

The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family. By ANNETTE GORDON-REED. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008. 798 pages. \$35.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Edward Countryman, *Southern Methodist University*

Lengthy, humane, thoughtful, gripping in its prose, compelling in its rich, sensitive argument, Annette Gordon-Reed's *The Hemingses of Monticello* is garnering praise and honor as I write. I make it a rule to avoid other reviews until I have written my own, but before the *William and Mary Quarterly* invited me to do this one I did read Edmund S. Morgan and Marie Morgan's account in the *New York Review of Books* and, of course, I know about the author's National Book Award. I saw, but did not read, Jill Lepore's discussion in the *New Yorker* with its title "President Tom's Cabin."¹ Whatever Lepore wrote, that gets the book exactly wrong. This book is not about anybody's cabin. It is about a complex family's Monticello.

Gordon-Reed's title says it all. Thomas Jefferson figures very large in this book; it may well be the Jefferson book for the Obama era. More than any other writer, Gordon-Reed has convinced me here to take Jefferson seriously and even sympathetically, as a complex human being, rather than to let his mastery of Monticello and Poplar Forest overwhelm his stirring language of human equality and liberty. To avoid Jefferson without blotting him out seems akin to the task of imaging an extrasolar planet; the glare of the neighboring star is overwhelming. Yet in the same manner of recent astronomers, Gordon-Reed shifts attention and perspective away from him. This book is more centrally about Betty Hemings and her children, particularly Robert, James, Thenia, Critta, and Sally, and their kin, including not only Jefferson but also his wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson, and their daughters Martha and Maria. The book is about the malign absurdities of slavery, about one most unusual plantation complex, and about sex, naïveté, opportunity, choices, and limits in the founding era of the United States.

Gordon-Reed wastes no time at all on whether Thomas Jefferson fathered Sally Hemings's children. I have not doubted it since Winthrop D. Jordan noted that Jefferson was near her nine months before each of her childbirths. A decade ago Gordon-Reed herself disposed of the whole controversy with a judicious and rigorous reading of the many arguments pro and con and of the evidence supporting them.² Freed from

¹ Jill Lepore, "President Tom's Cabin: Jefferson, Hemings, and a Disclaimed Lineage," *New Yorker*, Sept. 22, 2008, 86–91; Edmund S. Morgan and Marie Morgan, "Jefferson's Concubine," *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 9, 2008, 15–17.

² Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), 466; Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, Va., 1997).

addressing that question, she turns to the lives that the Hemingses forged at Monticello and beyond. She does so despite her sources being either thin or opaque. We do not know what the members of the Hemings family looked like. We can just barely get access to their words, through Jefferson or other sources, and we cannot do that often. But that is the regular problem facing anybody who proposes to write history “from the bottom up” or about people who used to be called “the inarticulate.”

Gordon-Reed realizes that to understand this American family we must understand American slavery. But she also realizes (and argues powerfully) that we do the Hemingses a huge injustice if we reduce them to mere exemplars of some supposedly general pattern. Her book centers on a long-term, fertile sexual relationship between two very unequal people, but Gordon-Reed refuses to reduce that relationship to any archetype, be that archetype rape or romance. Instead of resorting to glib generalizations, she takes us into the choices that her subjects made as they sought to deal with the very difficult situations of their lives.

Consider the most fateful choice that Sally Hemings and her older brother James Hemings made, to return from France to Virginia with Jefferson in 1789. She was sixteen and pregnant with a child who did not survive. We know nothing of what she felt or said. But we can learn a great deal about the life that they had led in Paris, she for two years and he for five. He trained as a chef. They both learned French, he, at least, from a tutor. They tasted the possibilities that a great metropolis offered. They dressed well. They received excellent care when they were in need. Indubitably, they realized that by French law they need only apply in court in order to win their own freedom, embarrassing Minister Jefferson and the United States mightily in the process. That done, they might have joined the city’s black community and parlayed their respective talents into very good situations. Instead, they *chose* to return to Virginia. Why?

