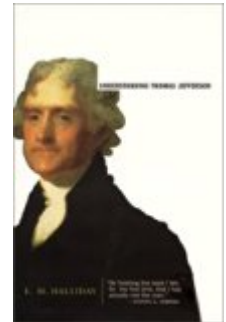


E. M. Halliday. *Understanding Thomas Jefferson*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001. xiii + 284 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-06-019793-3.



Reviewed by Robert M. S. McDonald

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Misunderstanding Thomas Jefferson?

A book that purports to offer the key to understanding Thomas Jefferson creates for itself a formidable challenge. As author E. M. Halliday writes, "the prevailing tendency in Jefferson biography in recent years has been to regard him as a man of such contradiction and paradox as to be, in the end, essentially a puzzle" (p. xi). Andrew Burstein, as Halliday notes, views Jefferson as a "grieving optimist" and Joseph Ellis portrays him as a sphinx. Peter Onuf, moreover, recently confessed in this venue that he was "deeply conflicted" in his assessment of the third president—who was, after all, deeply conflicted himself.[1]

Yet Halliday asserts that "the 'sphinx' approach to Thomas Jefferson tends to mystify rather than enlighten, and can lead to badly skewed misinterpretations." Jefferson's "contradictions and paradoxes"—among which Halliday includes his status as a slaveholding egalitarian and "white-supremacist" miscegenator, his repeatedly-stated antipathy to public service during his long career as public servant, his "firm belief in God" despite his distaste for organized religion,

and simultaneous admiration of and chauvinism against women—"are reasonably understandable when observed in the light of his personal and social circumstances, and considered in the light of common human experience" (pp. xii, 169).

Jefferson, in other words, may well be complicated, but historians need not throw up their hands, lament his supposed contradictions, and move on to another subject. This is a good point, and Halliday is probably right to suggest that the recent tendency to portray Jefferson as a man of paradox, when taken to extremes, stifles more insightful analysis. Unfortunately, Halliday fails to clarify the complexities that he identifies. His book—which consists of a sketch of Jefferson's private life followed by "a series of closely-related essays on crucial topics such as his almost symbolic feud with Alexander Hamilton; his views on slavery and race; the surprising distortions to be found in some of the most distinguished biographies; Jefferson's literary taste, moral philosophy, and religion; his adamant opinions on women; his ideas about democracy, freedom of expression, and education, plus an estimate of his place in

American history; and finally, a rumination on history versus historical fiction" (p. xiii)—lacks focus. In addition, and despite his stated strategy, Halliday sometimes ignores historical context and relies too heavily on somewhat extravagant conceptions of "human experience."

Consider, for example, Halliday's contention that the "persistent conflict between Jefferson's love for [his wife] Martha and Monticello... and his love for politics" is illustrated by the fact that, rather than celebrate with John Adams the ratification of the Declaration of Independence, he spent the afternoon buying gloves. Bad enough that Halliday provides no evidence that joining Adams "for a congratulatory drink or two" ever entered Jefferson's mind (pp. 42-43). Worse yet, he fails to recognize that Jefferson's oft-stated affinity for farm, family, and books need not be considered in conflict with public service. Like George Washington, who Garry Wills describes as a "virtuoso of resignations" who gained power by making clear his willingness to give it away, Jefferson was not above striking a disinterested pose.[2] The point is not that Jefferson's many professions of disinterestedness were necessarily opportunistic; it is that an eighteenth-century statesman who yearned for home was not a man with a dilemma. Instead, his desire for domestic bliss conformed fully with the precepts of revolutionary-era political culture.

This relatively minor instance of inattention to historical context suggests more major flaws: Halliday's research seems shallow and his documentation is scant. All of his cited sources, with the exception of a telephone call (p. 266, n231), are published; none are archival. Only once does Halliday cite a scholarly journal article (p. 262, n167). Rarely does he document anything other than direct quotations. While many of the sources that he does employ (such as Dumas Malone's six-volume biography and Princeton University Press's exhaustive *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*) are excellent; some (such as Fawn Brodie's psy-

chobiography) are not; and none contribute substantially to the interpretations that make his book unique.

