

A (Brief) Survey and Analysis of Works about Thomas Jefferson

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Trying to write a somewhat abbreviated tome on anything related to Thomas Jefferson may be the most intimidating and futile exercise in all of the academic world of US History. The sheer quantity of information and documentation that was produced by and about Jefferson is simply overwhelming. An amazon.com search of “Thomas Jefferson” in all categories yields nearly 7,000 results, while a simple google.com search of the same terms produces almost 9 million hits! To compare, a google search of “John Adams” delivers approximately half that number.

The purpose of this paper will be to survey a very small slice of that work. Even to pick and choose from amongst the literature produced on Jefferson is a difficult task. There is no single accepted “best” biography of Jefferson. Most of the recent work however, does seem to add much to the knowledge base, analysis, and ultimately, understanding of the third President of the United States. So in beginning the task of choosing which monographs to use, it is perhaps most useful to begin with recent works. Though this will eliminate such classic works as Dumas Malone’s six volume biography of Jefferson and other works by such historians and writers as Daniel Boorstin, and Henry Wilder Foote. A true survey of Jeffersonian literature would indeed be a massive undertaking. This paper will use writers and books that this author became familiar with during this year’s TAH program, as well as an outside work by a more popular writer, known more for his prose than his historiography.

The 2010 TAH program gave its students the opportunity to interact directly with a number of prominent author-historians (or, as they would probably prefer, historian-authors). The first of whom was R.B. Bernstein, author of *Thomas Jefferson, The Founding Fathers Reconsidered*, and *Amending America: If We Love the Constitution So Much, Why Do We Keep Trying to*

Change It?, amongst other works of the “Constitutional Period” in American History. The aforementioned *Founding Fathers* will be the first of the works discussed in terms of how it considers Jefferson. The second book, *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding* by Darren Staloff was also one of the books that TAH students had the opportunity to discuss during the July sessions of the program. Staloff’s approach to Jefferson and the period in general, is different than Bernstein’s, and in some ways more methodical. Staloff, as discussed over the summer, takes a more economic approach to his analysis of Jefferson (and others) and that will aid in providing a more complete picture of Jefferson’s ideas and philosophies as they were put into action.

Finally, Jon Meacham’s *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*, will be the third book used in this survey. Meacham is better known as the managing editor of Newsweek magazine, and has written skillfully, and often, on the topic of religion in America. *American Gospel* has been widely praised by historians, scholars, and the general public for its scholarship, its prose, and maybe most importantly, its ability to refocus many in the general public as to the importance of understanding what many of the Founding Fathers really believed about religion. The ease in which a high school student could read *American Gospel*, as well as its focus on such a timely subject as religion, were amongst the reasons this book was chosen for this project.

Whether critic or fanatic, no historian can dispute Jefferson’s remarkable contributions to US history. From all manners of science to literature to languages to religion to health and well-being, there is nary a topic on which Jefferson didn’t write extensively. In as much as this makes

him admirable and, along with Benjamin Franklin, one of America's few real Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers, it also allows for a number of controversies. As probably most modern-day celebrities and politicians will attest to, whenever one's thoughts and actions are nearly always in the public eye, it is almost inevitable that inconsistencies will occur. Bernstein addresses this very issue about Jefferson in *Thomas Jefferson*:

"...this book also explores the contradictions of his life, which bedevil all those who study him. Jefferson was an advocate of liberty who owned slaves; abandoning his opposition to slavery, he became a troubled apologist for the institution, justifying it by racial theories that, he claimed, were based on science. A champion of limited government who wanted power to rest with the states, he became a president who devised and created expansive uses of national power - in some cases bordering on tyrannical. A private man who claimed to loathe politics, he became his era's dominant politician. A man of aristocratic habits and tastes, he became a symbol of American democracy, and its most eloquent voice. A cultivated Virginian gentleman of the late eighteenth century, he became a timeless theorist of liberty, democracy, and the rights of man."

This is an issue that Bernstein revisits (a number of times) in *Reconsidered*. On page 116, he notes, *"...many historians, politicians, and jurists have praised them [Founding Fathers] as the most creative and learned gathering of statesmen in American history, among the greatest such gatherings the world has ever seen. At the same time, especially beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, we have come to recognize the founding fathers' limitations and failings, and we have struggled to balance gratitude with recrimination in assessing them."* He continues further down on the page, with more specific examples: *"...The reputations of some founding fathers (Washington and Franklin) have remained consistently high...The reputations of others*

(Jefferson and Hamilton) have risen and fallen almost in complementary historical cycles, suggesting that their struggles with one another when alive continue by proxy long after their deaths...”

