



Twilight at Monticello: The Final Years of Thomas Jefferson

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Told with grace and masterly detail, Alan Pell Crawford's unprecedented and engrossing personal look at the intimate Thomas Jefferson in his final years will change the way audiences think about this true American icon.

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Checkman says

Approximately forty-two years ago (1976) I read a series of books about famous Americans. They were published in the 1950s and aimed at young readers. They were a product of their time (Cold War, Red Scare, Eisenhower Era). Designed to give a patriotic history lesson to young Americans they weren't a "warts and all" biography. Of course I was too young to realize that I was reading what was basically propaganda. One of my favorites was *The Story of Thomas Jefferson* by Earl Schenck Miers. I believe I read that one several times over the course of my year in 3rd Grade (1976-1977). It made such an impression that I still remember the book and it has had much to do with my ideas of the third president of the United States.

"Twilight at Monticello" ,on the other hand, is like dunking myself into a tub of ice water. Of course I've known about the possible relationship between Jefferson and his slave ,Sally Hemings, for many years and the many contradictions that made up the man are also not unknown to me. However ,what I was unfamiliar with, was Jefferson's life after he left the White House; the last seventeen years of his long life. I had no idea that he ,and his family, was always living on the edge of financial ruin. I also knew precious little about his many descendants. Alan Crawford's excellent biography has helped to educate me - which is always a good thing.

Books covering the final years of famous individuals can be tough reads. People who accomplish great things are often very complex and not always very nice. Their final years are often hard as their peak years are behind them and they no longer enjoy the prestige and power they once possessed. The final years often seem comprised of disappointment and pathos. There is that in Jefferson's final years as well.

Mr. Crawford's book alternates between examining the public and academic pursuits of Jefferson in his final years and his personal life. Jefferson wasn't good at managing money and his single minded determination to pursue an enlightened and rational life caused him to often ignore the more unpleasant aspects of Humanity - to include his own progeny and the people they married (violence, alcoholism, bankruptcy, etc.). Crawford writes in an easy style and it moves along at a rapid pace. Rather than an highly detailed academic treatise Mr. Crawford has produced an informative biography intended for the non-specialist.

Mr. Crawford has not written an assassination piece. He shows that Jefferson was all too Human - as are we all. Jefferson was a true Renaissance Man with an incredible mind. There was much about Jefferson that was admirable and not so admirable, such as his stance both practical and intellectually regarding slavery. The effect is making Jefferson a more interesting and deeper person than the one that I was introduced to in 1976. He doesn't take the easy and simple minded task of portraying Jefferson as some type of secular saint or just a lecherous hypocrite. Such a balancing act is not an easy thing to do and I ,for one, am impressed by Mr. Crawford's work.

Appropriately enough I purchased this book at the gift shop located at Monticello. It was a good purchase. Though a fast read I recommend it. It's a good book.

Jean says

I read this book about a year after reading "America's First Daughter" and combined it with a visit to Monticello. I liked having read "America's First Daughter" first, as it helped me appreciate "Twilight at Monticello" more fully. Alan Pell Crawford did a fantastic job of organizing the facts and weaving quotes and pictures into the narrative of Thomas Jefferson's post presidency life. I'm glad to have a better understanding of the beliefs and struggles of this Founding Father. It's unfortunate that many of the same struggles continue today, for example, the division over public education and its funding.

Joy H. says

Added 5/22/16.

I never realized that Jefferson had been so ill or that he went through such hard times.

I forgot to post a review right after I listened to the audio version of this book. So I don't remember much of what I heard on the CD. I listened to the CD around April, 2016.

However, I did copy down one quote:

"[Thomas Jefferson] made elaborate geographical calculations. ... This was the kind of abstract contemplation that he found so soothing. ... such mental exercise kept worrisome realities at a manageable distance for only so long however."

Kevin Barbee says

Twilight At Monticello didn't involve vampires, or vampire slayers, but it did give a nitty gritty portrayal of Thomas Jefferson's later life, his creation of the University of Virginia, and the overall decline of the state of Virginia. The politics of slavery, drunken son-in-laws, and the day-to-day matters of running a plantation are covered in just enough detail to make it interesting, and not too much to create boredom.

