

Mark Holowchak, Brian W. Dotts, eds.. *The Elusive Thomas Jefferson: Essays on the Man behind the Myths*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2017. 252 pp. \$49.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-6925-0.

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There have been a spate of recent books that argue against the idea that Thomas Jefferson is “impenetrable,” in the words of Merrill Peterson, or a “sphinx,” as he was described in the title of a biography by Joseph J. Ellis. These include Annette Gordon-Reed and Peter S. Onuf, *“Most Blessed of the Patriarchs”: Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination* (2016); Robert M. S. McDonald, *Confounding Father: Thomas Jefferson’s Image in his Own Time* (2016); Kevin Gutzman, *Thomas Jefferson—Revolutionary: A Radical’s Struggle to Remake America* (2017); John Boles, *Jefferson: Architect of American Liberty* (2017); and Gordon S. Wood, *Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (2018). These works share in common an empathetic approach that attempts to place Jefferson in his own times. The list can be supplemented by numerous other works that have appeared in the last decade by authors such as Hannah Spahn, Brian Steele, Andrew Burstein, Richard Bernstein, Maurizio Valsania, and Frank Cogliano.

Andrew Holowchak and Brian W. Dotts, the co-editors and contributors to *The Elusive Thomas Jefferson*, introduce this collection of essays by decrying “the uptake of the notion that Jefferson is fundamentally unknowable” with the result that “scholarship on Jefferson is shambolic, even reckless” (p. 2). They contend that scholars merely seek to find support for their existing agendas and

conclusions “while ignoring all evidence in contradiction of it” (p. 1). Like many other recent authors, they note the extremes of scholarship on both sides, with those they call “bashers,” who “exist today in abundance” and who “seem willing to do whatever they can to prove to the World that Jefferson was racist, hypocritical, hedonistic, narcissistic, and power-driven,” on one and apologists, who “seem driven to defend Jefferson of all calumny” and who “want their man, at all costs, squeaky clean,” on the other (p. 1). It is the extreme viewpoints which attract attention: “the more outlandish, the better—outlandishness sells” (p. 1).

Although the editors claim to be equally critical of both extremes, the reader might be forgiven for thinking that the collection is largely defensive. The most egregious example is the second-longest essay in the book, by one of the editors, Andrew Holowchak, entitled “‘The spirit of the master is abating’: The Myth of Jefferson’s Racism.” Holowchak denies that Jefferson was a racist on the grounds that Jefferson did not make prejudgments, but approached the subject like a scientist and tested out his hypothesis based upon observation and inductive reasoning; his “assessment of the inferiority of Blacks was in keeping with the popular views of Blacks at the time” (p. 90); his “attitude toward Blacks was not contempt-

based or depredatory” (p. 95); and that he made “prodigious moral concessions,” especially his acknowledgment of the “moral equality of Blacks with non-Blacks ... that has never been addressed in the literature” (p. 97). The argument forces Holowchak to repeat some of the embarrassing passages from *Notes on the State of Virginia*, including the absurd suggestion that orangutans preferred black women to female orangutans in Query XIV. For Holowchak, this can be excused since such stories were circulated by several writers in Jefferson’s day (p. 98). The point about prejudice is that it predisposes an individual to select one form of evidence over another.

Jefferson’s view on race would be complicated by discussion of his relationship with Sally Hemings but Holowchak dissents from the prevalent view of historians and makes no reference to the multifaceted case made by Gordon-Reed, which does not rely simply upon DNA. Even if we set this aside, it is impossible to rescue Jefferson from the charge of racism given that he believed that the races should not intermix sexually and that blacks were intellectually and aesthetically inferior to whites. In regard to the argument employed here, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin was worried that historians would one day excuse the Holocaust on the grounds that anti-Semitism was widespread in 1930s Europe. Holowchak’s argument would be more effective if he had framed it differently and confined himself to challenging the view of Winthrop Jordan and others that Jefferson was more racist than his contemporaries and that he was virtually the first American writer to introduce a pseudoscientific theory of race into the United States. Holowchak makes a case for a different reading of the *Notes*, in which Jefferson is very tentative, while the second half of his essay on Jefferson as an abolitionist would certainly find support from the new biography by John Boles.

Other than the issue of his ownership of slaves and his view on race, the topic that is most

controversial among the public is the question of Jefferson’s religious views. In “The Myth of Jefferson’s Deism,” William M. Wilson argues that Jefferson was not a deist, who believes in a God who created the world but not in a “living” God (p. 122). He claims that he was more Newtonian. He notes that in cutting and pasting segments of the New Testament into what has become known as the Jefferson Bible, Jefferson did not reduce the text to “a list of pure moral platitudes” (p. 127) and that he retained “a direct, literal, non-parabolic, apocalyptic saying of a divine verdict and eventual subjugation of worldly power” which was tantamount to accepting a prophecy (p. 128). Nevertheless, Jefferson rejected miracle stories and ultimately believed that people would adopt a rational religion like Unitarianism. Indeed, his rational approach to religion is a good counter example to the first essay in the collection, by Andrew Holowchak, on “The Myth of the Preeminence of Rationality in Jefferson’s Notion’s of Man and Society.” Holowchak treats the subject as an essay in ideas rather than discussing the actual choices and actions of Jefferson. He might otherwise not have presented this as an either-or case but rather as a tension which existed within Jefferson. The famous “Head and Heart Letter” concerning Maria Cosway reflected the struggle between his emotions and his reason. It is not entirely clear which wins in the letter but his actions afterwards would suggest the victory of the head over the heart.