Taking us not just by empathy but by careful reasoning with the evidence into the head of Sally Hemings, Gordon-Reed presents a young woman in full possession of her beauty, aware of the hold she had on Jefferson and, fatefully, willing to trust that he would honor his agreement that she would live well and that their children would become free. She proved lucky: Jefferson did as he promised and she became his lifelong concubine. She accepted that situation, realistically. So did he, and so did the white people around him, family, neighbors, and associates. Rumors abounded, but they were just Charlottesville or New York or Philadelphia gossip. Nobody knew that he would become president of the United States, that James Callender would turn their fairly common

situation into the first presidential sex scandal, or that she would become the most famous African American prior to Frederick Douglass.

Musing on possible terms to describe their situation, Gordon-Reed settles on concubinage. Their relationship was consensual but inherently unequal. It could not become marriage, and it suited Jefferson far better than anything to which his totally unrealistic Paris flirtation with Maria Cosway might have led. It was Hemings's relationship as well as his, and it did lead to what she wanted: as good a life as the slave South permitted and her children's eventual freedom. But this is a book about a whole family, not about a solitary woman or an isolated couple.

Gordon-Reed limns Hemings with extreme sensitivity, but the family member who emerges most strongly is her tragic brother, James Hemings. We have some of his own words, including his defiant correspondence with Jefferson about becoming chef de cuisine in the President's House (Jefferson wanted him; Hemings wanted to be asked, not told) just before he took his own life. Gordon-Reed shows him effectively managing his own life and work even in Virginia slavery before the trip to Paris and chafing at the limits that remained upon him, even in freedom. Jefferson was astonished at Hemings's apparent ingratitude for what he interpreted as the trust and elasticity Hemings enjoyed, but Gordon-Reed understands where the experience of a little bit of possibility can lead for a person who is supposed to have no possibilities at all.

Some might object that Gordon-Reed has constructed a huge book with a very complex argument out of very limited direct evidence. But she demonstrates two important points. First, history in any meaningful sense requires not "facts" but context. Second, the rules and assumptions that the historian uses to establish context need to be clear, much like the rules of evidence in law. Like Jefferson, Gordon-Reed is a lawyer, and she establishes a far larger pattern of meaningful context surrounding the Hemingses than Jefferson himself did when he submitted "facts" to a "candid world" in order to "prove" his case against King George III in 1776.

Gordon-Reed also is a writer of great power. Modestly, she suggests that it would take the talents of Leo Tolstoy to "convey the mix of tragedy, absurdity, touching vulnerability, flawed humanity, [and] hopeful expectation" (391) at Eppington Plantation, home of Jefferson's sister-in-law, who also was Sally Hemings's half sister, when the returning Jefferson/Hemings party stopped on their way from Norfolk to Monticello. But other writers also come to mind in their ability to depict the tangles and tragedies of human lives.

In the American context, I think of William Faulkner, because Monticello yields nothing to Yoknapatawpha County in its web of contradictory human connections, and of Toni Morrison, because all of her

characters, black and white, female and male, are utterly believable, never, ever reduced to caricatures or stereotypes or cutouts. Gordon-Reed presents an equally powerful and rich picture. She achieves it not in the manner of a "faction," mingling the made-up with the verifiable, or by resorting to theory-driven psychosexual speculation but rather by putting her sources together, taking all of her characters seriously, and constructing the richest, most explanatory account of them that the evidence permits her to make.

I confess to a long and fruitless effort at coming to terms with Jefferson (to borrow the title of a lecture by Joyce Appleby that I drove hundreds of miles to hear). Perhaps the problem is that I long have reduced him to a binary stereotype: the source of white Americans' best language about themselves *and* an exemplar of their worst hypocrisy. Eschewing such melodrama, Gordon-Reed presents a fully human Jefferson who was fully of his time. Her account of him convinces me.

But he is not the point: it is possible to see him in such terms only because in these pages we see the Hemingses and their world, and because we see his world, which people like them made possible, through their eyes. Gordon-Reed avoids generalizations. But by working so carefully and so sensitively through the Hemingses' story, she addresses a large point. As much as Canadians, who recognize *métissage*, or Mexicans, for whom *mestizaje* is a foundation of national identity, Americans always have been a mixed people. For a perfect instance, we need look only to the one private, residential building featured on our coinage, Monticello.