For Halliday, the key to understanding Jefferson is understanding Jefferson's sex life, an interior world about which we have little documentary evidence. As a result, Halliday situates Jefferson within the context of "common human experience," as he describes it. This is problematic. First, Jefferson can hardly be considered common, and the particularization of generalization can hardly be considered a judicious methodology. Examples include: that "certain events ordinary to any large farm," such as "a couple of lusty hunting dogs pursuing happiness out by the corncrib," "can easily be imagined" to have constituted young Jefferson's sex education (p. 14). Since he scorned prostitutes and daughters of the gentry scorned him, it is possible that as a bachelor Jefferson sought refuge in "mutual masturbation, or perhaps fellatio" (p. 21). As a "vigorous but lonely American gentleman" living in Paris, glimpses of the "low-cut décolletage" of French women and even "a vagabond nipple or two" must have made Jefferson "feel quite desperate" (p. 7). Second, as John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman demonstrate, sexual mores and attitudes are historically contingent; twenty-first-century sexuality should not be superimposed on that of the eighteenth.[3]

Halliday's treatment of the relationship between a middle-aged Jefferson and Sally Hemings, his slave and the possible half-sister of his deceased wife, offers more of the same. It is not that he asserts that Jefferson fathered Hemings's children, an accomplishment for which Jefferson—probably but not certainly—deserves credit.[4] It is that he moves too promiscuously from the probable to the possible, and even to the implausible. Hemings, Halliday conjectures, may have seduced Jefferson; Patsy Jefferson "may well have become aware that [her father's] concern for Sally, whose flourishing sexual attractions were so obvious, went far beyond that ordinarily shown by a mas-

ter to a maidservant" (p. 108). "[I]t is not unlikely," Halliday informs readers, that Hemings "practiced a certain amount of rhythm birth control" (p. 118). The problem with all of these assertions is that they emerge not from the evidence but from speculation.

Halliday concludes his book with a chapter on the interrelationship between history and fiction. It contains passages that stand out as his most wise--and revealing. "The past is never fully recoverable," he writes, "and any history will indeed be fiction to some extent. Still, a line between history and historical fiction can be meaningfully drawn... and documentation, carefully judged and interpreted, remains the essential criterion." Halliday, however, repeatedly crosses this line, relying too heavily on "that mysterious essence *probability*, which governs so many of our judgments of actions both past and future, [and] swings with an illuminating beam that can be disregarded only with peril" (p. 250).

Notes

[1]. See Andrew Burstein, *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Peter S. Onuf, Reply to Holly Brewer's review of *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000) <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-SHEAR&.../8QqZBg&user=&pw>.

[2]. Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), 3.

[3]. See John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

[4]. Although for many decades historians scoffed at the contention, first brought forth publicly in 1802 by journalist James Thomsen Callender, that Jefferson fathered the children of an en-

slaved woman named "Sally" (J. T. Callender, "The President, Again," *Richmond Recorder*, September 1, 1802), Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997) challenges the logic of their arguments. Additionally, DNA tests (Eugene A. Foster, *et al.*, "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child," *Nature*, 196 [November 5, 1998], 27-28) demonstrate that male descendants of Hemings's son, Eston, possess the genetic imprint of a male Jefferson. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation makes available its "Report of the Monticello Research Committee on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings," as well as a dissenting reports and other documents, at its "Jefferson-Hemings DNA Testing" web site, <<http://www.monticello.org/plantation/hemingsresource.html>>. While the Thomas Jefferson Foundation confirms the contention that Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston Hemings and probably all of the children of Sally Hemings, the majority of the "Scholars Commission on the Jefferson-Hemings Issue" convened by the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society disagree. See <<http://www.tjheritage.org/scholars.html>> as well as the summary by Scholars Commission chairperson Robert F. Turner, "The Truth About Jefferson," *Wall Street Journal*, July 3, 2001, A14. Provocative meditations by members of the pro-paternity camp appear within Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999) while the testimony of anti-paternity interpreters can be found within *The Jefferson-Hemings Myth: An American Travesty* (Charlottesville, Va.: Jefferson Editions, 2001).

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