



American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson

By Joseph J. Ellis

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National Bestseller

For a man who insisted that life on the public stage was not what he had in mind, Thomas Jefferson certainly spent a great deal of time in the spotlight--and not only during his active political career. After 1809, his longed-for retirement was compromised by a steady stream of guests and tourists who made of his estate at Monticello a virtual hotel, as well as by more than one thousand letters per year, most from strangers, which he insisted on answering personally. In his twilight years Jefferson was already taking on the luster of a national icon, which was polished off by his auspicious death (on July 4, 1826); and in the subsequent seventeen decades of his celebrity--now verging, thanks to virulent revisionists and television documentaries, on notoriety--has been inflated beyond recognition of the original person.

For the historian Joseph J. Ellis, the experience of writing about Jefferson was "as if a pathologist, just about to begin an autopsy, has discovered that the body on the operating table was still breathing." In **American Sphinx**, Ellis sifts the facts shrewdly from the legends and the rumors, treading a path between vilification and hero worship in order to formulate a plausible portrait of the man who still today "hover[s] over the political scene like one of those dirigibles cruising above a crowded football stadium, flashing words of inspiration to both teams." For, at the grass roots, Jefferson is no longer liberal or conservative, agrarian or industrialist, pro- or anti-slavery, privileged or populist. He is all things to all people. His own obliviousness to incompatible convictions within himself (which left him deaf to most forms of irony) has leaked out into the world at large--a world determined to idolize him despite his foibles.

From Ellis we learn that Jefferson sang incessantly under his breath; that he delivered only two public speeches in eight years as president, while spending ten hours a day at his writing desk; that sometimes his political sensibilities collided with his domestic agenda, as when he ordered an expensive piano from London during a boycott (and pledged to "keep it in storage"). We see him relishing such projects as the nailery at Monticello that allowed him to interact with his slaves more palatably, as pseudo-employer to pseudo-employees. We

grow convinced that he preferred to meet his lovers in the rarefied region of his mind rather than in the actual bedchamber. We watch him exhibiting both great depth and great shallowness, combining massive learning with extraordinary naïveté, piercing insights with self-deception on the grandest scale. We understand why we should neither beatify him nor consign him to the rubbish heap of history, though we are by no means required to stop loving him. He is Thomas Jefferson, after all--our very own sphinx.

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American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson By Joseph J. Ellis Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #55352 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Vintage
- Published on: 1998-04-07
- Released on: 1998-04-07
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients

- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x 1.00" w x 5.20" l, .75 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 440 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Well timed to coincide with Ken Burns's documentary (on which the author served as a consultant), this new biography doesn't aim to displace the many massive tomes about America's third president that already weigh down bookshelves. Instead, as suggested by the subtitle--"The Character of Thomas Jefferson"--Ellis searches for the "living, breathing person" underneath the icon and tries to elucidate his actual beliefs. Jefferson's most ardent admirers may find this perspective too critical, but Ellis's portrait of a complex, sometimes devious man who both sought and abhorred power has the ring of truth.

From Publishers Weekly

Penetrating Jefferson's placid, elegant facade, this extraordinary biography brings the sage of Monticello down to earth without either condemning or idolizing him. Jefferson saw the American Revolution as the opening shot in a global struggle destined to sweep over the world, and his political outlook, in Ellis's judgment, was more radical than liberal. A Francophile, an obsessive letter-writer, a tongue-tied public speaker, a sentimental soul who placed women on a pedestal and sobbed for weeks after his wife's death, Jefferson saw himself as a yeoman farmer but was actually a heavily indebted, slaveholding Virginia planter. His retreat from his early anti-slavery advocacy to a position of silence and procrastination reflected his conviction that whites and blacks were inherently different and could not live together in harmony, maintains Mount Holyoke historian Ellis, biographer of John Adams (*Passionate Sage*). Jefferson clung to idyllic visions, embracing, for example, the "Saxon myth," the utterly groundless theory that the earliest migrants from England came to America at their own expense, making a total break with the mother country. His romantic idealism, exemplified by his view of the American West as endlessly renewable, was consonant with future generations' political innocence, their youthful hopes and illusions, making our third president, in Ellis's shrewd psychological portrait, a progenitor of the American Dream. History Book Club selection.

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From School Library Journal

YA. In studying historical leaders, students rarely get a look at the individuals behind the myths that have grown up around them. Here, Ellis does an excellent job of showing that Jefferson was a human who made many decisions and some mistakes. On the one hand, he was a great historical figure who is due respect; on the other, he was a debt-ridden man with family problems. Ellis does not have an agenda to promote; he has a story to tell, and he tells it well. In a book that reads like fiction, he combines exciting plot turns with information. At the end, readers may not know for certain that Jefferson's life had a happy ending; but they will see him as flesh and blood instead of as a stiff statue or fixed painting in the Capitol rotunda. This absorbing study concludes with an appendix dealing with the Sally Hemmings scandal as well as extensive notes and an excellent index. ?Rebecca L. Woodcock, formerly of Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Scott Anderson:

Reading can be called mind hangout, why? Because when you find yourself reading a book mainly book entitled American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson your thoughts will drift away through every dimension, wandering in most aspect that maybe unfamiliar for but surely will become your mind friends. Imaging every word written in a publication then become one web form conclusion and explanation which maybe you never get previous to. The American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson giving you a different experience more than blown away the mind but also giving you useful information for your better life on this era. So now let us teach you the relaxing pattern the following is your body and mind will likely be pleased when you are finished studying it, like winning an activity. Do you want to try this extraordinary investing spare time activity?

Emily Sandlin:

American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson can be one of your nice books that are good idea. We recommend that straight away because this publication has good vocabulary that may increase your knowledge in terminology, easy to understand, bit entertaining but still delivering the information. The writer giving his/her effort to set every word into joy arrangement in writing American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson although doesn't forget the main stage, giving the reader the hottest as well as based confirm resource info that maybe you can be one of it. This great information could draw you into fresh stage of crucial pondering.

Vincent Mireles:

What is your hobby? Have you heard which question when you got college students? We believe that that concern was given by teacher on their students. Many kinds of hobby, Everyone has different hobby. And you know that little person just like reading or as looking at become their hobby. You have to know that reading is very important in addition to book as to be the point. Book is important thing to include you knowledge, except your own personal teacher or lecturer. You get good news or update with regards to something by book. A substantial number of sorts of books that can you decide to try be your object. One of them is this American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson.

John Hagen:

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