

OUTSTANDING SEMINAR PAPER AWARD

JEFFERSON AND THE POST-WAR ERA: RACE, MISCEGENATION, AND HISTORY

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The memory of Thomas Jefferson has long been associated with the American experience of race and slavery. Just as Jefferson's words are used whenever freedom, liberty, and democracy need defending, Jefferson's example is used whenever racial hypocrisy is criticized. In the nineteenth century, abolitionists used Jefferson's words as weapons, while Southerners used his example as a defense. It is the issue of race that has most clouded Jefferson's reputation in the second half of the present century. As the Civil Rights Movement gradually became a success, and as scholars increasingly realized that Jefferson's notion of equality was not the same as the modern idea of equality, Jefferson's fortunes began to fall in the academic community. Discussions of Jefferson's legacy have become increasingly complex since the nation celebrated the 200th anniversary of his birth in 1943. Ambivalence and qualification now surround most writing on Jefferson as the innocence of the 1940s and 1950s yielded to the skepticism and cynicism of later decades. Jefferson's life is a parallel with the destiny of the nation with regard to racial issues, and this parallel can be seen in the histories that have been written about Jefferson.

The Jefferson Memorial in Washington was dedicated on April 13, 1943, at the height of World War II. President Franklin Roosevelt wasted no time in associating the spirit of Jefferson with the cause of the war. "Today, in the midst of a great war for freedom, we dedicate a shrine to freedom. To Thomas Jefferson, apostle of freedom, we are paying a debt long overdue."¹ The importance of the moment was recognized by Dumas Malone, who held the Jefferson chair in history at the University of Virginia and had just begun work on a multi-volume biography of the sage of Monticello. He observed in *The Saturday Review* that the Memorial "signifies in a tangible way his recognition as a member of our Trinity of immortals."² One hundred and seventeen years after his death, Jefferson had finally joined Washington and Lincoln in the pantheon of America's exalted leaders.

As Jefferson became a tool for use against fascism, American liberals saw the opportunity to use Jefferson to attack racism at home. This is most evident in the 1944 work of the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Myrdal argued that white Americans knew that blacks were entitled

¹*New York Times*, 14 April 1943, pp. 1, 16.

²Dumas Malone, "The Jefferson Faith," *Saturday Review* 26 (13 April 1943): 4.

to treatment as equals, but were paralyzed by fear and ignorance. As a slaveholder and author of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson more acutely symbolized the dilemma than anyone. Myrdal portrays Jefferson as a social scientist struggling with the race problem of his day in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Myrdal argues that "he is cautious in tone, has his attention upon the fact that popular opinions are prejudiced, and points to the possibility that further scientific studies may, or may not, verify his conjectures. . . . This guarded treatment of the subject marks a high point in the early history of the literature on Negro racial characteristics."³ Myrdal used the example of Jefferson to encourage like-minded individuals to pick up where Jefferson left off, believing that would result in the removal of the remaining barriers to assimilation and the creation of the equality enunciated by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence.

Dumas Malone's six-volume biography of the third President, *Jefferson and His Time*, is as meticulous and thorough a study as any historian could hope to write. The weaknesses of these volumes, however, are indicative of the era in which Malone wrote rather than in his methodology. The biography does little to reveal the inner Jefferson, for the personal life of our political leaders was not of the consuming interest then that it seems to be today. Later in his life, after the miscegenation of Jefferson was alleged by Fawn Brodie, Malone's response could be summed up by stating that Jefferson was not the kind of man to do that, as if it were an insult to his aristocratic honor. While Malone's work is very much a product of his time, its importance cannot be overstated. It is the starting point for all subsequent study of Jefferson.⁴

In 1954, the first contemporary allegations that Jefferson had fathered some children of Sally Hemings appeared in the most widely read African-American publication, *Ebony*. The unnamed author of the piece wrote that "many reputable historians concede that Jefferson fathered at least five Negro children and possibly more by several comely slave concubines who were great favorites at his Monticello home."⁵ While some historians may have accepted this story, the leading Jefferson scholars of the day—all of whom were white—dismissed the charge as inconsistent with Jefferson's character.

