

# **The Brodie Connection: Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Smith**



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Louis Midgley

Years ago, as a graduate student at Brown University, I visited Stephen Crary, then chairman of the Religious Studies Department there. I had sent him a long letter in which I presented a detailed outline of my proposed doctoral dissertation, indicating my intention to show the fundamental and fatal weakness of the theology of Paul Tillich—at that time perhaps the most famous Protestant philosophical theologian in America. I faced something of a problem with the venerable Mr. Crary, for his own dissertation had been on Paul Tillich, and I was proposing to attack not only the great Tillich himself but also some of Mr. Crary's strongly held opinions.

When I entered Mr. Crary's plush office, one thing became immediately apparent: he had done some homework on Midgley. Mr. Crary's desk was bare except for one book, which was placed in the center of the desk, the title facing me. Now the point of this story: that book was none other than Fawn McKay Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, a biography of Joseph Smith, which since its publication in 1946 had attained the status of an authoritative work. I told Mr. Crary that Fawn Brodie's book was a bad one. He replied that someone who apparently had Mormon connections had enthusiastically endorsed it and that the entire scholarly world had embraced it. I responded with some of Hugh Nibley's objections to the book. He rejoined by pointing out that, whoever this Hugh Nibley was, he was obviously a Mormon and therefore biased in favor of Joseph Smith—and therefore incapable of an objective assessment of Fawn Brodie's work. This remark ended our dialogue over my religion, but eventually Mr. Crary consented to sign what I thought was a refutation of his.

I learned from this experience a lesson that frequently has been reaffirmed: those outside the Church often think they have the objective explanation for Joseph Smith in Ms. Brodie's book. Mormons' complaints about her treatment of the Joseph Smith story are either unknown or brushed aside as biased special pleading. Fawn Brodie has built a career on the fame she gained among scholars who were troubled by Joseph Smith and the Mormons and who wanted to see them put in their place.

But recently something has happened that has called into question Ms. Brodie's previously towering reputation as a scholar: she has written another book which has turned into an academic scandal. Ms. Brodie has

traveled a road leading from Nauvoo to Monticello, and it is with Monticello that the non-Mormon world has learned what certain Latter-day Saints had known way back when she started with Nauvoo.

## I

Fawn M. Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate Biography*<sup>1</sup> has now received enough critical attention that we may begin to draw some conclusions about the quality of her recent scholarship. Where reviewers know something about Jefferson and his times, she fares very poorly. Only where the reviews are short, unsigned, or obviously written by those whose business it is to promote book sales does she receive the standard "well done."

Even those reviewers whose response to *Thomas Jefferson* is favorable agree that her "psychohistorical" approach depends as much on invention as on facts. Ms. Brodie arrives at her conclusions, in the words of one reviewer, Alan Green, by "applying intuition to scholarship and employing the methods of modern psychology."<sup>2</sup> To Green, she does prove her allegation about Jefferson's sexual involvement with Sally Hemings, a mulatto slave, a major point of the book, but she does so "less by any single unqualified historical fact than by a fine web of subtle references. . . . She proves it also by noting strange omissions in the record—most often the record Jefferson kept. It is a web of circumstance, but it is various and compelling."<sup>3</sup> Edward Weeks refers to Ms. Brodie's work as "literary psychoanalysis" based on the "questions arising in his [Jefferson's] domestic and emotional life."<sup>4</sup> Alfred Stern calls the book "a psychoanalytic history of Jefferson's complex mind and motivations . . . , a compelling, compassionate case history of the 'inner' Jefferson."<sup>5</sup> Frank X. J. Homer, writing in *America*, says "her methods are those of the 'psychohistorian', techniques that, in her words, 'look for feeling as well as fact, for nuance and metaphor as well as idea and action.'"<sup>6</sup> "Psychohistory in the hands of an amateur," Homer goes on to say in his warmly favorable review, "is capable of gross distortion," but, he assures, Ms. Brodie "has done her homework well."<sup>7</sup>

But has she?