If you tire of fake Super Heroes, then read about a true Super Hero, a founder of the USA, and a noble gentlemen, not perfect by any judgement, but a man of substance and the kind the world needs now more than ever. But how can substance, knowledge, experience, and wisdom compete with tights, abs, biceps, tweets, and salaciousness? Let's hope that virtues return to popularity soon.

Ken Garrett says

This book chronicles the tragic, increasingly sad and impoverished last days of Thomas Jefferson. I found this work to be a fascinating, instructive look at the end of a life governed almost solely by philosophic rationalism and cherished ideals, but at the same time lacking what the author calls the "moral imagination" to extricate himself from the culture and practice of slave-holding. This failure, along with Jefferson's abject failure as a farmer/plantation owner--led to the spiritual and moral impoverishment that marked his last days, and the experience of the family members that survived him.

This work is a wonderful study of how the beliefs, values, and faults of a leader bear fruit in the lives of

those he/she loves, and leaves behind. A sobering read.

Mike says

Like Lincoln, the books on Thomas Jefferson would fell a large forest in the Pacific northwest. Most probably aren't worth your time, however, this is one that definitely deserves a spot on your shelf.

Jefferson's post presidential life, which this book covers, was an exercise in a futile attempt at remaining solvent. Like many Virginia planters, Jefferson was land rich but cash poor. His sons-in-law, daughters and grandchildren were constant sources of worry and consternation. His estate, Monticello, was a burden on him in terms of upkeep and maintenance.

Crawford's book is an interesting and informative account of our most enigmatic founding fathers.

JoAnna says

I have always admired Thomas Jefferson for his grand ideas and how they helped form our government and country. I also knew he was an architect and have always wanted to visit his home, Monticello. This book focuses on Jefferson's life after he is president. It made me a little sad to see that all his scholarly ideas didn't help him with normal, everyday life. He was a poor manager of his farms and was even worse at handling his financial affairs. He built Monticello, but it was not a practical house to live in. Still, he loved it so much his family stayed there until he died. He got himself in deep financial trouble and hoped that his country would help him out of the appreciation Jefferson believed they felt for him. His family life didn't go much better with his wife and children all passing away very young except for one daughter, who loved Jefferson more than her own husband. The author is sympathetic to Jefferson and I found myself still admiring, but also pitying, our Founding Father.

Carol says

I enjoyed this book. It was interesting to know about Jefferson after the Presidency. Life at Monticello was at times difficult. I would really like to visit there now that I have read this book. What a fascinating man!

Jeremy says

Great look at the final years of this American genius. Also great insights into his family. Excellent retelling of the mending of the rift with John Adams. He quotes the following letter to Adams: "A letter from you carries me back to the times when, beset with difficulties and dangers, we were fellow laborers in the same cause, struggling with what is most valuable to man, his right of self-government. Laboring always at the same oar, with some wave ever ahead threatening to overwhelm us and yet passing under our bark, we knew not how, we rode through the storm with heart and hand, and made a happy port. Crawford writes, "With this exchange of pleasantries began one of the most learned and provocative correspondences--literary, philosophical, political, and scientific--in the history of the American republic. I love Jefferson's quote about

the virtues of farming: "Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example." Compares very closely with Tolstoy's views on the issue. I was unaware of the sad financial state Jefferson found himself in towards the end of his life. All in all, an excellent read.

Donna says

I love learning about Thomas Jefferson. I thought his life after the presidency was very interesting but also depressing. Such an active interesting man that I was saddened to read that he and his family ended up in poverty. However, he had such a full life that I think that it just goes to prove that anyone can have money problems! I really recommend this book! Did you know that he used the Koran when he was sworn in as President?

Jeffrey Keeten says

"Jefferson 'alluded to the probability of his death--as a man would to the prospect of being caught in a shower--as an event not to be desired, but not to be feared.'"