A former editor of the *William & Mary Quarterly*, Douglass Adair, worried that the attention given to the *Ebony* article would distort Jefferson's historical reputation. Adair wrote that "its printing is designed to stir up, to quote a phrase of Jefferson's, 'ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained.'" The appeal of the article was also being used by white segregationists to illustrate the dangers of integration. In Adair's view, the cautious and conscientious Jefferson, who was a symbol of good will in race relations, was being replaced by a hypocritical figure who was being dragged yet again into

³Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 90.

⁴Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, 6 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948-81).

⁵"Thomas Jefferson's Negro Grandchildren," *Ebony* 10 (November 1954): 78.

politics. Adair was persuaded by Malone and others not to publish the essay, which remained unpublished until after his death, so as to not give those using the Hemings legend the dignity of a scholarly rebuttal.⁶

In 1960, Merrill Peterson published an award-winning book called *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*. Peterson, who shortly afterwards succeeded Malone in the Jefferson chair at Virginia, surveyed the ever-shifting ways in which Jefferson's legacy had been used and abused from his death until the bicentennial celebration of Jefferson's birth in 1943. In his view, "no serious student" of Jefferson gave the story credence. Peterson traced the genesis of the story, in part, to the:

Negroes' pathetic wish for a little pride and their subtle ways of confounding the white folks, the cunning of the slave trader and the auctioneer who might expect a better price for a Jefferson than for a Jones, the social fact of miscegenation and its fascination as a moral theme, and, above all, the logic of abolitionism by which Jefferson alone of the Founding Fathers was a worthy exhibit of the crime.

While Peterson noted that several recent publications had presented the story as true, he concluded that the Hemings affair had long ago "faded into the obscure recesses of the Jeffersonian image."⁷

The story remained in those "obscure recesses" through most of the 1960s, downplayed by the Jefferson scholars who shaped the popular image. While they knew about the Hemings story, black civil rights leaders saw nothing to gain in the promotion of it, electing instead to emphasize the Jeffersonian ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy. However, Jefferson was reproached by radical black leaders who became increasingly intolerant with white leaders who, like Jefferson, seemed to say the right things but not to follow through on those words. In 1965, Malcolm X impugned Jefferson's hypocrisy.

Who was it wrote that—'all men created equal'? It was Jefferson. Jefferson had more slaves than anybody else. . . . When I see some poor old brainwashed Negroes—you mention Thomas Jefferson and George Washington and Patrick Henry, they just swoon, you know, with patriotism. But they don't realize that in the sight of George Washington, you were a sack of molasses, a sack of potatoes. You—yes—were a sack of potatoes, a barrel of molasses, you amounted to nothing in the sight of Washington, or in the sight of Jefferson, or Hamilton, and some of those other so-called founding fathers. You were their property. And if it was left up to them, you'd still be their property today.⁸ Where moderate civil

⁶Trevor Colbourn, ed., *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays by Douglass Adair* (New York: Norton, 1974), 161, 167, 169.

⁷Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), 186-87.

⁸Malcolm X, *Malcolm X On Afro-American History*, 3d ed. (New York: Pathfinder, 1990), 39-40.

rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. considered Jefferson a white man with good intentions trapped in a moral dilemma, Malcolm X saw only a deceitful slaveholder.

In time other black social critics joined Malcolm in his condemnation of white liberals who looked up to Jefferson. Ishmael Reed, a poet and activist, maligned the earnestness of Jefferson and his white liberal followers in a *New York Times* op-ed piece which he called "Gliberals." Reed wrote that contemporary white liberals had learned the "writing techniques introduced by early political writers like Thomas Jefferson, the founding Gliberal, a slaveowner who insisted that the Bill of Rights be added to the Constitution."⁹ As the slow pace of reform presented by the white liberal leadership was attacked, their spiritual leader suffered accordingly.

