



## Thomas Jefferson: A Life

*Willard Sterne Randall*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

# Thomas Jefferson: A Life

*Willard Sterne Randall*

## **Thomas Jefferson: A Life** Willard Sterne Randall

Combining firsthand scholarship and material drawn from the Jefferson Papers, Willard Sterne Randall calls on his skills as an investigative journalist to challenge long-held assumptions about the reasoning, motives, and works of this sage, philosopher, politician, and romantic. Exploring both Jefferson's interior and public struggles, Randall sheds important light on Jefferson's thoughts on slavery and his relationship with the slave Sally Hemmings, as well as Revolutionary and diplomatic intrigues.

## **Thomas Jefferson: A Life Details**

Date : Published February 4th 2014 by Harper Perennial Modern Classics (first published 1993)

ISBN : 9780060976170

Author : Willard Sterne Randall

Format : Paperback 736 pages

Genre : Biography, History, Politics, Presidents, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History

 [Download Thomas Jefferson: A Life ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Thomas Jefferson: A Life ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online Thomas Jefferson: A Life Willard Sterne Randall**

---

## From Reader Review Thomas Jefferson: A Life for online ebook

### Rudy says

In my opinion, this book should be rated right up there with the top Thomas Jefferson Bio's out on the market today. The author wrote the biography of Thomas Jefferson in such a way that made reading interesting and comprehensible. The book covers the span of Jefferson's life and pays close attention to Jefferson's contributions to the founding of our country during his stay in Paris. If you haven't read any books on Jefferson I would eagerly recommend this book by Mr. Randall.

---

### James says

Long before William Jefferson Clinton, another child prodigy Southern Democratic/republican President lead his country to prosperity and expansion amidst sex ridden scandal and recriminations. Bubba Bill even duplicated his name-sake's penchant for financial scandal. But I don't want to belabor the this comparison. After all, before Jefferson, we had another cash poor expansion minded patrician named Julius Caesar who founded another similar kind of republican empire.

The thing is, so much has been written about Jefferson's life and its every nuance has been so well analysed and then specialized that it is sometimes hard for the general reader to get an overview about one of our most gifted presidents through all of the noise. This 10 year old college textbook is still the best introduction to one of the most fascinating men in history.

The book moves steadily through the eight periods of Jefferson's life: His childhood with the loss of his father in adolescence; his education and early years as a land speculator's lawyer; his early legislative efforts in the house of burgess; his reluctant efforts at the Continental Congress followed by his controversial revolutionary governorship; his romantic times as ambassador to France; his time as Washington's Secretary of State; His Presidency; and the two or so decades of his life after his Presidency. Randall offers tantalizing tidbits not often covered in other biographies. For example, Jefferson was a land speculator's lawyer who used legal devices to tie up lands for no money. Also, while we know he moved the Virginia Capitol to Richmond, less well known is his disgrace for "running away" during Benedict Arnold's invasion of Virginia during the Revolutionary War.

The biographer remembers to cover other important personages like the Marquis the Lafayette, George Wyeth, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr and John Adams. He lists Jefferson's proteges, Madison, Monroe, and Quincy Adams (the next three Presidents). Often, he looks at these lives using Jefferson's own words from his over 27000 pieces of correspondence. The work is scholarly enough that you feel that the author read every piece of that correspondence, but thankfully this book has none of the stuffy prose endemic to that type of scholarship.

Nor does the writer ever forget to cover Mr. Jefferson's loves. His wife Martha (or Patty) who died after child birth; his lover Maria Hadfield Cosway. And he convinced me that Jefferson did not have an affair with Sally Hemings his slave, because she would have been too young and he just was not there during the conception of her children.

The book, of course, covers major events, like Jefferson's general dislike of the edited version of his Declaration of Independence. The Louisiana Purchase and Lewis and Clark Expedition during his Presidency (Merriweather Lewis was his cousin). But, more importantly, the book spends time looking at Jefferson's

world in a way that Jefferson himself might have looked at it. His description of Jefferson's trip through the south of France and North Italy---to steal Piedmont rice, no less---reads like a romantic travelogue written by Jefferson.