Most of the reviewers of *Thomas Jefferson*, and particularly those who are historians themselves, would say no, Ms. Brodie has not done her homework well. Richard B. Morris, holder of the Gouverneur Morris Chair in American History at Columbia University, writes,

At times, in fact, her historical slips are embarrassing. She confuses the vote on and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. She says Jefferson turned down the offer to serve as a peace commissioner, but the record shows that. . . he accepted the appointment.<sup>8</sup>

Holman Hamilton states that

the book contains many errors of fact or of judgment involving a wide historical spectrum. These range from an unsupportable statement—which would be important if true—about Abraham Lincoln (p. 23) to giving Jefferson Davis a strange name, “Thomas Jefferson Davis” (p. 469). Mrs. Brodie confuses “Light Horse Harry” Lee with Richard Henry Lee (p. 125) and with “Black Horse Harry” Lee (p. 444). She calls Edward M. House the “president-maker” of Woodrow Wilson (p. 301). And so forth.<sup>9</sup>

“Brodie is convinced,” according to E. M. Yoder, “that Jefferson was a sly, lusty lady’s man who after the early death of his wife (in 1782) scandalized his young daughters by carrying on an affair in Paris with the English artist Maria Cosway, and in Paris and at Monticello with . . . Sally Hemings. . . . These alleged amours, for which the evidence is slight and circumstantial, form the centerpiece” of the book.<sup>10</sup> Mary-Jo Kline writes that, aside from Ms. Brodie’s reinterpretation of Jefferson’s “inner life,”

the most important new piece of evidence advanced [in support of Jefferson’s fathering Sally Hemings’s children] is an 1873 newspaper interview with Sally’s son Madison. (Since the Heminges had as much to gain by claiming descent from Jefferson as did the President’s legitimate heirs by denying that relationship, one must ask whether the testimony of Madison Hemings is any more disinterested than the disavowals by the Randolphs.) This interview, with many factual errors and obvious rewritings by the interviewer, asserts that Madison’s mother became Jefferson’s “concubine” in France and continued in that role at Monticello.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Brodie does not stop here. With no shred of testimony from Jefferson or from Sally Hemings, she goes on to argue that the affair was a deep, mutual commitment, “a serious passion that brought both parties much private happiness over a period lasting thirty-eight years.” Once committed to this view, Mrs. Brodie allows it to distort the closing third of her book.<sup>11</sup>

“Psychohistorical frills apart,” one reviewer states in the *Economist*, “Mrs. Brodie’s ‘findings’ lack the novelty which their prominence in her pages would suggest.” The rumors of Jefferson’s liaison with “Black Sally” originated with “a scandal-mongering journalist, James Callendar. . . . The allegation was not proved then and has not been proved since.”<sup>12</sup> Paul F. Boller, Jr., writes,

[Her] evidence for Jefferson’s miscegenation: James T. Callendar’s allegations . . . ; the fact that Jefferson and Sally were in the same places (Paris and Monticello) nine months before the births of each of Sally’s seven children; and the memoirs of two former Monticello slaves. . . . The evidence is of course purely hearsay and circumstantial and . . . it is important to remember that her evidence would scarcely hold up in a court of law. For the tenderness of Jefferson’s relations with Sally she has of course no evidence whatsoever.<sup>13</sup>

Holman Hamilton points out that Madison Hemings “erred at least four times in ten lines in that part of his reminiscences reproduced near the bottom of p. 472. On the basis of this portion of his story, is it possible for anyone to know whether other segments were similarly inaccurate?”<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the inaccuracies in Ms. Brodie’s book and her manipulation of shaky evidence, various reviewers have pointed out other scholarly problems in *Thomas Jefferson*. Possibly the most common complaint among reviewers is Fawn Brodie’s lack of depth in her understanding of Jefferson’s times. In discussing some of Ms. Brodie’s “questionable speculations,” Lois Banner writes, “One wishes . . . that Brodie had steeped herself as fully in studies of eighteenth-century rhetoric and social custom as she has in twentieth-century psychology.”<sup>15</sup> According to Mary-Jo Kline, “She often forgets that Jefferson lived in another culture and another age.”<sup>16</sup> Winthrop Jordan claims she is guilty of “impos[ing] our century upon his [Jefferson’s],”<sup>17</sup> and Max Beloff holds that Ms. Brodie has imposed her own ideals on Jefferson: “It is because of Mrs. Brodie’s own clear commitment to ideals of racial equality that she wishes to depict Jefferson as setting the tabu [against miscegenation] aside.”<sup>18</sup>

