obtaining Indian land for the expansion of the white population of the United States" (p. 225). Jefferson's "desire to obtain Indian lands, at almost any cost" (p. 205) constituted a severe constraint on his "civilization" policy. If, as Wallace concedes, Jefferson was "sincere" in his belief that Indian people must ultimately adapt the white man's ways in order to survive" (p. 226), they would have to do so in a hurry. In any event, as Bernard Sheehan showed so brilliantly in his classic *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (1973), the civilization project was a disaster for Native American societies, regardless of how "sincerely" or effectively it was implemented. As Wallace points out, "In the decentralized political world that" Jefferson "was endeavoring to create, his social ideals with respect to the rights of Indians

and a humane civilization policy could never be realized" (p. 178). But this may have been just as well, for the "civilizing process itself ... promised a kind of cultural genocide" (p. 276).

By this point it's hard to credit Jefferson with much moral responsibility for the Indians' fate. In Jefferson's hierarchy of values, the success of the republican revolution and the survival of an embattled union came first. Born in war, the new nation presented a belligerent face to the world, even as it promised a new millennium of peace and prosperity. For our late modern tastes, Jefferson's visionary optimism, his belief in the progress of civilization, his division of the world into friends and enemies, seem simplistic and naive. But Jefferson was a revolutionary nation-maker: had he understood the implications of everything he stood for (as well as we think we do), he would have sat the war out. Had he done so, perhaps we might think better of him. But then again, it's doubtful that we would think of him at all. The real question, after all, is what we make of the revolutionaries' legacy, a nation that somehow survived its turbulent beginnings. The American Revolution was a disaster for most Indians. Could it have been significantly different? And if not, was it, therefore, a colossal mistake? These are the questions we broach in our critical studies of Jefferson and the other founders. In the best work, including Wallace's, the answers are inevitably inconclusive. Wallace never relaxes his critical stance on Jefferson. But as he moves beyond a narrow focus on Jefferson's "character," historical context and circumstance move to the forefront. Some of the most illuminating pages of this eminent anthropologist's study are devoted to a surprisingly sympathetic account of Jefferson's pioneering ethnographic and archeological work. Of course, Jefferson shared the ethnocentric cultural biases of his day, and his discussion of native societies -- based on second-hand materials -- rarely rises above those biases. Obsessed with the question of Indian origins, Jefferson was fixated on the collection and collation of Indian word lists, even

as more sophisticated students were turning to the study of grammar. The study of Indian antiquities, notably the works of the Ohio Valley mound-builders, also passed Jefferson by. But in Wallace's generous assessment, Jefferson "would have been glad to see the mound-builders' technology recognized as compatible with that of the Indian nations known to him, and he would have been pleased to see his methods of patient, methodical, cross-sectional analysis employed so productively a hundred years after his own dissection of a small Virginia burial mound" (p. 333). If Jefferson's belief in the progress of western civilization now seems hopelessly dated, we continue to share his faith in the progress of science. Because of science's progressive nature, we don't expect earlier generations of scientists to know more than they could have known in their own time; we're much, much harder on political philosophers and nation-makers. But there is another, crucially important reason for Wallace's sympathetic treatment of the scientific Jefferson. Jefferson's successors may have been better scientists, but this "new breed of frontier intellectuals" betrayed a much more negative attitude toward the Indians. The great achievements of the mound builders led them to embrace the "catastrophic theory," asserting that there was no connection between contemporary Indians and the lost civilization that preceded them. Jefferson died too soon to see either the "flowering of investigation into the culture of the mound-builders," or "the political use of the catastrophic theory of their destruction by President Jackson to justify Indian removal" (p. 332). In substantive policy terms, the difference between the Indian-loving Jefferson and the Indian-hating Jackson may not in fact amount to much. But the contrast does make Jefferson seem more sympathetic. And it is, finally, Wallace's recognition of Jefferson's good will toward the Natives, however subverted in practice, that leads to his wistful conclusion. Given this good will, surely Jefferson could have invented a different kind of nation? Everything that comes

before in this fine book leads us to conclude that the answer is "no."

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

Citation: Peter S. Onuf. Review of Wallace, Anthony F.C. *Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4129>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.