



Most Blessed of the Patriarchs: Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination

Annette Gordon-Reed , Peter S. Onuf

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Thomas Jefferson is often portrayed as a hopelessly enigmatic figure—a riddle—a man so riven with contradictions that he is almost impossible to know. Lauded as the most articulate voice of American freedom and equality, even as he held people—including his own family—in bondage, Jefferson is variably described as a hypocrite, an atheist, or a simple-minded proponent of limited government who expected all Americans to be farmers forever.

Now, Annette Gordon-Reed teams up with America's leading Jefferson scholar, Peter S. Onuf, to present an absorbing and revealing character study that dispels the many clichés that have accrued over the years about our third president. Challenging the widely prevalent belief that Jefferson remains so opaque as to be unknowable, the authors—through their careful analysis, painstaking research, and vivid prose—create a portrait of Jefferson, as he might have painted himself, one "comprised of equal parts sun and shadow" (Jane Kamensky).

Tracing Jefferson's philosophical development from youth to old age, the authors explore what they call the "empire" of Jefferson's imagination—an expansive state of mind born of his origins in a slave society, his intellectual influences, and the vaulting ambition that propelled him into public life as a modern avatar of the Enlightenment who, at the same time, likened himself to a figure of old—"the most blessed of the patriarchs." Indeed, Jefferson saw himself as a "patriarch," not just to his country and mountain-like home at Monticello but also to his family, the white half that he loved so publicly, as well as to the black side that he claimed to love, a contradiction of extraordinary historical magnitude.

Divided into three sections, *"Most Blessed of the Patriarchs"* reveals a striking personal dimension to his life. Part I, "Patriarch," explores Jefferson's origins in Virginia; Part II, "Traveller," covers his five-year sojourn to Paris; and Part III, "Enthusiast," delves insightfully into the Virginian's views on Christianity, slavery, and race. We see not just his ideas and vision of America but come to know him in an almost familial way, such as through the importance of music in his life.

"Most Blessed of the Patriarchs" fundamentally challenges much of what we've come to accept about Jefferson, neither hypocrite nor saint, atheist nor fundamentalist. Gordon-Reed and Onuf, through a close reading of Jefferson's own words, reintroduce us all to our most influential founding father: a man more gifted than most, but complicated in just the ways we all are.

Most Blessed of the Patriarchs: Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination Details

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Valerie says

My god was this dull! This had the potential to be a great read but the co-authors writing styles made it tedious! Instead of being direct, the authors ran in circles around each point they were trying to make. I could not get out of the introduction (and this was after the prologue!). I had some issues with Jon Meacham's patronizing writing style on his study of Thomas Jefferson but at least his book was interesting. Meacham made Thomas Jefferson interesting. The authors of this book made Jefferson look dull when he was most certainly not.

Sally says

I discovered this book long after my own, MONTICELLO: A DAUGHTER AND HER FATHER, went off to the publisher and only just got around to reading it. We come from the same place and go to the same place -- no devils or angels here.

Karen says

Most Blessed of the Patriarchs judges Thomas Jefferson through a twenty-first century lens.

Did Gordon-Reed expect Jefferson to become an abolitionist? to make Sally Hemings his wife? to begin a campaign for the equal rights of women, who at that time were not allowed to own property? This would have brought about the destruction of the democracy Jefferson had helped to create. His fear of a civil war over slavery was addressed after all.

The subtitle of this book remains an enigma to me, but Jefferson did imagine a better America, hoping to uplift the rugged civilization with culture he found overseas in France. Perhaps if he had lived in a different age, Jefferson may have empowered us to forge a different kind of revolution.

Ivor Armistead says

Actually, 4 1/2 stars. This is a must read for everyone interested in understanding the most gifted and most complex of the founding fathers. The contradictions in the life of this son of the Enlightenment have always been apparent. How can a man who believed that all are created equal and who acknowledged the inherent evil and injustice of slavery, continue to live off of the forced labor of the fellow humans (including his

progeny) who he purported to "own?"

This is the conundrum that this well researched, written and reasoned book so artfully seek to unravel.

As a result, readers will come away with a fuller understanding of a humanized Jefferson, who we can admire and admonish.

Argum says

I won a copy of this from Goodreads First Reads program.