Winthrop Jordan, historian at the University of California at Berkeley, accuses Ms. Brodie of “bad ‘psychology.’”<sup>19</sup> Bruce Mazlish, psychohistorian and MIT professor, says, “Brodie’s analysis of the psychological situation is simply not convincing—[she] . . . takes as bedrock what is still the shifting sands of speculation.”<sup>20</sup>

Another charge commonly leveled at Ms. Brodie is that she is more concerned with Jefferson’s “intimate life” than with his historical contributions. “Nor is Brodie of much help with the larger questions of how Jefferson’s private life affected his public positions,”<sup>21</sup> states Richard B. Morris. The *Economist*, listing the amount of space she devotes to each aspect of Jefferson’s life, notes,

Her Jefferson is not the author of the Constitution of Virginia (three quarters of a page) or of the Declaration of Independence (two pages), the Secretary of State (scattered references), the architect of the Louisiana Purchase (one paragraph) or even (his own proudest boast) the author of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (one line). He is the would-be seducer of Betsy Walker (a chapter), the lover of Maria Cosway (another chapter), the father of five mulatto bastards by Sally Hemings, his slave girl (all or most of seven chapters, as well as an appendix.)<sup>22</sup>

After a discussion of the truth of falsehood of the Sally Hemings matter, Winthrop Jordan concludes: “Most of all, I remain persuaded that it does not much matter.”<sup>23</sup>

David Herbert Donald, Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard, remarking that Fawn Brodie strives to picture Jefferson as “a secret swinger,” suggests that “she ought to have given her book a better title. Why not ‘By Sex Obsessed’?”<sup>24</sup> He goes on to say that Ms. Brodie

appears to be a disciple of the late A. C. Kinsey and believes that a man ought to be judged by the fullness and frequency of his sex life. Since Thomas Jefferson was a very great man, he obviously could not have been the “somewhat monkish, abstemious, continent, and virtually passionless” figure portrayed by previous biographers. He must have had a string of amatory adventures. *Thomas Jefferson* . . . is Ms. Brodie’s heroic effort to restore to Jefferson his full humanity.<sup>25</sup>

Donald examines Ms. Brodie’s efforts to find something sexually interesting in Jefferson’s associations with four different women. With his wife, Martha Wayles, Jefferson “certainly did not break any . . . records. Nor, despite Mrs. Brodie’s enthusiastic exertions, can much mileage be gained from the tale that in his youth Jefferson . . . made an improper advance toward Mrs. [Betsy] Walker.”<sup>26</sup> After his wife’s death, Jefferson carried on a correspondence with a Maria Cosway. Donald continues: “Nothing in the correspondence indicates that the two progressed beyond an epistolary romance, but Mrs. Brodie, drawing upon ‘feeling as well as fact,’ upon ‘nuance and metaphor as well as idea and action,’ is sure what happened.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, Ms. Brodie unveils the major episode of her argument—Jefferson’s alleged affair with Sally Hemings. “Here at last,” writes Donald, “Mrs. Brodie finds Jefferson exhibiting that sexual vitality every great man must have. . . . The fact that no other Jefferson biographer—and all of them have had access to exactly the same sources Mrs. Brodie uses—accepts these tales of his sexual prowess troubles Mrs. Brodie not at all.”<sup>28</sup> Donald goes on to comment that Ms. Brodie is not

bothered by the fact that she can adduce only slim factual support for her tales of what she primly calls Jefferson’s “intimate life.” Reluctantly she confesses that there is “no real evidence” as to what happened in the Betsy Walker case. And documentation for the liaison with Sally Hemings is “simply unrecoverable.” Such absence of evidence would stop most historians, but it does not faze Mrs. Brodie. Where there are documents, she knows how to read them in a special way. . . . Where documents have been lost, Mrs. Brodie can make much of the gap. . . . Mrs. Brodie is masterful in using negative evidence too. . . .

