Master of Monticello. A new examination of history challenges a long-held perception of Thomas Jefferson as a benevolent slaveholder, by Henry Wiencek.

Henry Wiencek The winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for the Hairstones: An American Family in Black and White, a complex family history in the Old South, Wiencek is the author of Master of the Mountain: Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves, sure to spark debate when it appears this month. An exclusive excerpt (p. 40) treads a perilous ground. “Finding moral fault in the founding era is tantamount to poisoning the well.” He says, "but I was fascinated with the radical contradiction between Jefferson's ideals and actions, and the lives of his slaves".

On the eve of presidential elections, it seems like the right time to look at the power of secrets on America. We begin at the beginning with Thomas Jefferson who wrote in code at the explorer Meriwether Lewis, and later created a wheel cipher so ingenious that its design was used to create military codes nearly 150 years later. Jefferson keep other secrets at his home at Monticello, most notable in on Mulberry Row a Spartan village of slave cabins and work buildings. In Master of Monticello (p.40) award winning historian Henry Wiencek uncovers new archeology and documentary evidence that paints a darker portrait of Jefferson.
As Michael Caruso, Smithsonian Magazine Editors commented: “sure is. this Smithsonian exclusive excerpt is to spark debate when it appears this month.

Shure it did!

______________________________

Who is the real Thomas Jefferson?

http://www.salon.com/2012/12/03/the_thomas_jefferson_wars/

MONDAY, DEC 3, 2012 12:30 PM CST

A heated Op-Ed war among historians is picking up where two controversial new biographies left off this fall

SALON STAFF

The firestorm over author Henry Wiencek’s unsparing portrait of Thomas Jefferson, “Master of the Mountain: Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves,” has taken to the pages of the New York Times and other media outlets with a vengeance. Amid tepid praise for Jon Meacham’s folksy best-seller, “Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power,” which skirts the complex world of slavery, it is Wiencek’s hubristic treatment that has returned Jefferson to center stage in historians’ long-standing war over whom to blame first and foremost for our racist underpinnings as a nation.

Wiencek seizes upon stray notes in Jefferson’s hand in which the Virginia planter performs cold calculations on the monetary value of slaves. A Scrooge-like Jefferson becomes cruel and uncivilized as he obsesses over the slave economy – which he comes to see as a “convenient engine” of American growth. You don’t remove the human face from slavery and come out ahead. But that is what Henry Wiencek has done to Thomas Jefferson.

Swayed as many of us were by Wiencek’s deft examination of George Washington and slavery, Jefferson scholars expected a hard-hitting sequel. But in its design to shock, “Master of the Mountain” rashly removes the conversation from the long-active
scholarly community, by self-consciously claiming that Wiencek, as historical
detective, has smoked out a criminal.

Here's the irony: Nothing is new in the current debate. Jefferson and his fellow
founders have been sensationalized in the press and in popular literature and
academic monographs without cease for over 200 years. For the uninitiated reader
who has not followed the long parade of books on Jefferson, every spin on the third
president appears at first to have merit. Jefferson has been a political symbol since he
first sought the presidency, and a piñata in America's culture wars for nearly as long
as that.

Matthew Livingston Davis, Aaron Burr's first biographer, actually knew Jefferson.
When Thomas Jefferson Randolph published four volumes of his grandfather's papers
in 1829, Davis went through the letters and was shocked to discover that the
Virginian's real talent lay in deception. His favorite term of derision for Jefferson was
"Jesuitical." But the award for the most entertaining portrait of a villainous,
hypocritical Jefferson goes to the late Gore Vidal. In his fictional "Burr," we get a
president who violated the Constitution while seducing his foes at the dinner parties
he threw (those gatherings Jon Meacham offers up as his model of bipartisanship).
Vidal's Jefferson is surrounded by mixed-race offspring; his concubine Sally Hemings
is pretty, but unfalteringly stupid.

Meacham's Jefferson is "attractive and virile," a smooth operator, serenely
philosophical about the criticism he regularly receives, and a man who swings
gleefully from realism to idealism, blending republican politics with haute cuisine. Oh,
and also a master compromiser (which he was decidedly not). These
characterizations of the sensitive politico serve to reframe the Jefferson biography as
a Bob Woodward-style, inside-the-White-House intimate drama. Making Jefferson
recognizable to us as a practitioner of political hardball allows the biographer to go on
Chris Matthews' "Hardball" and delight the host with comparisons to whatever is
happening in Washington this week.