Interesting engaging read about Thomas Jefferson. I wouldn't really class this as a biography, more a personality sketch well researched. This is not chronological or comprehensive, but rather categorical portraits of Jefferson. If you are not well versed in the basics of Jefferson you will not get them here. Instead you find chapters on Jefferson away from home and Jefferson and music. You get a sense of the man using a wide array of papers, first hand accounts, and previous scholarship. One big piece focused on how Jefferson could be a slave holder with slave family and still truly believe that slavery was abhorrent. I feel I know Thomas Jefferson better than before, but couldn't say I learned anything specific.

John Daly says

Book 13 of 40 for 2016

Thomas Jefferson is our Founding Father who is and will always be to history a riddle wrapped in enigma. The slave owner who proclaimed "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

In Most Blessed of Patriarchs Gordon-Reed and Onuf attempt to unwrap the enigma that is Thomas Jefferson. Be warned if your looking for a biography of Jefferson this is not it go pickup Meecham's Thomas Jefferson The Art of Power or Joseph Ellis' American Sphinx.

Jefferson wanted control of his world and left records of only what he wanted to share with history as such we don't know the full scope of his relationship with the Hemming's but we do know that Sally and her family had a special status in the life on the hilltop.

Jefferson had several opportunities to speak out about the cancer that was slavery on the country he helped to create. Even during his long retirement he never used his clout and status to move the debate over slavery forward just depending on the next generation to take care of the problem that was left behind by the Southern Founders.

Jefferson also got sucked into the French Revolution and then when it turned ugly and heads began to roll down the streets of Paris his ego refused to allow him to admit that the Revolution went to far.

It's clear that we are in a period of historical scholarship where Jefferson is being reexamined and

reevaluated. With Hamilton, Adams, and Washington being reexamined the Southern Republican faction may be losing some of their luster.

Gordon-Reed and Onuf provide a great examination of Jefferson's motivations and actions and it gives the reader a chance to go deeper into Jefferson and his actions and motivations. Definitely pick it up after you've read Meecham or Ellis and you will enjoy the deeper dive into this complex man.

Nathan says

Read a pre-release copy shared by Sara. Librarians get to go to the coolest conferences.

Andrew Carr says

Let us count the ways in which thou art blessed. For Thomas Jefferson, this injunction could take all night. For the book *Most Blessed of the Patriarchs: Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination* it is unfortunately a much shorter task.

Thomas Jefferson is a charming and contradictory figure. An 'American Sphinx' as one biographer described. I've probably read a half dozen books on Jefferson over the years in a bid to understand him; such that this task is ever possible. So I was excited to get a copy of this book, given the reputation of the authors and the advanced praise for this book.

What I find most interesting about Jefferson is clearly not what the authors do. To me, he is a man of philosophy, prose and politics. All three are occasionally illuminated through this book's lenses as his role as a patriarch. This book brings together the latest research on Jefferson, showing just how much new we have learned in recent years. But less engagingly, most of this has to do with the more mundane aspects of Jefferson's life.

Personally, I find his relationship with Sally Hemmings, a slave girl and half-sister of his late wife quite uninteresting. I read biographies to learn about the unusual and historic. That an old slave owner found comfort in and had children through a slave he owned is neither. It was common for the time, and such behaviour is common across time.

As such, it was mildly interesting for the first 100 pages or so to see this relationship —if such a word can be used given questions of power and consent— brought into the light. Annette Gordon-Reed won a Pulitzer Prize for her earlier works demonstrating the truth of these ties. This was important for revealing a little bit more of his contradictory nature. But in *Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*, it seemed like the book's authors couldn't find an appropriate balance in trying to discuss Jefferson's many sides.

The book is nominally about his approach to home life, and the importance of having a domain he was master of, in shaping his world view and life. Thus many topics such as his daily routine, the construction of Monticello and his views on gardening (much more negative than commonly presumed) are discussed.

But few of these topics get the space they deserve, before the subject gets dragged back to his ties to Hemmings and the unwillingness of his white family and white Virginia to recognise them in any way. Often

this occurs with little warning, with book jumping around, going back and forth, rather than methodically trying to peel back the layers.

The chapter on Jefferson's time in France is a welcome exception, giving the period a sustained analysis. They reveal how Jefferson's embrace of French society, and his role as advocate for America helped him see what was most distinct and valuable about America, its people, environment and culture.

Many of Jefferson's biographers write huge tomes in the hope that the sheer space they cover will provide a large enough net to snare their slippery catch. Annette Gordon-Reed and Peter S. Onuf make do with just 320 pages, and at times you feel they have indeed brought some of the real Jefferson to the surface.