The book adroitly and quite succinctly covers early party politics by describing the battle between Federalists lead first by Adams and then Chief Justice John Marshall, and Jefferson's and Madison's Democrats. I never understood that part of American political history until I read this book. Ironically, while Jefferson's ideology "won" during his time, his views of states rights and small government were ultimately defeated by his admirer Abraham Lincoln.

In the end, Jefferson the architect/philosopher/viticulturalist (our first Robert Parker!)/inventor/naturalist and bad accountant comes across as a multi-layered and conflicted person (albeit a Patrician born to high office) like many people. He was a principled intellectual who knew he had to compromise to achieve his goals. Like with Slavery, while he fought against it almost his whole life, he kept slaves until he died, emancipating but a few.

Mr. Randall's biography is the perfect balance between the breathless worship of Joseph Ellis' "The American Sphinx" and muck raking bodice ripper of Fawn Mackay Brodie's "An Intimate History". It is breezy without being as low-caloric as David McCullough's "John Adams". Throughout, the author uses journalistic devices like foreshadowing and headlining that occasionally comes across as repetitive.

My biggest gripe about the book is that it spent far too little time talking about arguably Jefferson's greatest period, his presidency and his legacy. There is maybe three or four chapters near the end. After the huge build up to this point, I would have like to read more about his Presidency and its aftermath. Perhaps the author ran out of space.

Perhaps the author became so imbued with Jefferson's life that he took on Jefferson's attitude. In the end, Jefferson listed in his own epitaph as his accomplishments, the Declaration, the University of Virginia, and his family. He didn't think it important enough to mention that he was elected and served two terms as the President of the United States of America, a country he helped to found.

---

## Matthew Ericson says

For a 600 book to only spend about 30 pages on his presidency was a bit disappointing. He is also very much an apologist of Jefferson and falls short of being a critical study. Jefferson is an important figure in US history, but a tremendously difficult one too.

---

## Mark says

There are dozens of books on Jefferson, and while this volume is comprehensive, fairly objective, and mostly readable, I do offer a few opinions for the potential reader:

This biography dwells in extreme detail on the legal and philosophical history of Jefferson's development as one of our founding fathers, mostly in his early years in Virginia. Of 590 pages, we don't get to his time as president until page 550! This is not the book to read if you want an in depth study of his two presidential

terms. Certainly his work as a lawyer and Virginia statesman were instrumental in his future political life, but it took me quite a while to work through the middle 1/3 of this book. This may be partially due to Randall's writing, which at times is repetitive. A more thorough editing would have greatly improved this biography.

Often, the book reads as a history of early America and the State of Virginia, with Jefferson's contributions interspersed. Context is one thing, but presumably anyone reading this book is already familiar with American history. Jefferson was one of the most complicated and intriguing figures in history, but there were several times where I wanted more personal information on the man, and less on the time and place he lived in. I would have liked more study of his architectural, scientific and academic pursuits, but there are probably other books that cover that. The book does shed some light on his personal life, his strained relationship with women and the numerous, tragic family losses.

Overall this is a good biography of one of the most intelligent and complex men to have ever lived, and I certainly learned a lot about him, and early America.

---

### **Jeremy Perron says**

Willard Randall's take on the life of Thomas Jefferson is worth reading. The strength of the book comes from his coverage of Jefferson's developmental years. The later part of his life is glossed over rather quickly. For example there is only one chapter covering his two-term, and rather eventful, presidency. So this book is good for what drove President Jefferson and what events contributed to his personality but not very useful when covering his presidency. That is not necessarily a bad thing when you consider that Jefferson's time as the President of United States is well covered by other historians, but it is worth noting.

One of things I learned in this book that I like about Jefferson was his resistance to adopt any one political ideology or philosophy. The book shows Jefferson referring to the adoption of a philosophy to fitting your mind in a prism that limits the way you view the world. That part really spoke to me because that is how I view things as well; I always dislike trying to label myself with any word to describe me and how I think. Randall does a good job showing where Jefferson gets his ideas and beliefs.

