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Peter S. Onuf, *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson*. Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2007.

281 pages

Mind Out of Sight: Hide and Seek with Thomas Jefferson

In *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson*, Peter S. Onuf,ⁱ arguably today's preeminent student of Thomas Jefferson, has collected a dozen of his essays that can serve as a primer for aspiring Jefferson scholars. In these historiographic inquiries, he rejects the judgment of several estimable historians that Jefferson "was the most impenetrable of men . . ."ⁱⁱ Not bashful, Onuf flatly asserts that "this impenetrability is as much a function of their unwillingness to probe as of their subject's unwillingness to be probed."ⁱⁱⁱ Onuf's overarching thesis is: rather than an unscalable wall standing between two Jeffersons—the public and the private—there is a permeable membrane through which Jefferson's multiple personas converse and argue with and persuade each other. In the ongoing quest to define the "real" Thomas Jeffersons, Peter S. Onuf's guidebook is indispensable.

While tackling his formidable task, Onuf reminds the reader that "[W]e live in a radically different world than Jefferson's, yet . . . it must remain inextricably linked to ours The historian's role is to protect us against facile appropriations of the past to serve present purposes [and] . . . to keep past and present apart, not to destroy, but rather to . . . challenge the assumption that the founders' 'original intentions' . . . should be authoritative guides to future action." (Onuf 2-3). A citizen must properly deconstruct today's intellectually lazy debate to pursue this stubborn, elusive quarry. "Jefferson . . . will live as long as there is an American nation and Americans seek to know who they are as a people and what their role is in world history." (Onuf 12) I intend to affirm Onuf's understanding of this radical revolutionary who,

“[n]otwithstanding the assaults of generations of iconoclastic critics, . . . remains an American icon.” (Onuf 9)

The most salient subjects in this neatly structured book are the Declaration, race, slavery, religious freedom and education. My trailhead begins at the end—Jefferson’s tombstone. He designed an unadorned obelisk whose clean lines project his ideal of the free, earthbound yeoman farmer. The inscription is equally “unpretentious.”

Here was buried

Thomas Jefferson

Author of the Declaration of American Independence

of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom

& Father of the University of Virginia

The Declaration was the Big Bang, “the opening salvo of a great struggle to liberate humanity from the tyrannies of the past.” (Onuf 9-10) Jefferson invented America. On the bedrock of Enlightenment theorists (particularly the moral/political philosopher John Locke^{iv}), with the counsel and wrangling of his peers, he proclaimed the vision of a self-governing free people with inviolate rights granted not by a fickle monarch, but inherent in “The Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” The spiritual copyright on this eloquent, pragmatic, succinct document will never expire.

The Declaration was the Next Big Thing in 1776 and has been the biggest of all The Next Big Things since. Despite its impurities, the Declaration of Independence, with its oscillating evolution, transcends its time and place. It is free for people who aspire to its ideals and are prepared to defend it.

This is the cozy, rosy Ken Burns version. Onuf opines: “[Burns] presents . . . familiar images of slavery and Native Americans, authentic-sounding music, [and] conventional cinematography

... neutralizing what is dangerous and disturbing in a reassuring visual package ... as if his aesthetic can solve the problem of race in this country.” ... (Onuf 53)

The cleareyed Mr. Onuf tells a better-informed story. One counterweight he cites is the overwrought condemnation of Conor Cruise O’Brien, who, in his 1996 book, *The Long Affair*, “explicitly challenges Jefferson’s ‘place’ in the nation’s ‘symbolical architecture,’ portraying his subject as a philosophical terrorist and slaveholding racist.”^v (Onuf 20) O’Brien was poised to evict Jefferson from the Founders’ pantheon. Though most reputable historians hold the absolutist O’Brien at arm’s length, Onuf uses him to illustrate how seductive it is to think of history as an unbroken straight line—centuries piled on centuries like neat stacks of Pringles. The reductionist notion that there is a good Jefferson and an evil Jefferson is comfort food for thought. For Onuf, history is anything but a straight line. Rather, it is an unwieldy gyre, simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal.

Annette Gordon-Reed and Peter Onuf, who have collaborated for thirty years, are two scholars who can juggle centripetal and centrifugal. Together, they wrote “*Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*” *Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination*” in 2017. It is clear from their joint appearances^{vi} that just reading the excerpts from *Notes on the State of Virginia* about race and slavery is little more than sticking a toe in the water.