A studious historian strives to contextualize evidence. The 4 percent annual profit on
the births of slave children that Wiencek seizes on is not pretty; no one gives
Jefferson high marks, because there is no such thing as a good master. Yet the
evidence Wiencek plucks from the page belongs to a conversation, foreign to our time,
that took place in general terms relating to the collective self-interest of Southern
elites who had inherited feelings of racial superiority. The evidence should be viewed
as well in the context of those pages Jefferson produced when he doodled daily with
numbers and lines, sketching out his parquet floors. In designing Monticello, he saw
his world as a mathematical puzzle and calculated to fractions of an inch when
builders of his day couldn't come anywhere close. He said he lulled himself to sleep by
conjuring "diagrams and crotchets" (wooden building supports).

Jefferson marveled, with melancholic persuasion, at the sublime scenes that nature,
day and night, produced on his mountaintop. And this same man, born into a world of
slavery, saw human ownership in terms that he could convert into practical
experiments – slaves were pawns in his experiments with fruit trees and rice
cultivation, too. Yet he was not a monster. We must always try to assess the true
boundaries of the moral universe that existed, as we seek greater insight into the
social limitations he and they contended with. It’s hard to do this without making premature judgments, which is why historians continue to find employment.

Still, there is something seductive in Wiencek’s argument. We want to get inside the heads of people who came before, who left a paper trail, whom we can imagine still speaking to us. Salon’s book review editor, Laura Miller, does not pretend to be an archivist of early American sources, and in reviewing Wiencek’s book she positively responded to its stark provocations. It is perfectly reasonable that she would not have identified senior scholars who were missing from the endnotes. And that is what moved experts on Jefferson and slavery to go public in their denunciations of the book. Selective evidence, presented effectively, is how prosecutors stage an argument, and Wiencek is clearly prosecuting his case against Jefferson. His detractors are not “Jefferson defenders,” but scholars whose more nuanced perspectives are absent from his argument.

Over the last two weeks, Op-Eds have rolled and roiled. Legal historian Paul Finkelman, writing in the Times, said that Wiencek is wrong only in his timing, and that Jefferson was not suddenly roused to racism when he discovered his 4 percent solution—no, he was always “deeply committed” to slavery. Finkelman terms Jefferson “creepy,” fixing understandably on Jefferson’s words in calling free blacks “pests in society” and emotionally primitive. Finkelman targets Jefferson, but at the same time excuses Washington, whose slave-owning experience differed from Jefferson’s only in that Washington was not perpetually in debt as Jefferson was, and could therefore have lived quite well if he had freed his slaves while he was in his prime and set a standard for others to follow. (We should add that even the urbanite Benjamin Franklin was a slave owner, and only freed his slave in his will.)

Everyone seems to have an ax to grind. Professor Finkelman is correct to charge Wiencek with exaggeration. To reduce Jefferson’s views on slavery simply to profit misses all the other ways that he engaged with the institution. This is the problem when a writer takes a very complex man and makes him familiar; this is what scholars call reductionist, wherein one solitary trait stands in for an entire personality.

But to call Jefferson “creepy” reflects Finkelman’s long-held bias. His Jefferson is incorrigible, a morally deformed figure lurking in the bowels of historic memory. When we isolate Jefferson and see his actions apart from those of his fellow Southerners (and a clear majority of Northerners), we miss the larger picture. Of course, he wrote in “Notes on Virginia” that Africans were a “blot” on the American landscape, and it sounds horrifying to our ears; it should. But his language drew on the respected 17th-century travel writer George Best and the ethnographic science of the mid-18th century’s ingenious (if misguided) Comte de Buffon.

Smithsonian

The Dark Side of Thomas Jefferson
A new portrait of the founding father challenges the long-held perception of Thomas Jefferson as a benevolent slaveholder

By Henry Wiencek
Smithsonian Magazine I October 2012
Read more: http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-dark-side-of-thomas-jefferson-35976004/#0u5UCm5H2sfk6esF.99

With five simple words in the Declaration of Independence—“all men are created equal”—Thomas Jefferson undid Aristotle’s ancient formula, which had governed human affairs until 1776: “From the hour of their birth, some men are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” In his original draft of the Declaration, in soaring, damning, fiery prose, Jefferson denounced the slave trade as an “execrable commerce...this assemblage of horrors,” a “cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberties.” As historian John Chester Miller put it, “The inclusion of Jefferson’s strictures on slavery and the slave trade would have committed the United States to the abolition of slavery.”

New York Times

Some Scholars Reject Dark Portrait of Jefferson


New York Times

Grand Bargainer
‘Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power,’ by Jon Meacham
By JILL ABRAMSON NOV. 2, 2012
Master of the Mountain: Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves, by Henry Wiencek