"It is not from the Scottish religious reformers but from English and European writers of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Age of Reason that Jefferson drew his evolving notions of government. From Bacon, the grandfather of the English Enlightenment, Jefferson had learned to use his powers of observation and question any opinion, regardless of its source. He adhered to Bacon's admonition to apply reason and learning to the functions of government to improve society. Jefferson was influenced by Newton's Principia, which held that the universe was a great clock invented, made, and set in motion by a deity, but he had adapted Newton's view to his own quest for a world of order and harmony. Like Newton, Jefferson did not believe in miracles. Jefferson's third hero from the time of boyhood studies was Locke, who had joined the empiricism of Bacon and Newton to the realm of politics. Locke's An Essay Concerning Human Understanding for the first time fed his natural optimism and gave him hope mankind could be improved by education. From Locke and Scottish adherents, Jefferson had adopted the theory of the Second Treatise of Government that legitimate authority to govern was derived from the consent of the governed, which had first been granted while mankind had still been in a 'state of nature' when all human beings were by right free and equal. Locke underpinned all of Jefferson's political thought." (p.205)

There is great deal of information of Jefferson's career in the Continental Congress, his horrendous stint of Governor of Virginia, and his time abroad negotiating on America's behalf in Europe. Jefferson considered his authorship of the Declaration to be one of the finest moments of his personal career, although he did not think so at the time.

"The debate was one of the more painful ordeals of Jefferson's long political career. He sat there, beside Franklin, silent in his humiliation at the number, extent, and importance of the changes. He mostly maintained this silence for years, but what little he wrote indicates his mounting disgust at the timidity of the conservatives in Congress, their slashing deletions of at least two major clauses in Jefferson's draft declaration."

On Sally Hemings Randall could not have been more off. Although it is sometimes hard to separate fact from fiction, Randall does do a good job correcting the lies of James Callender the propagandist, and some of the unhistorical flaws of the work of Fawn M. Brodie. However he was clearly wrong about the final conclusion.

"Sally Hemings's lover was, in other words, a son of Dabney Carr and Jefferson's sister Martha. It is impossible to believe that Jefferson abandoned his love for Maria Cosway to force his affections on even the most beautiful adolescent girl." (p.477)

I bet that statement is a little embarrassing now! DNA reveled in 1998 that Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings' kids. So, on this issue, he is definitely wrong.

In America over the last seventy years there has been a great deal of debate over the Executive Branch's use of military force without the consent of the Congress. Many who feel offended by all such actions often cite the founders and the U.S. Constitution. However if one looks at what the Founders themselves did when managing the government of the Constitution, and they might find themselves coming to a far different conclusion. A good example is Jefferson's actions against the pirates.

"At the first full cabinet meeting on May 15, President Jefferson confronted his first foreign policy crisis, one he had tackled first as minister to France fifteen years earlier. Tripoli had attacked American ships in the Mediterranean. Putting into effect his long-held views on the subject, Jefferson had already assembled an American naval squadron at Norfolk that was ready to sail. An American navy sailing off Tripoli, he told his cabinet, 'might lead to war.' He wanted his cabinet's opinions and approval. All five members agreed on sending the squadron but disagreed over Jefferson's authority to act while Congress was adjourned. Navy Secretary Smith and Treasury Secretary Gallatin backed Jefferson's position that the president could use military force to defend the United States, but Attorney General Lincoln argued that without a formal declaration of war by Congress, American warships could destroy North African pirates wherever they could be found." (p.549)

Thomas Jefferson: A Life is good book about a very complicated figure. James Madison once warned people who study Jefferson to be ready for a great deal of twists and turns when going through his mind. Randall acts as fairly good guide.

---

### **Carrie says**

Very insightful. I feel like I've forgotten a lot of the history I learned in high school and this taught me a lot about not only Jefferson, but also the Revolution, the beginning of politics in this nation, and what the world was like at that time.

---

### **Michael Loveless says**

The book is a thorough biography of Jefferson. It focuses on his early life and the shaping of his outlook and

values. A surprisingly small amount of the book is dedicated to Jefferson's time as Secretary of State and as President. More time is spent on his college years than on his diplomatic career. Jefferson was shown to be a perfectionist who devoted himself to study as a young man and who tirelessly studied legal theory to win a case.

The book was interesting since I knew the least about his early life. I would have liked to hear more about the effects of his political philosophy on his time in Washington's cabinet and in the White House.

As a reference for details about Jefferson's life.

---

## **Mike says**

This is a moving, poignant, and illuminating look at a man who reluctantly served his country for nearly all of his adult life. The constant refrain of this book is Jefferson's desire to live out the remainder of his days quietly at Monticello. However, the nation that he helped to form continually called him back to service, and he always rose to the task.

