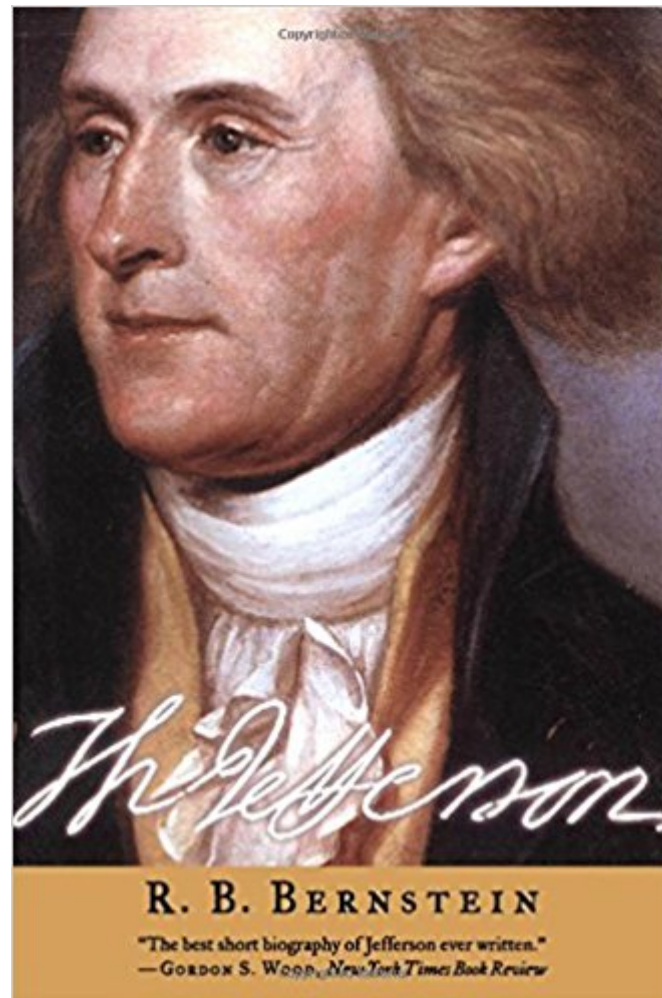




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Thomas Jefferson



Synopsis

Thomas Jefferson designed his own tombstone, describing himself simply as "Author of the Declaration of Independence and of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia." It is in this simple epitaph that R.B. Bernstein finds the key to this enigmatic Founder--not as a great political figure, but as leader of "a revolution of ideas that would make the world over again." In *Thomas Jefferson*, Bernstein offers the definitive short biography of this revered American--the first concise life in six decades. Bernstein deftly synthesizes the massive scholarship on his subject into a swift, insightful, evenhanded account. Here are all of Jefferson's triumphs, contradictions, and failings, from his luxurious (and debt-burdened) life as a Virginia gentleman to his passionate belief in democracy, from his tortured defense of slavery to his relationship with Sally Hemings. Jefferson was indeed multifaceted--an architect, inventor, writer, diplomat, propagandist, planter, party leader--and Bernstein explores all these roles even as he illuminates Jefferson's central place in the American enlightenment, that "revolution of ideas" that did so much to create the nation we know today. Together with the less well-remembered points in Jefferson's thinking--the nature of the Union, his vision of who was entitled to citizenship, his dread of debt (both personal and national)--they form the heart of this lively biography. In this marvel of compression and comprehension, we see Jefferson more clearly than in the massive studies of earlier generations. More important, we see, in Jefferson's visionary ideas, the birth of the nation's grand sense of purpose.

Book Information

Paperback: 253 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; Reprint edition (September 15, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195181301

ISBN-13: 978-0195181302

Product Dimensions: 7.9 x 0.6 x 5.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 138 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #50,230 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #72 in [Books > Biographies &](#)

[Memoirs > Historical > United States > American Revolution](#) #130 in [Books > History >](#)

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Customer Reviews

And still they come, these biographies of Thomas Jefferson-so many, in fact, that it's sometimes hard to tell them apart. But not this one. Veteran historian Bernstein (*Amending America*, etc.) pulls off a remarkable feat: he writes of Jefferson and his "ambiguous legacies" with utter serenity, detachment and balance. He takes no sides and offers no particular arguments about the man. Instead, in prose of the utmost directness and clarity, Bernstein simply lays out the great founder's life in all its complexities, achievements and, at the end, ruin-by which he means not only Jefferson's late-life financial plight but also his sad conviction that a new generation had become unfaithful to "his" Revolution. The acid test these days for partisan or skeptical biographers of Jefferson is how to present his relationship with his slave Sally Hemings. In a characteristic example of his evenhandedness, Bernstein treats the controversy in a concise summary, then tells us what is now known of the relationship and what cannot yet be determined. One comes to trust the author as a guide, not a polemicist. In fact, it's precisely because Bernstein reveals nothing new and argues not at all that anyone wanting to brush up on Jefferson's life or gain exposure to the latest findings about it will find this book of huge value. It will be most valuable to those seeking an introduction to Jefferson's life and achievements. There's little doubt that the book will become the standard brief one-volume biography of someone who was "the leading spokesman for the revolution of ideas that changed... the face of America and the world." Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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Grade 9 Up
An honest look at Jefferson's life, accomplishments, and inconsistencies. Bernstein does not gloss over his subject's flaws and the controversies that surrounded him. The contradictions between Jefferson's beliefs and his behavior, while exposing his human side, are not used to denigrate him or to diminish his accomplishments. Obvious controversies, such as his owning slaves in spite of his writings, his relationship with Sally Hemings, his conflicts with George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, and his volatile friendship with John Adams, are supplemented with lesser-known facts. His determination to lead the life of a landed gentleman despite his inability to afford it; the continuous construction at Monticello that made it much less pleasant than the museum it is today; his pride in founding the University of Virginia and his disappointment in the conduct of the student body; and, simply, the rough edges of his personality are all effectively delineated. The development of Jefferson's religious beliefs is particularly well described, but a misquoting of the Virginia Bill for Religious Freedom results in an incomprehensible sentence. Overall, the book reads well, although some of the background events would benefit from

