Book Review:
Evaluating *Master of the Mountain*
by Henry Wiecnek

John Smith

History 101

January 13, 2013

Dr. Melinda West
Thomas Jefferson has been a topic of fascination for scholars and historians ever since Jefferson first stamped his mark on the newly-formed United States. As the principal author of the Declaration of the Independence and America’s third president, Jefferson is listed alongside George Washington, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison as one of the key architects of the U.S. government. Historians have focused on Jefferson’s skill as a diplomat and negotiator, particularly when it comes to role in the Revolutionary War and the Louisiana Purchase. But recent decades have also seen a renewed interest in Jefferson’s role as a slave owner and patriarch of his Virginia plantation, the beautiful and extravagant Monticello, and the discussion of Jefferson relationship to slavery has often become heated. Entering in the fray in 2012 was Henry Wiecnek, whose book Master of the Mountain paints a picture of Jefferson as a calculating, greedy slaveholder who disregarded the welfare of slaves in order to support a lavish lifestyle. While the text presents an interesting new spin on the Jefferson mythos, ultimately Wiecnek falls short of proving his theory.

Much has been written about Jefferson’s beliefs regarding slavery and his relationship with his own slaves; this topic has been particularly fertile for scholars because Jefferson’s record on slavery is complex, maybe even paradoxical. Jefferson owned hundreds of slaves that worked in his house and on his plantations, but also opposed the slave trade and introduced legislation to outlaw slavery in new territories. He father at least six children with one of his mixed-race slaves, Sally Hemings, but did not free Hemings or her family members until after his death. In short, Jefferson’s relationship with slavery was deeply conflicted and leaves plenty of room for interpretation. Over the last decade or so, since the paternity of Sally Hemings children was confirmed, the prevailing narrative of Jefferson has been that of a principled man.
who opposed slavery, but struggled with the practical applications of his beliefs. Noted biographers, including Merrill Peterson and John Ferling, support this interpretation, although other scholars, such as Stephen Ambrose and William Freehling, have challenged the belief that Jefferson was a true advocate of abolition.

Wiecnek’s book takes the accepted facts of Jefferson’s history and attempts to put a new spin on his dealings with his slaves. The main focus on Wiecnek’s book is a letter written by Jefferson in which he calculates the value of each slave born on his plantations: “I allow nothing for losses by death, but, on the contrary, shall presently take credit four per cent. per annum, for their increase over and above keeping up their numbers.”¹ Wiecnek claims that when Jefferson realized this, he intentionally backed away from abolitionist rhetoric and began seeing his slaves as nothing more than figures in a ledger. Wiecnek also offers up what he sees as evidence that Jefferson treated his slaves much like the other plantation owners of his time, that is, terribly. He tells stories of iron collars and vicious beatings, and stresses Jefferson’s choice not to free his own slaves. But it’s not just Jefferson’s own slaves whom he kept enslaved: he also refused to emancipate the slaves of Tadeusz Kosciusko, a wealthy Polish plantation owner who had named Jefferson the executor of his will. In this will, Kosciusko stated that part of his estate should be used to free his slaves. Jefferson, however, did not follow through on this request. Through the accumulation of these kinds of stories, Wiecnek builds an image of Jefferson as a calculating and cold-hearted slave owner.

The reception of Wiecnek’s work has been divided. Many popular reviews have lauded it, with *The Washington Post* calling it “brilliant,”² and Salon critic Laura Miller saying that “we try to persuade ourselves that the author of some of our most inspiring political works was not a self-serving hypocrite. But given the bountiful evidence offered in *The Master of the Universe*, it’s now impossible to see him [Jefferson] any other way.”³ However, Jefferson scholars have been harshly critical of the book. Jan Ellen Lewis, a professor of history at Rutgers, excoriated the text, calling it a “train wreck of a book”⁴ and asking whether Wiecnek “is so blinded by his loathing of Thomas Jefferson that he cannot see what is right in front of his eyes.”⁵ Other historians have also criticized the tone of the book for dismissing the work of other prominent researchers who have tried to put forward a more nuanced portrait of Jefferson. *The New York Times* notes in particular that he claims the work of Harvard professor Annette Gordon-Reed is erroneous and misleading.

Understandably, Gordon-Reed has been the most vocal critic of Wiecnek’s work. She is particularly galled that Wiecnek claims to have discovered new evidence that changes the current fundamental understanding of Jefferson, which in fact he recycles many anecdotes and facts already well-known by historians, some of which are included in her own work. Gordon-

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⁵ ibid.
Reed’s argument is persuasive. She claims that the four-percent note has always been recognized by historians, and that it’s actually just an off-the-cuff estimation for Virginia plantations in general—thus undercutting Wiecnek’s main piece of evidence. Gordon-Reed also makes the argument that Jefferson did not chose to disregard Kosciusko’s will because of his support for slavery, but because he was legally unable to follow the directions because of the existence of several contradictory wills. Again, her explanation for Jefferson’s actions are sound and offer a plausible explanation for his behavior that fits with the depiction of the man in her own book. In the end, Gordon-Reed and other scholars offer a credible criticism of Wiecnek’s book, and provide enough reason to doubt his harsh portrayal of Jefferson. However, it should be noted that none of these critics dismiss the idea that Jefferson was a complex man who furthered an evil institution; they only object to the poor methodology employed by Wiecnek.

Ultimately, there may never be a definitive biography of Thomas Jefferson: his personality and his accomplishments, coupled with the momentous times in which he lived, make him a decidedly difficult man to understand. But this difficulty doesn’t mean historians should stop debating this contentious figure. With every new book and article, the picture of Jefferson, and of the nation’s history, becomes more complex and interesting. Wiecnek’s upending of the Jefferson story, combined with the critical lashing of his book, shed unprecedented light on the role slavery played in the founding of the United States and has important implications for the way people today view the men who created this new country. Particularly today, when the perceived objectives and ideologies of the founding fathers play such an important role in the way government is understood by common citizens, it’s important that everyone be able to judge for themselves the complexities of Thomas Jefferson.
Bibliography