Portrait by Thomas Sully of Thomas Jefferson in 1821. Jefferson died on July 4th, 1826 at age 83.

One would think that the man who was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, who was elected the 2nd governor of Virginia, who was the founder of the University of Virginia, and who was elected President of the United States...twice...would be able to retire without financial worries.

This was simply not the case with the tall, redhead from Virginia.

Thomas Jefferson was certainly cursed with some bad luck. We all experience our share of that, but Jefferson certainly made things worse with his all consuming curiosity about all things. These desires for achieving an understanding of the innovations of the day made him the fascinating man that he was, but curiosity, as I can attest to myself, is expensive.

"A remarkable disciplined scholar, Jefferson spent money on books the way less purposeful young men spent it on whiskey and women...within three and a half years, Jefferson had purchased 1,256 volumes to replace those lost. During this period, he bought books at a rate of roughly one a day, at a time when books were costly items."

The Thomas Jefferson library at the Library of Congress. In 1814 when the British burned the Library of Congress along with the White House, Jefferson offered to sell his library to the government to use as a basis for building a new collection. This temporarily eased some financial burdens for Jefferson.

He'd amassed 1,200 volumes previously, but his childhood home at Shadwell had burned down taking all the books with it. He replaced them all in less than four years. Luckily book collecting is a "gentle madness" though it can be exasperating to those that live with the book collector.

We can't really condemn him for buying too many books, that would be ridiculous.

He was not, unfortunately, a very good farmer, many of his experiments did not prove fruitful though he did seem to be a better gardener. His gardens, still in operation at Monticello, are beautiful. A few years ago I had the opportunity to stroll those gardens and also to take a tour of the house. He also suffered some untimely droughts (part of that bad luck) that forced him to buy grain, that normally would have come from his own lands, to feed his extensive family and slaves.

A small part of the massive gardens at Monticello.

Monticello is pleasing to the eye, an architectural marvel that was designed by Jefferson. Unfortunately what is beautiful is not always practical and efficient heating was not one of the attributes of this house. The lovely skylights are amazing, until it rains, and they leak. The upkeep of Monticello was very expensive and as hard cash became more difficult for Jefferson to obtain the less that was spent on his much loved house.

Jefferson obsessed with new architectural ideas and in the midst of his ongoing economic crises he decided to build another house on another property he owned called Poplar Forest. Simply madness or simply a man too consumed by his passions to be practical. He did want to keep his family close to him so by building another house just down the road he had another place to entice his burgeoning extending family to stay. It leaked like a rusty bucket as well, but that just adds a bit of charm.

Monticello experienced some dilapidation before being restored.

He made poor investments, rarely could refuse himself anything that furthered his enjoyment and understanding of the universe, he indulges his grandchildren with gold watches, silk dresses, and horse riding equipment, and he cosigned notes for friends when he was barely able to find credit for himself.

He wasn't the only one suffering in Virginia during this time, families that felt they should be doing really well were struggling. Alan Pell Crawford outlines some very real reasons for this downturn in Virginia's wealth.

"Intellectual life was almost nonexistent. Virginians published few newspapers or books. Almost all literary works came from the North. The well-to-do refused to be taxed to pay for the education of their poorer neighbors, and the great majority of young people, white and black, received no formal schooling. A result was the almost complete absence of an educated middle class. There were only land-rich, cash-poor gentleman planters at the top, a somewhat larger group of lawyers, doctors, and merchants just below them, and the poor whites and free blacks at the bottom, followed by great numbers of slaves. Costly in itself, the presence of slaves discouraged the immigration of white laborers, denying Virginia much needed skills and enterprise."

With every new generation there is an opportunity to make social changes. There were men trying to find ways to escape this calcified and doomed perception of a way of life. Jefferson was approached as a man who on paper had all the qualifications to carry the banner for emancipation. He'd even favored the process of gradual emancipation. He'd attempted to abolish the slave trade in an early draft of the Declaration of Independence (struck out because of the strong objections of South Carolina and Georgia).

He...was...not interested.

