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R. B. Bernstein. *Thomas Jefferson.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xviii + 253 pp. $26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-516911-9.

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Jefferson Reduced, Redux

"Take care of me when dead," Thomas Jefferson famously asked of his old friend and protege James Madison. He need not have bothered. Scarcely a week goes by that does not see the publication of a new book on the third president, typically with the word "and" following his surname. A check of amazon.com reveals 21,930 references to Jefferson on their site, roughly three times the number of references accorded to his French contemporary Napoleon Bonaparte. Even John Adams, who has been discovered anew by the reading public, fails to draw the flock of authors and scholars who circle about Jefferson, digging into every minuscule aspect of his long life.

R. B. Bernstein, a Professor of Law at New York Law School and the author of several books on early American legal and constitutional history, has produced a balanced and readable short biography of Jefferson. Given Jefferson's voluminous correspondence–which will be completely published only after most readers of this review are in their graves–as well as the daunting number of specialized studies that any potential biographer would have to master, this is no simple task. But Bernstein comes close to pulling it off. Unlike Willard Sterne Randall's clumsy *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*, which devotes far too much space to Jefferson's early years and then races through his presidential career, Bernstein understands proportion, and each turn of Jefferson's varied life receives a nearly equal amount of attention. One assumes that the target readership for this volume is college students, since David McCullough and Ron Chernow have demonstrated that the general public will wade through ponderous tomes. Students will indeed profit from Bernstein's brief but clear explanations of long, complicated events, such as the Jay Treaty, or the coming of the Revolution.[1]

More impressive still, Bernstein has fashioned what is probably the most fair and evenhanded account of Jefferson's life. Unlike Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson, who came to praise Jefferson, or Joseph Ellis, who came to bury him, Bernstein steers a middle course, admiring Jefferson when the occasion deserves, but taking him to task for his frequently obtuse behavior. Echoing Forrest McDonald, for example, Bernstein makes no attempt to defend the Embargo Act of 1807. "Unfortunately," he writes, "Jefferson's hopes were out of touch with the reality of the situation" (p. 167). Worse yet, the Apostle of Liberty's use of the armed forces to patrol American waters in search of smugglers "violated cherished political principles, some of which Jefferson had given memorable expression" (p. 168). For Malone, Jefferson could do no wrong, but Bernstein reminds his readers that Jefferson had once accused King George III of using unwarranted military force in times of peace to enforce his trade regulations, yet by 1808 he was committing the same crime against his countrymen.[2]

As good as this book frequently is, one nonetheless has to wonder why yet another Jefferson biography is necessary. The promotional release from Oxford University Press describes Bernstein's study as "the first concise biography" of the Virginian "in six decades," but that is hardly true. The work under review contains 198 pages of text, which is only 6 pages more than Norman Risjord's 1994 biography, and but 10 pages less than Joyce Appleby's 2003 biography. Both Risjord and Appleby are veteran scholars of the era, and the former has been writing about Jefferson's world since *The Old Republicans* was published in 1965. Noble Cunningham's 1987 biography and Joseph Ellis's 1997 character study weigh in at roughly twice this size, but both are quick and enjoyable reads; Ellis is especially student-friendly. (This does not even include other modestly sized specialized works, such as Andrew Burstein's thoughtful *The Inner Jefferson* or Forrest McDonald's insightful if caustic *Presidency of Thomas Jefferson*.) Even if Bernstein's work can stand beside these studies, do we really need three "concise" biographies in ten short years?[3]

There is also the question of whether one can write a concise but complete biography of such a multifaceted man and such a turbulent time. One might reasonably reduce the convoluted series of events that culminated in the Louisiana Purchase into a single chapter, but can the story truly be told in seven pages? Bernstein's ability to condense lengthy monographs into a single paragraph is admittedly impressive, but some topics defy brief descriptions. Over the course of his eighty-three years, Jefferson was involved in so many critical events, wrote so many highly quotable letters and documents, and resided in so many turbulent places. This is not a plea for more oversized biographies. In the past few years, able scholars like John K. Alexander, Joel H. Silbey, and Lynn Hudson Parsons have crafted modestly sized but highly successful biographies of Samuel Adams, Martin Van Buren, and John Quincy Adams. But even the well-traveled Adams lacked Jefferson's breadth of interests, and Adams's lengthy political and diplomatic career, for all of his successes, covered a far less tumultuous era. Quite possibly, Jefferson is the one founding father whose life and times simply cannot be reduced to eighty-three thousand words.[4]

Curiously, it is in the area of race and slavery, the very part of Jefferson's life willfully ignored by earlier biographers like Peterson, Malone and Randall, where Bernstein is on the shakiest footing. None of his errors are major, yet as Bernstein is rightly determined not to gloss over Jefferson's greatest personal failure, it is strange that so many mistakes exist. St. George Tucker's eminently feasible plan for uncompensated gradual emancipation, laid out in his 1796 *A Dissertation on Slavery*, was not based on the idea that the "United States would buy and free all the slaves" (p. 114), and Jefferson noted that retaining slavery was like grasping a "wolf by the ear," not by the "ears" (p. xi), a small point until one realizes what a tenuous grasp one has in holding a snarling animal by a single ear. Rather more seriously, Toussaint Louverture did not spell his adoptive surname with an apostrophe, Haiti did not become an independent republic in 1801, and the French colony of Saint Domingue did not encompass the entire island "now known as Hispaniola" (p. 146). Hispaniola was the sixteenth-century name given to the island by Spanish explorers, and French colonists inhabited only the western half of the island, which they shared with the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo in the east.

That said, for those in search of a serviceable biography to assign in American history survey courses, or junior-level classes on the Revolution or early national period, Bernstein's work should be the one. His prose is clear, strong and thankfully free of jargon, and his brief bibliographical essay is up to date and will lead students to both the longer life studies and the handful of indispensable monographs that anyone interested in Jefferson will wish to consult. Unlike most brief biographies, Bernstein's, thankfully, does include notes; unhappily, Oxford placed them at the end of the book.

Notes

[1]. Willard Sterne Randall, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1993); David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

[2]. Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time.* 6 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948-1981); Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: a Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976).

[3]. Norman K. Risjord, *Thomas Jefferson* (Madison: Madison House 1994); Joyce Appleby, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Times Books, 2003); Noble E. Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Andrew Burstein, *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995).

[4]. John K. Alexander, *Samuel Adams: America's Revolutionary Politician* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Joel H. Silbey, Martin Van Buren and the Emergence of American Popular Politics (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Lynn Hudson Parsons, John Quincy Adams (Madison: Madison House, 1998).

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