In “Have Gun(s), Will Travel: Thomas Jefferson, Gun Ownership and Military Affairs,” Arthur Scherr spends much of the essay making the case that “Jefferson was less of a pacifist than many historians have assumed” (p. 169), although he does not cite two recent books on Jefferson’s foreign policy, by Jim Sofka and Frank Cogliano, which make the same point. Scherr provides numerous quotes to the effect that Jefferson enjoyed guns for hunting but less evidence that he was an enthusiastic supporter of the Second Amendment. The point would be moot if you accept the view of

many historians, like Saul Cornell in *A Well Regulated Militia: The Founding Fathers and the Origins of Gun Control in America* (2006), who interpret the amendment to be about the continued existence of a well-ordered state citizen militia under the new national government rather than guaranteeing the right of private gun ownership. Scherr speculates that Jefferson “would probably not have hesitated” to agree to the present need for “background checks” (p. 185). It would have been more instructive to note that Jefferson not only insisted that student military exercises be conducted with wooden replica guns that could not fire (as mentioned by Scherr), but that he and fellow members of the Board of Visitors—including James Madison—banned the possession of firearms among students at the new University of Virginia. It is one of many such instances of gun control dating from the early national period.

The majority of the other essays in the book are less exceptional in terms of provocative arguments. In “Toward a Jurismythos of Thomas Jefferson: The Supreme Court’s Use and Abuse of America’s Most Controversial Founder,” Benjamin Justice makes a convincing case for the abuse of Jefferson and the founders by the judiciary, including the Supreme Court. Somewhat contrary to the tenor of the introduction of the collection, he asks why “we would even *want* to enlist Jefferson’s ghost in contemporary jurisprudence on public school reform” (p. 65). In “Myths and Realities of Thomas Jefferson’s Architecture,” Richard Guy Wilson offers an excellent overview of Jefferson’s architectural abilities and how they were not appreciated in the early twentieth century. In “The Myth of Jefferson’s Polysemous Conception of Liberty,” Garrett Ward Sheldon acknowledges that Jefferson championed multifarious liberties but argues that they all derived from his belief in intellectual liberty. The collection contains two interesting articles on the impact of Jefferson’s views on education upon two influential twentieth-century thinkers: James Bryant Conant (by Wayne J. Urban) and John Dewey (by James J. Car-

penter). In “The Apostle of Whig History: Thomas Jefferson’s Reliance on the Ancient Saxon Constitution,” Brian W. Dotts considers the impact of Whig history on Jefferson’s constitutional thinking, including his draft constitution for Virginia and his later interest in ward republics.

The final essay, “Thomas Jefferson as Collective Memory,” by Jennifer Hauver James, Bruce A. VanSledright, and Christopher Farr, attempts to take the current pulse of public opinion on Jefferson. It seeks to gauge current attitudes by looking at his treatment in the curricula of public schools, in the media, and at historic sites. Their conclusions are surprising in that they find that uncritical hero worship and mythologizing persists in the schools and in the media, with a representation that is “fairly narrow, remarkably consistent and surprisingly disconnected from the work of historians” (p. 215). The only exception is historic sites, which they acknowledge offer a broader perspective that includes the lives of the enslaved people. This may indeed be true of schools but his reputation is more contested in the public arena. In the last two years, the Democratic Parties of Connecticut and Virginia have voted to end the tradition of the Jefferson-Jackson Dinners. Students have requested the removal of the statues of Jefferson at the University of Missouri and the College of William and Mary, while someone recently drew graffiti on the statue at the University of Virginia. In 2010 the Texas School Board removed Jefferson from a list of influential revolutionaries because of his views on the separation of church and state. Most modern schoolchildren have heard the name Sally Hemings, which is the result of the work of historians and inevitably affects the iconic view of Jefferson. The portrayal of Jefferson is hardly positive in the recent Broadway success, *Hamilton*.

The irony is that the treatment of Jefferson in recent scholarship is more moderate and more empathetic than the public debate. The editors of this collection mischaracterize the current state of

scholarship. They write, without giving page references, that Peter Onuf, in *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson*, states that Jefferson is “fundamentally unknowable” (p. 1), but Onuf actually says the opposite—that the supposed impenetrability of Jefferson is “as much a function of their [historians’] unwillingness to probe as of their subject’s unwillingness to be probed.”[1] The point is made emphatically in his most recent book with Annette Gordon-Reed. Gordon Wood described Onuf as having interrogated Jefferson more profoundly than any other historian, but the editors remarkably assert that Onuf takes an attitude of “*anything goes*” in possible interpretations of Jefferson (p. 1). In reality, Onuf has played a major role in keeping Jefferson alive as a subject of study when political history was increasingly unfashionable, not least through his graduate students Joanne Freeman, Christa Dierksheide, Johann Neem, John Ragosta, and Kevin Gutzman. Far from the current scholarship being “reckless, and even sham-bolic” (p. 1), Gordon-Reed and Onuf are more correct in asserting that “we are in a particularly critical and, potentially, transformative time in Jefferson scholarship.”[2] There has indeed been an efflorescence of recent literature which offers a balanced, rigorous, and nuanced understanding of Thomas Jefferson.

Notes

[1]. Peter Onuf, *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 3.

[2]. Annette Gordon-Reid and Peter Onuf, “*Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*”: *Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), 22.

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