Randall's biography has a few shortcomings. First, he is determined to let Jefferson off the hook with regard to slavery and his participation in the practice, which to me seems like the wrong lens to take on a person who lived two hundred years ago. Yes, Jefferson owned slaves and had relations with at least one of them. However, Randall seems to think that the acknowledgement of this fact would crumble the mountain of achievements that Jefferson accumulated during his life. I disagree - it's entirely possible to think of an historical figure as a great man, while still acknowledging his participation in behaviors that have since been judged as unacceptable.

Second, Jefferson's two terms in office are given short shrift. It almost seemed that Randall wrote up to Jefferson's term as vice president, realized that he was already over five hundred pages in, and aggressively cut down his discussion of Jefferson's presidency to avoid having a seven-hundred-page tome on his hands. I'm left thinking that I might have to hunt down a study of Jefferson the president at some point to round out the details.

Beyond these limitations, this is an excellent study of a man who was unique in his time and place - an intellectual who wanted no quarrel but was determined to take actions that he believed were right, even when those led to open battle. We could use a few more folks like that today.

---

## **Deborah says**

Randall's biography of Jefferson is extremely detailed -- EXTREMELY detailed -- but not always where you'd like it to be. For example, I really didn't need all of the information about what coffee houses Jefferson frequented, the lineage of his horses, the 7 pages about his tours of English gardens, and his 22 pages -- yes, I said 22 pages -- about the Italian countryside. It makes little sense to me how a 600-page book can expend such finicky detail on gardens and less than 100 pages on his term as Vice President and his TWO terms as President.

Also, Randall's biography is apologetic to the point of being equivocal. My overall impression of Jefferson is that he was, to put it politely, a man of contradictions, or, to be less polite, extremely hypocritical. There's no

denying he was a genius, but Randall seems to spend a lot of time trying to convince his readers that Jefferson wasn't the bastard that he frequently proved himself to be, and the result was that I don't find this biography to be completely credible.

There was much downplaying -- and sometimes a hint of denial -- that Jefferson seduced (on more than one occasion) his friends' wives. There was also much made of Jefferson's anti-slavery tendencies, despite the fact that he never made a move to free any of his slaves within his own lifetime, used the sale of slaves as a way to pay his compulsive-shopping debts, and advocated, if the slaves ever were freed, their immediate deportation to areas uninhabited by whites.

In addition, Randall dismisses Jefferson's rumored affair with Sally Hemmings as being "preposterous suppositions" and furthered speculation that the real father of Hemmings's children was his nephew, a son of his sister and Dabney Carr. In the next few years, however, "a consensus began to emerge after the results of a DNA analysis in 1998, which showed no match between the Carr male line, proposed for more than 150 years as the father(s), and the one Hemmings descendant tested. It did show a match between the Jefferson male line." So much for preposterous suppositions.

---

## **Omar Masood says**

Randall's biography of Thomas Jefferson is billed as the "best" and "authoritative" one volume Jefferson biography. Regrettably, it does not live up to the hype. Nonetheless it is still an excellent book.

The book is superb with respect to covering Jefferson's life prior to the presidency. During this portion of the book it indeed does live up to the hype. You get to know the facts of Jefferson's pre-presidential life and the experiences and intellectual influences that shaped his world view. Unfortunately, Randall seems to run out of steam at the end of the book. He spends approximately 30 pages on Jefferson's two-term presidency and roughly a dozen pages on his post-presidential life. This is truly a shame. If he continued to cover Jefferson with the detail and depth he did for the first 500 pages or so of the book this would have been a great biography fully worthy of the lofty hype surrounding it. Instead, it seems Randall had a publishing deadline to meet and rushed through the last quarter century of the third president's life. I enjoyed his writing and looked at reviews of his biographies on Washington and Hamilton and found that there is a consistent trend of Randall glossing over the end of his subject's life. This is unfortunate. Randall would better serve students of history by writing two volume biographies of these figures, or alternatively a lengthy single volume book like Merrill Peterson did.