As most who have met or seen Bernstein speak about “the founding guys,” as he calls them, can attest, Bernstein seems to have genuine affinity for most of the founders. He is acutely aware of their foibles, and not afraid to acknowledge them, but at the same time, does seem to believe that their accomplishments should (mostly) outweigh the criticism. In *Reconsidered*, he discusses how difficult this can be sometimes, especially for those charged with cataloging and analyzing Jefferson’s original works:

*“...Documentary editors also can present a more ambiguous, conflicted picture of a founding father, as has been the case with *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Despite the efforts of its founding editor, Julian Boyd, to fix at its core an uncompromisingly Jeffersonian vision of its subject’s career and the political history of the early Republic, the Princeton edition has spawned a rich body of historical literature portraying Jefferson as a sometimes devious, manipulative politician and a deeply conflicted man who shielded himself from conflicts between his professed views and his actual conduct.” (136)*

It is significant that Bernstein uses the casual language “guys,” when talking about the Founders. To him, it is essential that today’s students of the period know that those whom we refer to as the “Founding Fathers” or the “Founding Brothers” are very human. If they were alive today, they would be seen in Washington’s finest restaurants, many of its pubs, and probably as staples on MSNBC, CNN, FoxNews, and the Sunday morning talk shows.

Staloff is also an admirer of the Founders, and talks about them in often glowing terms. Of Jefferson he says, “...*was much more than simply a revolutionary statesman and political*

theorist. The American Da Vinci, he truly was the universal man idealized by the Renaissance. The breadth of his mind was stunning, his intellectual appetite canine and omnivorous. In addition to political philosophy, Jefferson read widely in metaphysics, epistemology, and moral and aesthetic philosophy. One of the few early Americans who could actually do the calculus associated with Newton's mechanics, he was an avid student of the sciences, conversant with the most recent developments in chemistry, biology, zoology, and botany, and he had a more than passing interest in meteorology. Widely read in classical and modern history, he was equally fascinated by the emergent social sciences of political economy and sociology and proved himself a fairly accomplished amateur anthropologist.” (234).

Staloff continues on for a number of pages listing the accomplishments, interests, and accolades bestowed upon Jefferson during his lifetime and posthumously. At one point he invokes Kant to express his admiration for Jefferson's mind: *“Quite simply, Thomas Jefferson thought about more in one week than occurs to us mere mortals in a year. He was indeed, an “extraordinary collection of talents.” (235)*

Like Bernstein, Staloff is also willing to offer some criticism of Jefferson. But he phrases it in such a manner that makes Jefferson seem almost like a victim of his time and place:

...Jefferson's values and beliefs were challenged by political developments during the struggle for independence. Virginians turned out to be far less public minded and virtuous than the Sage of Monticello had hoped. The old Dominion proved impervious to efforts at reform, a source of immense frustration to a practitioner of the politics of Enlightenment like Thomas Jefferson. The political crises of Virginia also took on a personal dimension for the lanky statesman. When the British invaded and overran Virginia during his tenure as governor, his political career reached its absolute nadir. The Virginia Legislature seriously considered censuring him for his official

conduct. Compounding his despair, shortly after leaving his office his wife died after a difficult childbirth, making him an emotionally devastated and lifelong widower. As tragedy followed tragedy, each contradicting his aspirations and ideals, Jefferson began to reassess those ideals. Under the pressure of recalcitrant realities, he modified his beliefs to accommodate them. The result was the unfettering of the Romantic spirit in the Jeffersonian vision.” (249)

In *American Gospel*, Meacham, the most popular and well known of the three authors discussed in this paper, mostly shies away from criticizing Jefferson. This is interesting, because of all the topics in Jefferson’s life, religion is often thought to be the most hypocritical. Despite Jefferson’s somewhat well-known contradictions on the subject, Meacham tends to use Jefferson’s thoughts to explain specific ideas, or ideas of the time. He notes:

“...Musing amid the Revolution, Jefferson drew a distinction between Britain’s America and the very new United States. ‘I doubt whether the people of this country would suffer an execution for heresy, or a three years imprisonment for not comprehending the mysteries of the Trinity,’ he said. ‘But is the spirit of the people an infallible, a permanent reliance?’ No, Jefferson answered, it was not. History teaches us that ‘the spirit of the times may alter, will alter. Our rulers will become corrupt, our people careless.’ Best, then, to make the most of moments like the American Revolution, moments when precious things can be provisionally secured against ambition and avarice. ‘It can never be too often repeated, that the time for fixing every essential right on a legal basis is when our rulers are honest, and ourselves, united’...” (62-63)

Meacham seems to hint at some dispute in Jefferson’s mind when he discusses Jefferson’s use of a “Natural G-d” in the Declaration of Independence, and his belief in Christianity, but only in that he contrasts it with how uncomfortable Jefferson was with the idea of a National Day of

Prayer, and his arguments with John Adams on the floor of Congress about it. Adams even went so far as to call Jefferson an “enemy of Christianity.”

Though I have not had the opportunity (time?) to read Malone’s six volumes on Jefferson, or even many of the other well known works, a picture of Jefferson as a politician, a leader, an idealist, and a “guy,” becomes much more clear through the readings of a few of the works. The important lesson, as it relates to my teaching and my students I think, is that multiple sources, especially those that are contradictory, must be presented as often as possible when discussing such complex subjects as Thomas Jefferson and the other personalities that have shaped US History. Just as it is difficult for a professional student (teacher!) to read all of the information available on Jefferson, it is more difficult for our students to do it as well. Finding the essential passages, essays, letters, and analysis is what will make the learning experience more fruitful, more interesting, and more ultimately, more relevant – for both students and teachers.