In his 1972 article "Mr. Jefferson and the Living Generation," Malone defended Jefferson against these charges of hypocrisy. "Contradictions there were, as indeed there are in all of us, but I am most impressed with his equilibrium—or, to use a musical rather than a physical term, with his polyphony." Malone wrote that Jefferson knew that the time for most of the reforms he desired still lay in the future. "To the fiery revolutionaries of our own time he probably seems a tame and timid creature. But no contemporary of his perceived more clearly the inevitability of change and the necessity that institutions keep pace with it."¹⁰ Sadly, Malone himself failed to keep pace with the changes of his own time. What Malone called a fair illustration of Jefferson seemed increasingly biased to his critics.

Race historian Winthrop Jordan's 1968 book *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* is a decisive reevaluation of race relations in early America featuring a lengthy section on Jefferson. He analyzed the evidence of the Sally Hemings affair—noting that "despite the utter disreputability of the source, the charge has been dragged after Jefferson like a dead cat through the pages of formal and informal history"—but ultimately concluded that whether or not the charge was true did not matter. Jordan also argued that miscegenation, black sexuality, and psychological repression were recurring themes in Jefferson's life and thought. Moreover, he made a serious charge against Jefferson: the third president's comments on black inferiority "constituted, for all its qualifications, the most intense, extensive, and extreme formulation of anti-Negro 'thought' offered by any American in the thirty years after the Revolution."¹¹ In twenty-four short years, Myrdal's hypothesis had been turned on its head.

Fawn Brodie approached Jefferson's personal life differently from Jordan or any other previous writer. Brodie, a UCLA lecturer, had already made waves in using psychological models in history, as she was excommunicated from the Mormon church for her 1943

⁹Ishmael Reed, "Gliberals", *New York Times*, 31 March 1973, p. 35.

¹⁰Dumas Malone, "Mr. Jefferson and the Living Generation," *The American Scholar* 41 (1972): 587-98.

¹¹Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1968), 465, 481.

biography of Joseph Smith. In the late 1960s, she began studying Jefferson, who was "under bombardment" from writers like Jordan. Brodie felt Jordan had distorted the racism of Jefferson; her Jefferson was more vacillating on racial differences, and only offered his comments on black inferiority as a suspicion only. Still, that was enough to destroy the Jefferson image to some, and she feared that the Sally Hemings story aggravated that. She argued that the claims of the Hemings story should not be a threat to his heroic stature. "It could be that Jefferson's slave family, if the evidence should point to its authenticity, will turn out under scrutiny to represent not a tragic flaw in Jefferson but evidence of psychic health. And the flaw could turn out to be what some of the compassionate abolitionists thought long ago, not a flaw in the hero but a flaw in society." By arguing this case in a lecture at the University of Virginia and an article in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Brodie was entering her opponents domain, hoping to defeat their arguments before they were even presented.¹²

While she praised the work of Malone and Peterson, she said that she was in search of something that they had neglected their otherwise complete biographies. In a review of Peterson's biography, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation*, Brodie noted the lack of "any kind of probing into Jefferson's inner life for sources of his ambivalence toward blacks, which might explain his increasing apathy toward slavery."¹³ Her own developing hypothesis was that perhaps understanding Sally Hemings could lend insight into Jefferson's view of slavery. In April 1971, Brodie presented the paper "The Great Jefferson Taboo" at the Organization of American Historians, where Peterson and Jordan served as critics. According to *The Journal of American History*, Peterson "was especially critical of the psychological evidence presented by Brodie"; Jordan, by contrast, "stated that he had already been 60 percent on what might be called the Brodie side of the argument and described himself as having upped the percentage to eighty pro after reading her paper. He was impressed with the psychological evidence."¹⁴

Brodie, becoming ever more critical of what she called "the Jefferson Establishment," wrote an article entitled "Jefferson Biographers and the Psychology of Canonization," where she insinuated that Malone and Peterson had unknowingly yielded to the need to deify. "Both biographers teach at the University of Virginia, live virtually in the shadow of Monticello, and walk each day in the beguiling quadrangle Jefferson designed 150 years ago. Jefferson is so much a 'presence in Charlottesville, and so omnipresent a local deity, that one

¹²Fawn M. Brodie, "The Political Hero in America," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 46 (1970): 57-60.