This is the biggest sticking point of all apologists for Jefferson. Out of all the Southern patriots he is the first name that one would put their finger on to lead the charge to abolish slavery. It is hard not to believe that the real reason that Jefferson did not do what he could do to end slavery was because he benefited from the system. He was caught in the thinking that slavery was the only option to maintaining his way of life. We could say that he was a man of his time, but he was not a man of his time. He was a man out of his time, beyond his time. He was a visionary. It was as if that one shot he took, when he was writing the Declaration of Independence, was his one and only serious attempt to be a man capable of escaping the narrow vision of his class.

I want to touch briefly on the Sally Hemings affair. I am looking forward to reading *The Hemingses of Monticello* and feel that my understanding of the situation will be greatly enhanced after reading that book. Sally Hemings was the daughter of John Wayles and his slave Betty Hemings; and therefore, the half sister of Martha Wayles Skelton. Martha married Thomas Jefferson. Sally was light complected, not surprising since she was of three-quarters European descent. She was petite and said to be very pretty. Martha died in 1781 and on her death bed asked that Jefferson never remarry. He swore he would not and kept that promise. Two years later he left for France with his daughter Patsy and with her was the fourteen year old Sally Hemings.

The lovely actress Thandie Newton played the role of Sarah “Sally” Hemings in the film Jefferson in Paris.

Scholars believe that his relationship with Sally started in France or shortly after their return. Her quarters at Monticello were beneath his own and he had a staircase built that would allow her unrestricted private access to his chambers. This reminded me of many similar staircases built by European kings for safe passage of mistresses to their beds. She had six children, four of which made it to adulthood. It is fascinating to think of this relationship. To some it further tarnishes his image. In his political campaigns it was certainly used against him in the form of bawdy poems and songs, revealing that it was not a well kept secret. Jefferson never bothered to deny the assertions which in retrospect was probably very good politics.

In a time when men routinely married the sister of a deceased wife, this is somewhat odd to our sensibilities today, but not considered so then, I do wonder if when he looked at Sally did he see much of his wife in her movements, and in her features? Was she a way of still keeping his beloved wife in his life? DNA evidence has proven that Sally’s children were descended from a Jefferson male, not conclusively to Jefferson, but certainly to the family.

Crawford does focus on the rather stressful final years of Jefferson’s life, but he does give the reader a thumbnail sketch in several tightly written chapters of the president’s early life. Crawford sprinkles in some enlightening anecdotes that brings the older and younger Jefferson alive. I especially enjoyed the one regarding how he hurt his wrist that gave him so much pain later in life (there was a woman involved). I also find it curious that little is known about Jefferson’s parents mainly because he so rarely wrote about them. He had other health issues besides a painful wrist. He frequently suffered from rheumatism and a rash of boils would assault his back and buttocks from time to time probably somewhat induced by stress.

I can’t help but smile about some of the financial difficulties he found himself in mainly because he was “living large”, but also because of his insatiable curiosity that had him buying innovations that he could ill afford. He was a man who did much. We wish he would have done more; and yet, he remains one of the most respected and beloved presidents.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at:<https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Steve says

<http://bestpresidentialbios.com/2013/...>

“Twilight at Monticello: The Final Years of Thomas Jefferson” is Alan Pell Crawford’s third and most recent book, published in 2008. Breaking away from the tradition of most Jefferson-focused biographies, Crawford’s work spends the bulk of its energy not on Jefferson’s time in public office, but on his seventeen-year retirement.

At first blush, it might seem strange that anyone would set out to describe in two-hundred or so pages the same period that Dumas Malone spent five-hundred pages chronicling in his sixth and final volume on Jefferson written thirty-five years ago. What eventually becomes clear, however, is that Crawford’s book is no ordinary accounting of the last years of one of our most revered presidents.

“Twilight at Monticello” begins with a prologue which takes the reader to a day in 1819 when one of Jefferson’s grandsons is seriously injured in a fight with his brother-in-law. Much of this section seems to fall into the category of historical fiction, describing what Jefferson “may” have eaten for breakfast that morning and what he “perhaps” did the rest of that day before learning of the altercation. It seems intended to set a dramatic tone for the remainder of the book, but is unnecessary.