Despite my disappointment with his light treatment of Jefferson's presidency and his post-presidential years, I give this book 4 stars. It is an excellent introduction to Jefferson for a casual student of history who wants to learn the basics of Jefferson's character, life, and thought. It also is a good addition to the library of a student of Jefferson. However, if you are someone looking to learn the details of his White House and Monticello years in a comprehensive single volume biography, Randall's tome would be a poor choice.

---

## **JJ says**

If you're only going to read one book on Jefferson, I recommend this one.

---

## **Jude says**

I'm a Brit who spent some of my childhood living in the US and I remember studying American History at 8th grade, but that was a long time ago, so I thought it was time to refresh my memory. This book is well written, lively and informative, giving a good coverage of the major issues of the man's life and the issues which drove him. I can't give any comparison of any other scholarly works on the same subject. I saw some other review commenting that not much time was spent covering Jefferson's years as President, I think I am glad this is the case. Time was spent showing the scandals and betrayals that he dealt with at that time. I'm sure that if the politics is a major interest there must be dozens of other books which cover those years better.

What fascinated me, and I cannot remember if it was even mentioned at school, was Jefferson's time in France as an ambassador and how his revolutionary history made him advocate for revolutionary change in France. Having read about the French revolution and the bloodbath that it descended into over time, I felt curious to know how Jefferson felt about it on a personal level as that horror unfolded, but that aspect was not elucidated. Beyond stating that many of his French friends ended up fleeing the terror or died because of it, no more is said on the subject.

What I must criticise, and what caused me to rate the book so lowly was the appalling lack of proofreading of the electronic version. The book was scanned from the printed version, but it appears that only the most cursory efforts were made to check the results of the OCR. It was incredibly annoying, some of the typos were obvious, others not so and rendered sentences unintelligible. The "Report Content Errors" on my Kindle was over-used whilst reading the book, and I was left wondering why I was doing for free what the author/publisher couldn't be bothered to get done professionally. The level of typos was far more than in most self-published free books that I have read on my Kindle and reflects poorly on the book. At the end of the day, I hope someone actually actions the hundreds of reports I sent and re-edits this book, so other readers have a better experience than I did.

---

## **Adriana says**

This book is almost 600 pages long. If you are not into politics or history, you may not be interested in this read. Excellent book. Great information. Much of it had to do with his early years in politics.

---

## **MaryEllen Elizabeth Hart says**

Excellent! A must read for every citizen of United States of America.

If USA rated its Patriots (Founding Fathers) according to impact upon developing the structure and infrastructure, creative genius, perseverance of faith and personal investment in United States, Thomas Jefferson would be seen in the top three of the most significant human beings personal investment in formation and exploration of our great country USA! Thomas Jefferson's biography is awesome!

"Thomas Jefferson has been described as a(n): agriculturalist, anthropologist, architect, astronomer, bibliophile, botanist, classicist, diplomat, educator, ethnologist, farmer, geographer, gourmet, horseman, horticulturist, inventor, lawyer, lexicographer, linguist, mathematician, meteorologist, musician, naturalist, numismatist, paleontologist, philosopher, political philosopher, scientist, statesman, violinist, writer. He was also fluent in Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, and German!" <http://www.constitutionfacts.com/us-f...>

<http://constitution.laws.com/who-wrot...> "the primary recipients of this classification of authorship are typically credited to Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Thomas Paine, and John Adams – George Washington is credited with the responsibility of overseeing the Constitutional Convention that took place in Philadelphia between May 5th 1787 and September 17th, 1787."

I loved the story of Thomas Jefferson's life. I felt inspired by his youthful self discipline, his creative genius in writing USA constitution social structure as well as science, his knowledge of international governments, politics, societal proprieties, knowledge of history, knowledge of language, and personal courage is captivating. His love of his wife and children is inspiring.

The biography of Thomas Jefferson is mandatory reading if you consider yourself a citizen of United States of America or consider yourself a student of social structure and government!!!

---

### **Jerry Schollian says**

For any history buff who wants to know how the United States was made, this is a must read. Thomas Jefferson: A Life details the life of Thomas Jefferson, from his birth in the Virginia Commonwealth, his education, his brief marriage, his children, his exploits in France, his participation in the creation of the Declaration of Independence, his interactions with men such as John Adams, James Madison, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and others. His fascination with science, exploration and agriculture. His presidency, his later years, his letters to John Adams and his death. An outstanding biographical treasure.

---