¹³*The Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1970, quoted in Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in American Memory, 1943-1993," *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 427. Newspaper page number not given by French and Ayers.

¹⁴Jack P. Greene, "The Sixty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians," *Journal of American History* 58 (1971): 703.

cannot help wondering if this in itself does not exercise a subtle direction upon anyone who chooses to write about him." Brodie criticized the Jefferson biographers for neglecting his private life. "There is important material in the documents which the biographers belittle; there is controversial material which they flatly disregard as libelous, though it cries out for careful analysis. And there is what one may call psychological evidence which they often ignore or simply do not see." Brodie concluded "that something is at work here that has little to do with scholarship," something that called for "speculation and exploration" and perhaps even Freudian analysis. Since male biographers utterly rejected the notion that Jefferson could have had a slave mistress, Brodie insinuated that perhaps what was needed was a person of the opposite gender conducting the research.¹⁵

Brodie was more intent on criticizing "the Jefferson Establishment" rather than Jefferson, whom she clearly admired. She suggested yet again that an intimate relationship between the two could be seen in a positive light. Perhaps Jefferson, the lonely widower, "had turned to the 'dashing Sally' for solace" and she, in turn, found him attractive. "None of this has to be described as 'ruthless exploitation of the master-slave relationship.' And there is no man to whose character it could be genuinely unbecoming. He had then been for years a widower." Furthermore, Jefferson was not necessarily condemning his own children to slavery, since they were, by his own definition, white.¹⁶

Brodie was not the only historian collectively criticizing Jefferson scholars in the early 1970s. Eric L. McKittrick wrote that while "the view from Jefferson's camp, in the work of Peterson and Malone, is full as any such view can be," their perspective as biographers did not allow for alternative views. "If your host literally cannot imagine Thomas Jefferson as other than all that is finest and best not only in a gentleman but in the entire American tradition itself, how can you?" Like Jordan, McKittrick concluded that it was irrelevant whether the affair actually happened. What mattered was the psychosocial context in which Jefferson struggled with slavery and miscegenation. "It is the psychosexual dilemma of an entire society, reflected in that undergone by the most eminent citizen of Virginia and one of the most enlightened men of his time."¹⁷

Fawn Brodie's 1974 biography *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* turned "the Jefferson Establishment" on its head. Brodie combined documentary sources with Freudian psychoanalysis to determine that Jefferson had a loving, long-term relationship with Sally Hemings, and fathered many of her children.¹⁸ Malone and other Jefferson scholars were

¹⁵Fawn M. Brodie, "Jefferson Biographers and the Psychology of Canonization," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971): 161.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁷Eric L. McKittrick, "The View from Jefferson's Camp," *The New York Review of Books* 15 (17 December 1970): 35-38.

¹⁸Fawn M. Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York: Norton, 1974).

furious with the positive reviews that it received in the popular press. They considered its evidence unpersuasive, its approach doubtful, and its argument improbable. Proponents of Malone portrayed Brodie as a woman captivated with sex, a borderline historian who had made a "scholarly specialty of oddballs."¹⁹ Meanwhile Brodie's champions described Malone as a hagiographer, a conventional guardian of the national self-image.

