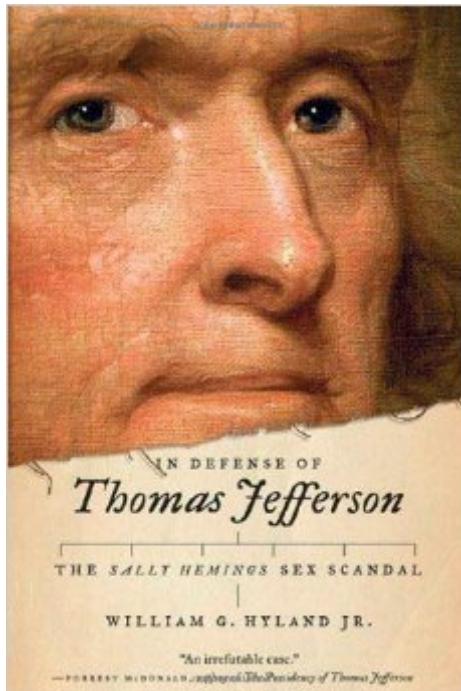


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In Defense Of Thomas Jefferson: The Sally Hemings Sex Scandal



Synopsis

The belief that Thomas Jefferson had an affair and fathered a child (or children) with slave Sally Hemings---and that such an allegation was proven by DNA testing---has become so pervasive in American popular culture that it is not only widely accepted but taught to students as historical fact. But as William G. Hyland Jr. demonstrates, this "fact" is nothing more than the accumulation of salacious rumors and irresponsible scholarship over the years, much of it inspired by political grudges, academic opportunism, and the trend of historical revisionism that seeks to drag the reputation of the Founding Fathers through the mud. In this startling and revelatory argument, Hyland shows not only that the evidence against Jefferson is lacking, but that in fact he is entirely innocent of the charge of having sexual relations with Hemings. Historians have the wrong Jefferson. Hyland, an experienced trial lawyer, presents the most reliable historical evidence while dissecting the unreliable, and in doing so he cuts through centuries of unsubstantiated charges. The author reminds us that the DNA tests identified Eston Hemings, Sally's youngest child, as being merely the descendant of a "Jefferson male." Randolph Jefferson, the president's wayward, younger brother with a reputation for socializing among the Monticello slaves, emerges as the most likely of several possible candidates. Meanwhile, the author traces the evolution of this rumor about Thomas Jefferson back to the allegation made by one James Callendar, a "drunken ruffian" who carried a grudge after unsuccessfully lobbying the president for a postmaster appointment---and who then openly bragged of ruining Jefferson's reputation. Hyland also delves into Hemings family oral histories that go against the popular rumor, as well as the ways in which the Jefferson rumors were advanced by less-than-historical dramas and by flawed scholarly research often shaped by political agendas. Reflecting both a layperson's curiosity and a lawyer's precision, Hyland definitively puts to rest the allegation of the thirty-eight-year liaison between Jefferson and Hemings. In doing so, he reclaims the nation's third president from the arena of Hollywood-style myth and melodrama and gives his readers a unique opportunity to serve as jurors on this enduringly fascinating episode in American history.

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Customer Reviews

My interest in Jefferson began not in history class, but with the recent miniseries by HBO entitled "John Adams." The mild-mannered, opinionated but deeply romantic man from Monticello fascinated me so much I started reading everything I could get my hands on about him. The more I learned about his personal likes and dislikes, his habits, his virtues and failings, and relationship with his wife and daughters, the more implausible it seemed that he would conduct a sexual affair with a much younger servant. But like most "doubters," I remained quiet, convinced the incriminating evidence against him would condemn most of my arguments. I find it ironic, therefore, that this book would not only mention "John Adams" as evidence of how the Hemings scandal has been absorbed by popular culture (indeed, one of the closing scenes finds Jefferson on his deathbed, with a weeping Sally at his side) but also go about debunking many myths represented in most history books as "fact." Everyone knows Sally Hemings was Martha Jefferson's half sister, right? To my astonishment, there is no actual evidence! It was inferred by later biographers hoping to give a reason for his potential interest, along with the belief that Sally resembled Martha. Discovering that led me to wonder what else history books were throwing at us without conclusive evidence. Having finished reading this volume, the answer is "a lot." All the points it raises are valid. Many of them have been argued against before, but certain evidence has been all but ignored that deserves to be brought to the forefront (namely, Jefferson's horrendous health, including frequent, crippling migraines, which anyone would admit would hamper sexual shenanigans).

Hyland makes a decent case that the lines of argument writers like Annette Gordon-Reed and Fawn Brodie use to "prove" Jefferson had a relationship with Sally Hemings are somewhat flawed. Some writers indeed come to Jefferson with preconceived hatchets to bury, and they proceed to bury them. Hyland marshals what evidence there is to attack the evidence that ties Jefferson to Hemings, which is: (1) Jefferson was around when Hemings got pregnant, (2) people accused them of having

a relationship, (3) DNA proves one of Hemings's children has male Jefferson DNA. (4) Thus, Jefferson MUST have fathered ALL of Hemings's children. But this, logically, is an argument that does not necessarily follow. It may, but it may not. (1) Other Jeffersons were around when Hemings got pregnant, and maybe Hemings wasn't always around Monticello when Jefferson was; (2) accusations don't necessarily prove anything (as another supposed African American descendant of Jefferson, Thomas Woodson, has no Jefferson DNA); (3) just because the DNA is Jefferson DNA, doesn't mean it's THOMAS Jefferson DNA; (4) just because Eston Hemings has Jefferson DNA doesn't mean that Sally's other children were fathered by a Jefferson. That said, a convincing case is not made that Jefferson DID NOT have a relationship with Hemings. (It is hard to prove a negative, anyway.) This book serves to knock Gordon-Reed's agenda-driven research down a tad, but it doesn't invalidate it. And, the argument that Jefferson would not have had sex with her because of his principles or ill-health is, well, a hard sell. History tells us principled people and unhealthy people oftentimes lose their principles and find renewed strength all the time when sex is dangled before them.

Mr. Hyland's book provides a well-written, logical, and technically supported review of an issue which has been abused by the politically-correct crowd and those intent on rewriting history...namely, his alleged paternity of his slave's children as initially published in 1802 by a political muckraker. The issue grew legs after a highly controversial and misleading publication of the dna test and the possibility of Jefferson's paternity and spawned several books and articles denigrating Jefferson's character, motivations, and value to our country, all the while using a misleading application of said dna test, hear-say, innuendo and imagination as the mainstay of their assumptions. Hyland brings witnesses for and against the defendant, and discusses their significance to the case; their testimony being their written statements (or books) on the subject of Jefferson's character and actions. Most interesting and surprising are those allied against Jefferson. There is an apparent concerted effort and collusion between an eminent Jeffersonian history scholar at the university Jefferson founded, together with individuals at the foundation responsible for the maintenance of Jefferson's home and other noted history and law professors, all intent on denigrating Jefferson's legacy and his effect on our nation for reasons not quite clear. There is some allusion to an effort at moral equivalency with the timing of the Jefferson/Hemings dna release coinciding with the Clinton impeachment. Then there are those who are apparently intent on making Jefferson the posterboy for racial inequality, mysogeny, and miscegenation and making up history, or dismissing documented history, to effect their ends.

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