Jefferson historians may never fully contextualize the man’s heart, mind, and character to satisfactorily answer the persistent questions about owning people as he would livestock. The cognitive dissonance of this excerpt from *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* is puzzling and disturbing:

I suspect that Jefferson was not gripped by guilt over slavery ... [He was not] constantly, inescapably tormented by his ... failure to [act] ... against this barbarous institution. The “real” Jefferson was an enlightened slaveholder, evidently satisfied with the self he so arduously fashioned, not a guilt-ridden schizophrenic ... Our moral sense leads us to ... hope [for] ... at least some inspiring words ... that we can live by. But Jefferson’s moral sense worked in the opposite way, ... not to ... reconcile or

suppress . . . what we . . . see as fundamental, irreconcilable personal conflicts but rather to underwrite an abiding self-assurance that verged on self-righteousness.” (Onuf 7)

In his review of *Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*, Gordon S. Wood, another distinguished historian of this period, is also puzzled: “That Jefferson, who wrote harshly against racial mixing and voiced strongly his suspicions of black inferiority, should have fathered children with a black slave would have been inconceivable to most white Americans through the past two centuries.”^{vii} Wood further notes that Sally Hemings remained “his chambermaid and closet concubine until his death. Neither he nor his white family ever acknowledged that she was his concubine.”

Given her time and place as an African American lawyer and historian, Annette Gordon-Reed is in the catbird seat on the Thomas Jefferson historiography continuum. Her dogged investigations have produced three books about Jefferson and the Hemingses. Onuf observes that “[She] . . . is most interested in . . . [how] historians handle evidence . . . [Annette insists] that we consider evidence from black sources as seriously as from whites, . . . [to remind] us forcefully that Jefferson lived in a thickly populated plantation world inhabited by whites and blacks both” [Onuf 58]. Her relaxed manner and easy humor make her complex, thorny subject accessible. She’s a terrific teacher.

We know Jefferson not only had some superb teachers, but he was one of America’s most prodigious learners. He was endlessly curious, a superb writer (and reader) an avid tinkerer, thinkerer, inventor, philosopher, futurist, oenophile, musician, diplomat, gardener, romantic, architect, gossip, Secretary of State, Vice President, and President. (Oddly, though he was part of the cohort of the Virginia planter aristocracy, he was a failed farmer and an inattentive businessman).^{viii} Gordon-Reed says separate biographies could be written about each of these Jeffersons.

He was the justly proud Father of the University of Virginia, one of the nation's first public universities. He believed the school would produce generations of the leaders needed to keep this fledgling country economically and politically viable. He was keenly prescient in pushing for a comprehensive system of primary and secondary public education that would enable "every citizen" to "understand his duties" and "know his rights." (Onuf 173) Without a farm team, the institution would be out on a limb. Regrettably, public education was not established until after his death.

The University of Virginia was one fruit of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom of 1786. The prestigious universities founded before and just after the Revolution were church-affiliated. Massachusetts was the last state to disestablish itself from the church in 1833.

What would Jefferson make of public education and the separation of church and state today? That the inverted conflation of public education and religious liberty must be fused to rescue America would turn him upside down in the grave. Purging the schools of every "ism" in the dictionary and rejecting critical thinking would surely strike him as a threat to his republican utopia. "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." (This chestnut has been misattributed to Jefferson so often that Monticello.org has a link to point out that it is a spurious quote.)

One of the gentry of the new republic, Jefferson swam in the milieu of honor culture. A man's honor was his lifeblood; his reputation was the coin of the realm. A man literally would not be caught dead without it. His epitaph is a spare twenty-seven words. He deliberately excluded many of his considerable achievements. It efficiently reveals the mind of Thomas Jefferson. These were his life's work. This is his legacy.

So, how's his reputation holding up? Pretty well. He'll not be moved from the front row of the pantheon this year. Anyone contemplating making off with the statue should wait til next season.

i Onuf is the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Professor, Emeritus.

ii Peterson, Merrill D. *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: a Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press 1970, p. 29. Peterson. Here, Peterson is quoting Albert Jay Nock, an opinionator of the early twentieth century. Note: Onuf was Peterson. Successor.

iii Onuf, Peter S. *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson*. Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2007, p. 3

[Note: The second essay is coauthored by Jan Ellen Lewis. The final piece is cowritten by Ari Hilo.]

iv See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/#toc> for an overview of Locke's philosophy

v O'Brien Conor Cruise. *The Long Affair Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution 1785-1800*. University of Chicago Press 1996.

vi See some of their conversations at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGTohYcxgVg>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Q-GQxj-YM8> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2QKEWKFGRo>

vii Wood, Gordon S. *Revealing the Total Jefferson*. New York: The New York Review of Books, June 23, 2016 <https://www-nybooks-com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/articles/2016/06/23/revealing-total-thomas-jefferson/>

viii As a prodigious debtor, he sold his six thousand books to the government. This was the cornerstone of the Library of Congress.