Malone rarely mentioned Brodie or her book by name, preferring to stay above the fray, but he was persuaded by a friend, Virginius Dabney, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, to issue a three-page statement which called the Brodie thesis "highly objectionable." Malone wrote that Brodie, "in her obsession with sex, has drawn a distorted picture. In her zeal to demonstrate that Jefferson's sexual activity continued after his wife's death—until almost the end of his long life—this determined woman runs far beyond the evidence and carries psychological speculation to the point of absurdity." Malone rejected the assertion that Brodie had humanized Jefferson, saying her book "can be regarded as an attempt to drag an extraordinary man down to the common level—to show that he was no better than anyone else. That would be a perversion of the doctrine of equality." Malone closed with a metaphor. "Fawn Brodie . . . cannot rob Washington and Jefferson of their laurels, but [she] can scribble graffiti on their statues. It is unfortunate that dirty words are so hard to erase, and it is shocking that the scribblers should be so richly rewarded."²⁰

Both Brodie and Malone were subject to criticism from their peers. The boldest analysis came from Garry Wills, a Jefferson scholar better known for his work on Jefferson the political thinker in *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*. Wills suggested that Brodie—and, by extension, Malone—had misunderstood the true nature of the Jefferson-Hemings liaison. Wills depicted a sexual relationship based on convenience rather than love. He likened Hemings to a prostitute who was rewarded by Jefferson for her deed. "She was apparently pleasing, and obviously discreet. There was less risk in continuing to enjoy her services than in experimenting around with others. She was like a healthy and obliging prostitute, who could be suitably rewarded but would make no importunate demands. Her lot was improved, not harmed, by the liaison." To Wills, the endeavor to reconstruct an affectionate relationship between Jefferson and Hemings required "heroic feats of misunderstanding and a constant labor at ignorance. This seems too high a price to pay when the same appetites can be more readily gratified by those Hollywood fan magazines, with their wealth of unfounded conjecture on the sex lives of others, from which Ms. Brodie has borrowed her methods." Wills differentiated between what he determined to be well-founded supposition and Brodie's uninformed guess.²¹

John Chester Miller's 1977 study *The Wolf By the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* is a

¹⁹Edwin M. Yoder Jr., "An Unshaken Hero," *National Review* 26 (10 May 1974): 542.

²⁰Dumas Malone to Virginius Dabney, 18 November 1974, Malone Papers, privately held. Quoted in French and Ayers, "Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson", 430-31.

²¹Garry Wills, "Uncle Thomas's Cabin," *The New York Review of Books* 21 (18 April 1974): 26-28.

wide-ranging, informative analysis of Jefferson's views on race and slavery and the actions to which they gave rise. His analysis of the Sally Hemings debate revealed just how much was at stake. If the story were true, Miller wrote:

Jefferson deserves to be regarded as one of the most profligate liars and consummate hypocrites ever to occupy the presidency [*sic*]. To give credence to the Sally Hemings story is, in effect, to question the authenticity of Jefferson's faith in freedom, the rights of man, and the innate controlling faculty to reason and the sense of right and wrong. It is to infer that there were no principles to which he was inviolably committed, that what he acclaimed as morality was no more than a rhetorical facade for self-indulgence, and that he was always prepared to make exceptions in his own case when it suited his purpose. To Miller, not even an earnest and genuine love for Sally Hemings could "sanctify such an egregious violation of his own principles and preachments."²²

One important book went even farther than Miller. Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery—American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* insinuated that the whole issue had been framed incorrectly. The supposed incompatibility and discord between white democracy and black slavery was not inconsistent at all. In a complicated and shrewd argument, Morgan asserted that the planter statesman of eighteenth-century Virginia were able to envision broad-based white political rights precisely because slavery had solved the problem of a dangerous working class. With slavery holding almost all of the working poor in bondage and with race safely dividing poor white from poor black, men such as Jefferson could adopt the most democratic ideals. Morgan's Jefferson was not anguished or paradoxical, but cruelly constant. His was the most disturbing vision of all.²³

