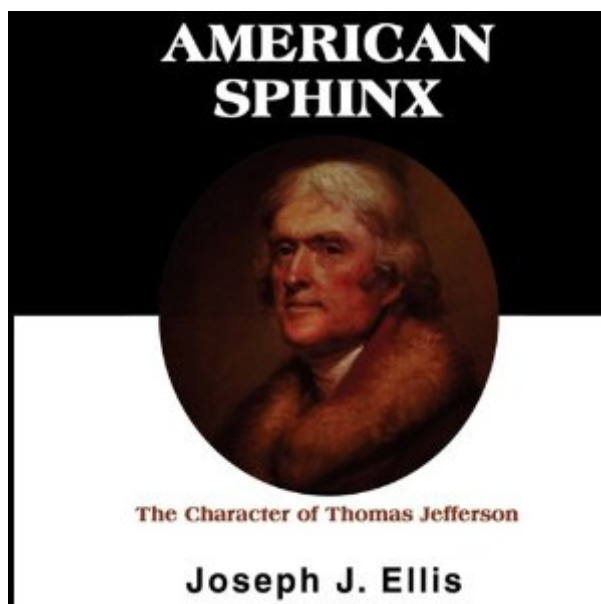


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American Sphinx: The Character Of Thomas Jefferson



Synopsis

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, 1896); 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 naivete, 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. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"American Sphinx" by Joseph Ellis is an excellent book about Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence and a man of astonishing achievements. However, it is not a standard biography of Jefferson and it is not a good introduction to Jefferson, because it does not tell some of the most important history involving Jefferson. Instead, "American Sphinx" is a well-written critique of Jefferson. I strongly suggest R. B. Bernstein's concise, yet excellent, biography Thomas Jefferson for a great introduction to Thomas Jefferson. That unbiased book is the best brief biography of Jefferson. Then read American Sphinx as a second book. Also consider Dumas Malone's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Thomas Jefferson (six volumes). So many important things about Jefferson are missing from "American Sphinx." Ellis previously wrote a fine biography of John Adams to revive the reputation of Adams (deservedly so), overshadowed by Jefferson. Adams and Jefferson bitterly disagreed on some issues, and Ellis admittedly agrees more with Adams. Therefore, it is no surprise that readers come away with a less than impressive opinion of Jefferson after reading "American Sphinx". Ellis is brilliant and accurate, but some favorable aspects of Jefferson are missing. Ellis states in his biography of Jefferson, "My approach is selective... to focus on the values and convictions that reveal themselves in these specific historical contexts..."

Joseph Ellis projects an interesting analysis of the illusive Thomas Jefferson in "American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson." Brilliant but contradictory, most historians glorified the author of the Declaration of Independence for nearly 200 years. Recently, with the emergence of John

Adams as an equally accepted visionary Founder, the strange and conflicting sides of Jefferson have been given equal attention to those that reflect the genius from Monticello, Virginia. More than any other American historical figure, Jefferson was incredibly aware of his future role in history, and thereby his legacy. Much of the documented historical record, both that written by him and that written to him, reflect the facts that he chose what future generations would see. Ellis breaks down five periods of Jefferson's life: (1) the period around the writing of the Declaration, (2) the years in Paris as American envoy, (3) the years in semi-seclusion during the second Washington administration, (4) his first Presidential term, (5) and his years in retirement the decade prior to his death. The main premises of Ellis' work are that Jefferson was elusive in description, contradictory in philosophy, and often devious in action. After reading *Founding Brothers* by Joseph Ellis (see my review dated 7/23/01) I had enormous expectations for his previously penned biography of Thomas Jefferson. It is a good scholarly account, but falls short of the enormously readable "Founding Brothers" work that won the Pulitzer Prize. Ellis teases you by revealing the many two-faced aspects of Jefferson's character, but shies away from drawing the conclusions that Jefferson's personality was bizarre.

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