But just when they do, they let him return to the depths he found of most comfort, with ponderous and repetitive writing. Or rather, overwriting. The authors seem unable to simply state that Jefferson tried to be a good host. Instead they must tie it to the contradictions of human society and his vision of a grand American republic as an inspiration for all mankind.

For those fascinated by Jefferson, there is value in this book. The parts have value, if more than the sum. The authors are masters of their fields, and learning the latest discoveries in the scholarship is engaging. But its gems are hidden by waffly language and a confused focus. The task of trying to count Jefferson's many blessings and oddities therefore continues.

Anita Lynch-Cooper says

This is a very readable history, though not a strictly chronological history of his achievements. Jefferson was an enigma. He early on wrote about the evils of slavery and prayed for an orderly emancipation of the slaves. He owned slaves, including 6 half siblings of his wife Martha. He idealized home life, yet spent many years separated from his daughters while in France and later in Washington. He prided himself on his hospitality, yet had a separate building for his own use away from Monticello where no friends or family were allowed and where he could escape too. He was not a fan of organized religion, but believed in god and the power of prayer. He was a man of his times regarding his opinion of women and slaves. Yet he corresponded with several educated women including Angelica Schuyler Church, who was Alexander Hamilton's sister in law.

Louise says

In 1776 when Thomas Jefferson wrote "all men are created equal" he owned over 200 slaves. Later, as a widower and US Minister to France, he began his relationship with Sally Hemings, his wife's half-sister, who was enslaved by him. With his wife he had 2 children who lived to adulthood and with Hemings he had 6 children, 4 who lived to adulthood. Members of the two families lived together at Monticello at various times over many years. How did he feel about his families and these contradictions?

In this book, Annette Gordon-Reed extends her research on the Hemings family, and along with Peter Onuf discusses the factors that went into Jefferson's character: his early life, his relationship with the other patriots, his time in Paris and experience in governing. They draw heavily of his own writings, particularly "Notes on the State of Virginia". They weigh his public and private lives from letters and narratives of those

who knew him.

Jefferson saw himself a “patriarch” a father/leader. He similarly viewed each family in a republic, free under its own patriarch, each state and finally the country as one family with a patriarch at its head. Other planters did not live on hill tops: hauling water and the long upward access were impractical, but at Monticello he was free to pursue his happiness. That this pursuit depended on the work of those with limited or no choices: women (whom he saw as natural helpmates to men) and slaves (whom he felt would be freed from their unjust condition by later generations) was not acknowledged by him.

The authors work is far beyond the Jefferson-Hemings relationship, but I could not help but focus on it as key to understanding Jefferson. While a social person with refined tastes, he regularly retreated to a very private life. Was the need for privacy a way to control what people knew of him as a slave owner and partner to a woman who was his slave? Did he pay his slaves in Paris because knew the opinion of slavery held by those he respected? Why is it that none of the many guests at Monticello (a few of whom saw children who looked like Jefferson) reported any engagement with his children? Did Jefferson not free Sally Hemings in his will because it would call attention to their relationship? The authors describe Jefferson’s manners and the way he steered conversations; was he avoiding unpleasant notices of his situation? His appreciation of the opera, the symphony and folk music of Scotland, Ireland and Virginia is well documented, but did he hide an appreciation for the music of those living closest to him? Did he leave incomplete, and perhaps obfuscated, records in order to hide his private life?

There was a huge backlash in the 1970’s when Fawn Brodie introduced the Sally Hemings to the general public. It’s taken two generations, DNA testing and black and female scholars crossing the glass ceiling to have a book like this received with minimal reaction of it as an attack on Jefferson. I recommend it for those with some background on Jefferson (this is not a bio) and an interest in the issue of slavery.

Jenny says

The book gives a good insight into Jefferson’s contradictions, especially with his views on slavery. You also get a good feeling as to how important family was to him. My complaint is that the book seemed to meander everywhere, so at times it was a bit hard to follow the point the author was making. Overall, good, but not a must read on Jefferson.

Colleen Browne says

Gordon-Reed and Onuf have crafted a book on Jefferson that adds a tremendous amount to our knowledge about one of our most enigmatic Forefathers. Written from the perspective of what Jefferson's world would have looked to him, it is a fascinating book divided into chapters about the different aspects of his life. It is not a biography but certainly complements our knowledge of the subject. Very well written and valuable to anyone interested in learning more about Jefferson.