Crawford then takes the reader on a fifty-page whirlwind tour through Jefferson’s youth, his time as a lawyer, legislator, governor, diplomat, secretary of state and his two terms as president. This brief reference to Jefferson’s upbringing and public life is too superficial and rushed to serve as a meaningful introduction to the man, but does provide a quick reminder of how Jefferson spent his time prior to retirement.

The author then takes a more leisurely-paced and wonderfully detailed stroll through Jefferson’s post-presidential years. But rather than providing what might reasonably be described as an impartial, if critical, look at Jefferson’s last years of life, Crawford crafts a story of persistent heartbreak, misery, scandal and intrigue. There are few moments of homage to a man of great deeds, love for friends and family (particularly his daughter Martha), and fervent in his desire to establish the University of Virginia.

Most of all, we are reminded (constantly) of the almost unending misery borne by Jefferson and his family in his last decades of life: of the death of friends and family, alcoholism and domestic abuse within his extended circle, mental illness among his siblings, of achingly persistent financial woes and of his own ill health. The author seems to take special delight in highlighting Jefferson’s pervasive pangs. The Old Testament’s “Job” almost seems to have been fortunate by comparison.

Far from sympathizing with Jefferson’s misfortune and (often) self-inflicted woes, Crawford describes an impractical, self-focused and often delusional dreamer – a profligate shopper unable to control his spending, whose life and family is wracked by so much dysfunction and so many contradictions that it is a wonder his likeness is carved into Mount Rushmore.

The anguish and pain, the incomprehensible personal contradictions and Jefferson’s crushing financial debts are well-described and Crawford provides remarkable and penetrating insight into these darkest of shadows.

He also describes the Jefferson/Hemings controversy in a comprehensive and balanced manner, repeating the conclusion of many (based on DNA studies) that Jefferson almost certainly fathered at least one of Sally Heming's children.

One of the book's missed opportunities, however, was the chance to more fully describe the renewed friendship between Jefferson and John Adams during their respective retirements. Their prolific correspondence, terminating only with their nearly simultaneous deaths, provides history with rich insight into these two unique men. And although his book might have served to complete the psychological profile provided by Joseph Ellis's "American Sphinx," Crawford stopped short of fully exploring how Jefferson's lifelong pain (and fear) of loss shaped his character.

"Twilight at Monticello" does not end with Jefferson's death, but goes on to tell the sorry tale of the years that followed, with Monticello virtually abandoned, Jefferson's estate largely liquidated to repay old debts, and his family scattered geographically while attempting to recover from the shock of almost complete-ruin. Nowhere else have I seen such a fulsome and candid description of the fallout which followed Jefferson's death.

Crawford's book is far from perfect and it seems clear that his "angle" was to focus on the most miserable and contradictory aspects to an otherwise impressive (if enigmatic) life. What is left unconfessed is that many of these challenges, and contradictions, are present in almost every family. But most of us don't author a Declaration or serve as president, or profess the evils of slavery while owning slaves. And in his fame, Jefferson seems to invite special attention.

"Twilight at Monticello" is an unconventional look at an already complex and mysterious former president. It is a skillfully written, entertaining and well-researched book focusing on the less transparent aspects of Jefferson's last years. That the book seems imbued with a tabloid patina may be inevitable given the focus of the book, but in any respect it also seems somewhat unbalanced. For the reader with a robust existing knowledge of Jefferson's life, "Twilight at Monticello" will likely provide greater color and some new insight to his final years. For others, the book will seem a strange jolt, inconsistent with fading memories of Jefferson acquired in a history class years ago.

Overall Rating: 4 stars

Michael says

Thomas Jefferson was a true genius and Renaissance man who, in his last years, dealt with crippling migraines, painful boils on his ass, an always-present risk of complete financial ruin, and death. Lots and lots of death – including his wife, five of their children, two of their grandchildren, five siblings, and many close friends. The man suffered a lot, but also gave us a lot. Namely, a country.