In 1981, Virginius Dabney responded to the allegations initially raised by Brodie in the publication of *The Jefferson Scandals: A Rebuttal*. He took exception to Brodie's assertion that Malone and Peterson were part of a Jefferson Establishment, centered in Charlottesville and devoted to the "canonization" of Jefferson. Dabney emphasized the different backgrounds of the two professors, who were born, raised, and educated outside of Virginia. He wrote that they were recruited to the University of Virginia by the presence of Jefferson materials at the University and Monticello, not by their devotion to Virginia or Jefferson. The two had also written "scathingly" of Jefferson's conduct during the Burr trial and of his role in the Embargo Acts. Malone and Peterson may have agreed in their rejection of the Hemings hypothesis, but that hardly made them part of a "Jefferson Establishment."²⁴ While Dabney provides the most extensive reply to Brodie's claims, it undercuts its own case by its extreme defensiveness, exaggerated tone, and by treating a fiction such as Barbara Chase-Riboud's

²²John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 176.

²³Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery--American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).

²⁴Virginius Dabney, *The Jefferson Scandals: A Rebuttal* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981), 113-19.

novel *Sally Hemings* as a serious threat to Jefferson's historical reputation.

In the late 1980s and the 1990s, several Jefferson biographers rejected the charge of miscegenation with no indication of having tried to explore the facts themselves. Relying upon the consensus of the earlier generation took the place of primary research on this issue, and none of these new works made any use of the knowledge that had been gained about the Hemings family since the era of Malone and Peterson. Some of these otherwise significant and well-written biographies of Jefferson include Noble Cunningham's *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, who wrote that "not only is there no valid historical evidence to support this, but the weight of evidence against it is also preponderant"; Silvio Bedini's *Thomas Jefferson: Statesman of Science*, which devotes a measly sentence to the allegations; and Willard Sterne Randall's *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*, which says that "the whole chain of suppositions is preposterous."²⁵

For whatever reason, the American public seemed willing and almost anxious to believe that such a relationship existed. In their essay "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson," historians Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, Jr., examined how the representation of Jefferson has taken on a life of its own with the general public, despite the wishes of the Jefferson scholars.²⁶ The Hemings story has played a vital role in that process. The result is an increasing willingness among historians and researchers to take a more balanced approach to life at Monticello, and inquiring into slave life at the mansion.

The most severe criticism of both sides of the issue came in the 1997 book by NYU law professor Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*. In a very lawyerly tone, she convincingly argues that the evidence for the liaison has been denied a fair hearing. A chief argument of those who disbelieved the allegations was that one of Jefferson's nephews, either Peter or Samuel Carr, was the actual father of the Hemings children. This claim can be traced as far back as Adair. Gordon-Reed responds that those advocating this theory are asking the rest of us to believe that:

The Carr brothers, who lived close to Monticello, could only conceive children during the few months of each year when Thomas Jefferson was at Monticello. The Carr children produced under these circumstances all looked like Thomas Jefferson, and they were given the names of people who were connected to Thomas Jefferson, two of them his closest friends. The Carr sons were trained in their youth to play the instrument that Thomas Jefferson was noted for playing. Then one of the Carr sons grew up to engage in ascending balloons, an activity that fascinated Thomas Jefferson, that he bought books about, and that

²⁵Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1987), 115. Silvio A. Bedini, *Thomas Jefferson: Statesman of Science* (New York: MacMillan, 1990), 394. Willard Sterne Randall, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 476..

²⁶French and Ayers, "Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson," 418-456.

he wrote and spoke of on numerous occasions.²⁷ Though she claims she is agnostic on the ultimate question of Jefferson's paternity, it is clear that she believes that the circumstantial evidence points toward that paternity.