more detail. Black-and-white photos and period prints complement the text. Attractive and appealing, this book is similar in reading level to Joyce Appleby's *Thomas Jefferson* (Times, 2003) and in content to Norman Risjord's *Thomas Jefferson* (Madison, 1994). --Jeffrey A. French, Euclid Public Library, OH Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

If you've put off reading a book about our "founding fathers" I would recommend R. B. Bernstein's, "Thomas Jefferson" as a great place to start. Bernstein's book provides a very good, though not detailed, examination of Jefferson's life, reflecting both the good and the bad. It is impossible for a citizen of the U.S. in 2013 to imagine the difficulty and uncertainty the "founding fathers" had in traversing the unknowns of establishing a new nation and a new government system while breaking their connections to England, their homeland. What could inspire and compel men to do such a thing? Bernstein permits us to take a brief look into the minds of several of these early leaders, Thomas Jefferson in particular, to gain a sense of their motivations. In "Thomas Jefferson" we follow Jefferson from his early privileged life in Virginia; his education and his venture into politics, starting at the Virginia Assembly and rising to be Vice President and then President of the United States. Along the way he made mistakes and experienced some of the frailties common to most men but his contributions to our republican form of government set him apart as one of our finest Presidents. Should a reader of this book desire to read further into this period of American political life, Bernstein provides a very good list of references in his Notes and Bibliographical references.

Not being a Thomas Jefferson (TJ) fan, I appreciated this book as a quick overview of his life, times, and most important decisions. It fairly identified TJ's shortcomings without diminishing his impact on American history or continued relevance today. I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who wants an introduction to TJ, though I only gave it four stars for the same reason I chose it: it's conciseness. The book's very brevity made it in some cases too concise. I feel like to even begin to have a working knowledge of TJ, I would need to read another book. What I have learned from this book is just enough to keep me from making major errors regarding his achievements and aims as a philosopher, scientist, partisan, and President.

This book is concise and easy to read, which is important to maintain the reader's interest. You'll learn many things about Jefferson that you didn't know, especially his nuanced feelings about slavery. What's most interesting is the often overlooked time Jefferson spent in Europe.

Understanding this period of Jefferson's life is crucial to understanding his sympathy for the French Revolution, which was one of a couple of major points of contention between Jefferson and Hamilton. (By the way, the Jeffersonians and Hamiltonians were the first major political divide in America.) Bernstein achieves what is very difficult: withhold judgment on Jefferson and let the facts speak for themselves. After reading several books about the Founders, I've found that Jefferson is an idealist to a fault and much too faithful in the goodness of men. Also, his determination not to choose sides between the French and British was one of a series of mistakes made by Presidents Adams through Madison that left America open to attack from the British in 1812. My only complaint of this book is that the chapter on Jefferson's second term in office is rather brief. Besides that, it is pleasantly informative and balanced.

Alright, I have to admit that I was not close to being a TJ fan prior to reading this book. Like most of us, he was certainly a walking contradiction in his own right, but unlike most of us, he has been revered times over, walking contradictions and all. Yet, also unlike most of us, he has been extolled as one of the "Greats" as a Founder of these United States. This is the first bio I have had the opportunity to read though, that has humanized Jefferson, and I have to admit, my stand has softened. Where before I did not clearly understand why he was such an advocate for the Bill of Rights, I understand better now that I see how his views were at first shaped by the relationship of England with pre-Revolution America. Then seeing how he was at ringside for the tyranny attempted by aristocracy in government while serving in France, it all comes clearer to me. Jefferson is extraordinary in his ordinary-ness. He is smart and insightful without trying to impress with his smarts and insightful-ness. He is a Statesman without trying to be overbearing in Statesmanship. He is again, someone who is humanized by Bernstein. Thomas Jefferson will never know it, of course, but thanks to Mr. Bernstein, you are someone I think I would like to meet.

No matter your opinion of Jefferson, well read or a novice reader of Jefferson, this is a book that everyone who reads it will come to understand he is the foremost founding father to contribute to the establishment his revolutionary vision of a thriving democracy. Although it struggled in its infancy and has been tested on many occasions, it the greatest country the world has ever known. It is Jefferson who best exemplified and put to paper his vision of what America could be to the world. He was a man with many contradictions, strengths and flaws, but his passion for the love of his country, and the democratic government principles he was committed to are unsurpassed by no other one person in the history of our country. A must read for all seeking to better understand why

American is indeed still a beacon of hope to a large portion of the people currently living on planet earth.

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