Claire says

Very well written and insightful. I got a much clearer picture of Jefferson the man, as opposed to Jefferson

the icon.

Brian Willis says

Unlike most books about Jefferson, this book is not a straightforward biography of the man and the set of circumstances that led to his authorship of the Declaration of Independence and the events of his presidency, nor does it intend to indict Jefferson for his inconsistencies over slavery. In fact, Gordon-Reed, who won a Pulitzer for her definitive case uncovering the children fathered by Jefferson with Sally Hemings, and Onuf, a leading Jeffersonian scholar, have written a book that analyzes and rescues the terms "patriarchy" and "empire" from their pejorative senses within feminist and postcolonial lenses and restores them to the sense that Jefferson himself corroborated within his imagination to establish his own world view.

Focusing on how Jefferson organized his home Monticello and how he perceived himself as the beneficent font of prosperity at the head of that household, we see Jefferson's domestic sphere in a whole new light. Yes, he owned slaves, and yes, he wished that slavery could be wiped out of existence though he did little to further that cause, but he also saw himself as the person from whom both family and slaves received positive benefits to their lives. No, this argument is not an apology for slavery or as harsh as modern moralistic perspectives would rightfully condemn the institution of slavery, but it does place us within the mind of Jefferson to understand how he could claim freedom for white men but not enable it for all within his own household. We also see Jefferson's relationship with his own land, that of Monticello as well as Virginia. The authors trace the evolution of Jefferson's views based on his extensive residency in France, as well as the minutiae of Jefferson's personality within the domestic boundaries of the interior of Monticello itself, the entertainment there, dining, the treatment of visitors, Jefferson's need for privacy, as well as his complicated religious views (he disavowed the supernatural aspect of the Bible and only absorbed the more rational teachings located there).

A noble book with a unique perspective, I would place it alongside Joseph J. Ellis's *American Sphinx* as the two best books available about Jefferson's mind and thoughts as opposed to straightforward biographies. I would have appreciated a little more variation in prose style for the book, but the content is exemplary.

Ben says

In the case of a subject like Thomas Jefferson, biographies of whom abound on any library or bookstore shelf, any new contender for space on those shelves should make a plausible case for doing something different, for increasing and improving our understanding of the man and not just pouring old wine into a new bottle (something of which Jefferson, a noted oenophile, would certainly not have approved). *"Most Blessed of the Patriarchs"* makes such a case by not following the life and work of Jefferson in chronological order, examining instead several of the major themes that exercised an influence on his thinking and actions from youth to death. The result of this organizing principle is, I think, a clearer picture of Jefferson the man than a traditional biography can produce. Particularly with a man like Jefferson, a man of deep learning and contemplation who was willing (for better or worse) to change his opinion when evidence warranted, a man who often held views inconsistent with those held by the majority of his peers and who was viewed by those peers as a walking contradiction, following the evolution of his ideas and beliefs reveals more of the man as he truly was.

So what kind of man was he? This book highlights the difficulty of answering that question. Was he vocally pro-slavery? No, quite the opposite. Did he hold slave? Yes, for all of this life. Was a decent and generous friend? Absolutely. Did he seek to undermine the presidency and destroy the legacy of a former comrade-in-arms with whom he shared a deep and shared affection? With gusto. Did he believe in a highly circumscribed federal government with clearly delineated powers? Very much so. Except for when he was the president.

In the end, everyone will evaluate Jefferson for themselves and decide whether his undeniable influence on the early history of the United States balances toward the better or worse. Of course, we can only judge him on what we have available to us today and so can only go so far. There are certainly things that we simply can never know about him at this remove of time, but this book, perhaps in an attempt to make him more relatable as a more fully fleshed out character, includes frequent mentions of what Jefferson "must have felt" or thought, or to the fact that "no one had ever said such things to him" and other such statements that are patently impossible to verify. These are small things, certainly, but when taken as a whole give the reader pause to wonder what else the authors are assuming or taking for granted. He was, after all, a politician who was conscious that much of what he wrote would be read by a great many people, not reflections for his and his friends' eyes only. Even if an underlying thought or feeling can be inferred from a statement in a letter or line from a document, how can we be sure that his words accurately represent what was in his heart? It seems clear to me that we can't and there is little compelling reason for a good historian to pretend otherwise.

All that said, I did enjoy the book. I would recommend it to anyone with the simple caveat that it shouldn't be the only book about Thomas Jefferson that they read.