Brodie does not emerge unscathed from Gordon-Reed's attack. "There are many legitimate reasons to criticize Fawn Brodie. She was less than careful in her reading of documents and sometimes ran ahead of her evidence without making it clear that she was speculating." Despite these faults, Brodie at least attempted to deal honestly with the facts. Critics of her "picked the weakest of her arguments to criticize . . . thus concealing the far stronger evidence that Brodie presented." Those historians criticizing Brodie emerge with the strongest criticism from Gordon-Reed. "If any of the historians whom I have discussed had approached this issue with a commitment to finding the truth, instead of seeing their role as protecting their image of Thomas Jefferson, they most likely would have seen, and been willing to acknowledge, that there is more to the story than they have let on." They need not go as far as Brodie, but Malone, Adair, Peterson, and Dabney should have been willing to see that there was more to the accusation than they were willing to admit.²⁸

A more balanced treatment of "the Sally question" appeared in Joseph J. Ellis's 1997 National Book Award Winner, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*. Ellis, a professor at Mount Holyoke College who has previously studied John Adams, remains nominally an agnostic on the question, but he does seem to lean toward the opinion that Jefferson did not father the Hemings children, citing two reasons. First, he notes that Sally's last two sons were born after the 1802 scandal where the allegations were first aired by a disgruntled journalist, James Callender. Second, neither of Jefferson's chief enemies, Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, found it possible to believe that the accusations were true. Ellis notes that the relationship, "if it did exist, defied the dominant patterns of his personality." To Ellis, the ultimate truth on the question was something that we could never know.

Barring an exhumation of Jefferson's remains and a DNA comparison with Heming's descendants, a procedure that might well be scientifically unfeasible, the available evidence on each side of the controversy is just sufficient to sustain the debate but wholly insufficient to resolve it one way or the other. Anyone who claims to have a clear answer to this most titillating question about the historical Jefferson is engaging in massive self-deception or outright lying. This is one mystery destined to remain unsolved.²⁹

In 1998 this unsolvable mystery was solved, thanks to the very DNA evidence. Ellis thought might be unfeasible. The British journal *Nature* reported that comparing the Y

²⁷Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1997), 221-22.

²⁸Ibid., 225.

²⁹Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Knopf, 1997; Vintage, 1998), 366-67, 25.

chromosome—the chromosome that determines gender and is passed directly from father to son—from a male descendant of Sally Hemings and from another male who can be traced to Jefferson's paternal uncle resulted in a match. The odds of such a match occurring by chance are well under one percent. Together with the circumstantial evidence, it definitely proves that Jefferson fathered at least one child with Sally Hemings. With regard to the other children, the question remains open, but the burden of proof has clearly shifted.³⁰

Another more important question that remains open is what all this means for Jefferson's legacy. Ellis has written that "the net effect is to reinforce the critical picture of Jefferson as an inherently elusive and deeply duplicitous character."³¹ This opinion seems to be the dominant scholarly perception at the moment, tracing its origins clear back to Peterson. Jefferson is an extremely enigmatic figure, but will likely remain a sympathetic one. Future studies on Jefferson will likely focus on trying to develop a truer portrait of the inner Jefferson, which certainly will be a daunting task. The hypothesis of Fawn Brodie will likely be reevaluated, though some of her most far-fetched claims will still be rejected.

However historians of the future treat him, Jefferson's legacy is secure. Jeffersonian ideals have often become American ideals, and no stories about miscegenation, however truthful, can undermine that. One could hope that with "the Sally question" answered, future studies of Jefferson can refocus on his ideas that are his most important legacy. However, our modern obsession with sex likely precludes that. Whatever happens, there is no reason to believe that studies of Jefferson in the next fifty years will be any less dynamic than in the last half century.

³⁰Eric S. Lander and Joseph J. Ellis, "Founding Father", *Nature* 396 (5 November 1998): 13-14. Jefferson's paternal uncle was used because there were no known living legitimate paternal male descendants of Jefferson or of his younger brother. Jefferson had no surviving male children with his wife.

³¹Joseph J. Ellis, "When a Saint Becomes a Sinner", *U.S. News & World Report* 125 (9 November 1998): 67.