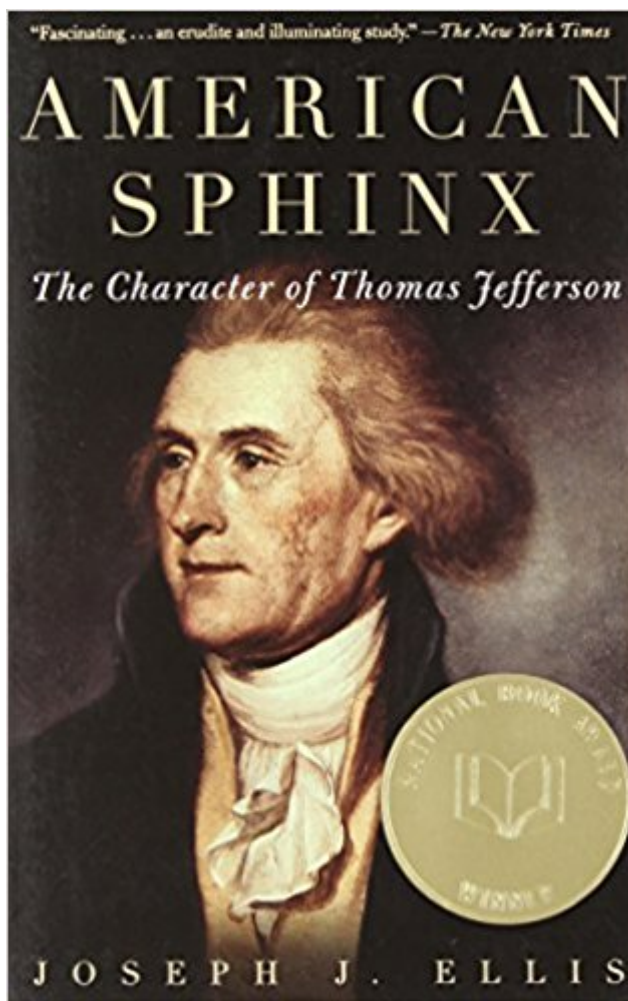


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American Sphinx: The Character Of Thomas Jefferson



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

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. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

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. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I thought the book was very good. It separates the myth from the man. The author does a good job of trying to explain the thought process of Jefferson as he dealt with issues on which he seemed to take positions on both sides such as slavery. We also know about his personal life and this man was truly a spent-thrift leaving nothing for his heirs and forcing the auction of Monticello after his death. Jefferson did not want to be remembered as president or primary author of the Declaration of Independence but the Founder of the University of Virginia. If you think politics are messy today, his battles with the Federalists were fierce and as loud as the ones we hear today on CNN or C-Span. The author also updated this edition of the book to present updated DNA evidence that verifies that Mr. Jefferson indeed fathered several and perhaps all of Sally Hemming's (his slave) children. Modern DNA testing verified this from the samples taken from Sally's descendents.

Definitive study of hypocrisy.

I wanted to understand the revolutionary period of our country so I set out to do this. I've read many, many books of this era which include several about Jefferson and this book brings us back to reality. Jefferson has been made into a god and when that happens we stop seeing the truth. Joe Ellis is a terrific historian and I recommend any of his books. I highly recommend this book

It had been years since I read anything about Jefferson. I think Ellis does a good job at presenting the complexities of Jefferson--a very talented and passionate man, but certainly not a saint. I like Ellis' writing style and found it easy and enjoyable to read.

Very well written with verity and poetic prose. A captivating, pleasurable, must read for anyone interested in the makings of USA.

Wonderful insights and analysis of one of the most enduring figures in American history. The book

gets slow and tedious at times, but it's last third are terrific. How is it that Jefferson could be a walking contradiction yet still remain relevant? The book does an outstanding job of analyzing character, scouring the historical record, mixing in speculation, and making it all tie to the present day. I can't imagine a better book about Jefferson.

Joseph Ellis continues to intrigue me with his approach and style. I only recently discovered his books, and this is the third that I've read over the past few months. I look forward to "His Excellency."

I highly recommend this book. It is difficult to find an American political group (Conservative to Liberal) that does not feel TJ directly supports their political establishment. As someone who 'knew the Jefferson facts', I wanted something that took on more the views and sentiments of Jefferson. This did just that. If you are looking for a straight bio, you may look elsewhere. However, you are after a study of Jefferson's view and potentially reasoning for these views, this is the book for you.

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