



American Sphinx

By Joseph J. Ellis

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Following Thomas Jefferson from the drafting of the Declaration of Independence to his retirement in Monticello, Joseph J. Ellis unravels the contradictions of the Jeffersonian character. He gives us the slaveholding libertarian who was capable of decrying miscegenation while maintaining an intimate relationship with his slave, Sally Hemmings; the enemy of government power who exercised it audaciously as president; the visionary who remained curiously blind to the inconsistencies in his nature. *American Sphinx* is a marvel of scholarship, a delight to read, and an essential gloss on the Jeffersonian legacy.

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American Sphinx By Joseph J. Ellis Bibliography

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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. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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

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Elmo Bragg:

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