I really enjoyed this book, especially how the author showed us the real Jefferson, warts and all. Jefferson was no doubt a brilliant man, but was also a real flesh-and-blood human, and the author does an admirable job blending the "perfect" side of what we think of Jefferson with the "imperfect" reality of the man in the twilight of his life. Well researched and well done.

Nathan Albright says

As someone whose views of Thomas Jefferson are somewhat complicated [1], I found it rather noteworthy that this author too had a complicated view of Thomas Jefferson. This is not a straightforward book, and the author shows a high degree of ambivalence about his subject. It should be noted that my views of the subject are not identical with those of the author--they are particularly far apart when it comes to questions of religion and education--but the author finds himself faced with the difficulty of seeking to be honest while also praising and appropriating what he views to be particularly relevant aspects of the character and behavior of Jefferson. This is a particularly difficult task as the author's attempts at giving Jefferson a charitable view are hindered by the author's own ideological commitments. The author, in a position of wanting to praise and honor Jefferson while viewing his troubled later years as being symbolic for the overall decline of Virginia and the slave south, is forced into a great many difficult places that he finds himself unable to fully overcome, try as he might, making him rather like Jefferson in his attempts to get out of debt while maintaining an unreasonably optimistic view of the future.

In terms of its structure and organization, this particular volume is mostly but not entirely chronological. A substantial amount of space is given to Jefferson's youth and family background and his ambivalent view towards his parents. There is also a fair bit of space given to the ruinous decline of Monticello after Jefferson's death when it took decades for his grandson Jeff Randolph to put the family's situation aright again before the disaster of the Civil War. In between we see a lot of Jefferson's idealism, his utter lack of practical focus, the yawning gap between the world of his imagination and self-deception and the real world, his inability to properly understand whole dimensions of human life, such as faith, and his letters. Jefferson comes off in this book as being ineffectual in defending the well-being of his slaves and relatives, of being inconsistent with his own views of honor with regards to Sally Hemmings as well as his opaque and shady financial dealings, and of being someone who was unable to live up to his high-minded pronouncements and a poor example for how our nation or any nation should address religious faith. He also shows himself entirely too attached to the culture of Virginia for his own good, and unable to make real steps at either moral or financial retrenchment in the face of difficulties. The author may be generally sympathetic to Jefferson, but the facts he uncovers makes it hard for an honest reader or listener to be as charitable.

In reading this book one gets an autumnal sense of melancholy, seeing Jefferson's ambition for high office and love of books and abstraction get in the way of a practical life. We see a man who had a hard time denying himself anything and so he behaved in such a way as to make life difficult on those who loved him the most. In particular, reading this book gives one a strong sense of sympathy for Jefferson's son-in-law and grandson, who suffered the most from his debt, his divisive family politics, and from his behavior. The author covers all of the expected, and some unexpected, angles of Jefferson's life, from his freethinking ways to his refusal to spend political capital to defend the well-being of slaves and free blacks, to his struggles with alcoholism and debt within his close family circle, as well as his frequent and expensive architectural alterations, some of which made it particularly easy for him to engage in a lengthy if clandestine relationship with his slave mistress while the menfolk of his family circle engaged in their own similar behavior. At the end, this book shows that Jefferson's behavior made him feel unable to be the sort of moral guide to his family that he wished to be, and to seek escape through the life of the mind. Even for all of his flaws, it is hard not to have some sympathy for Jefferson and his difficulties, and to wonder if we would have done better ourselves.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2014...>

Grumpus says

Listened to the audio download from [www.audible.com].

Narrated by: James Boles

If I read this book rather than listened to it, I would have given it 4 stars. This is the first time I've ever penalized a book for the reading.

Having just finished John Adams and watched the HBO miniseries, this book was an excellent accompaniment. Full disclosure, I am not a big Jefferson fan due his treatment of Hamilton and Adams, and as a result, could not feel sorry for him in his final years as he suffered financially for the extravagant ways of his early years nor for the painful boils on his butt.

Still, I think him a wise man not necessarily a nice man.