But Mrs. Brodie is at her best when there is no evidence whatever to could her vision. Then she is free to speculate.<sup>29</sup>

After she has told her readers that “no one can know” Jefferson’s sentiments on one occasion, she “then proceeds to reveal in detail what he must have felt.”<sup>30</sup> Donald sums up his reactions to *Thomas Jefferson* with the conclusion that the book

bears less resemblance to any conventional historical work than it does to Ignatius Donnelly’s devoted efforts to prove by an ingenious cipher that Francis Bacon wrote the works of Shakespeare. Indeed, in Mrs. Brodie’s untiring hands, the whole corpus of Jefferson’s writings and records has become a kind of elaborate cryptogram, which she has decoded to reveal his sexual secrets.<sup>31</sup>

The most intensive review of *Thomas Jefferson* is by Garry Wills, historian and writer of a recent book on Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence. Writes Wills:

Two vast things, each wondrous in itself, combine to make this book a prodigy—the author’s industry, and her ignorance. One can only be so intricately wrong by deep study and long effort, enough to make Ms. Brodie the fasting hermit and very saint of ignorance. The result has an eerie perfection, as if all the world’s greatest builders had agreed to rear, with infinite skill, the world’s ugliest building. . . . She has managed to write a long and complex study of Jefferson without displaying any acquaintance with eighteenth-century plantation conditions, political thought, literary conventions, or scientific categories—all of which greatly concerned Jefferson. She constantly finds double meanings in colonial language, basing her arguments on the present usage of key words. She often mistakes the first meaning of a word before assigning it an improbable second meaning and an impossible third one.<sup>32</sup>

Wills holds that Ms. Brodie’s “obsession with all the things she can find or invent about Jefferson’s sex life” is the main thing she has “poured into her work. . . . Since that life does not seem a very extensive or active one, Ms. Brodie has to use whatever hints she can contrive. In particular, she reads the whole Jefferson corpus as a secret code referring to . . . Sally Hemings.”<sup>33</sup> Wills is especially concerned over the constant use of what he calls “Ms. Brodie’s hint-and-run method—to ask a rhetorical question, and then proceed on the assumption that it has been settled in her favor, making the first surmise a basis for second and third ones, in a towering rickety structure of unsupported conjecture.”<sup>34</sup> Wills concludes that Ms. Brodie’s speculating in *Thomas Jefferson* “involves heroic feats of misunderstanding and constant labor of ignorance. This seems too high a price to pay when the same appetites can be more readily gratified by those Hollywood fan magazines, with their wealth of unfounded conjecture on the sex lives of others, from which Mrs. Brodie has borrowed her scholarly methods.”<sup>35</sup>

## II

In 1946 this same Ms. Brodie published *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet*.<sup>36</sup> Critics have regularly acclaimed that book as the best study of Joseph Smith and the Mormons. Whenever the subject of Joseph Smith or the Mormons has come up since 1946, Fawn Brodie’s book has been considered authoritative.

*No Man Knows My History* had some things going for it from the beginning. Ms. Brodie characterized Joseph Smith in such a way that his religious claims were seemingly denied for non-Mormon readers. The only people she could possibly offend in her 1946 book were the Mormons; she told everyone else what they wanted to hear.



After her success with Joseph Smith book, Ms. Brodie went on to publish biographies of Sir Richard Burton and Thaddeus Stevens, which were respectfully if not always enthusiastically received by reviewers. Sir Richard Burton and Thaddeus Stevens are fairly obscure and uncontroversial figures in history—no one was really concerned enough to make a fuss if her account of such people were fictional, inaccurate, or distorted. As one reviewer notes, until *Thomas Jefferson*, Fawn Brodie “has made a scholarly specialty of oddballs (e.g., Thaddeus Stevens and Joseph Smith).<sup>37</sup>

But her reputation was built on the Joseph Smith book. When some Latter-day Saints ventured to challenge her scholarship, their objections were ignored or brushed aside because, after all, they had an obvious vested interest in defending Joseph Smith. But in *Thomas Jefferson*, Fawn Brodie is writing for the first time about a man whose life and character are well known to numerous students and to a number of very eminent scholars.

In 1946, when Hugh Nibley first attempted to challenge Ms. Brodie’s scholarship,<sup>38</sup> he was denounced as flippant and his arguments were discounted; but there are some rather remarkable similarities between his objections to *No Man Knows My History* and the current scholarly criticisms of *Thomas Jefferson*, which complain as Dr. Nibley did of Ms. Brodie’s manipulation and tangling of evidence, of her obsession with sex, of her ignorance of the larger background of the subject she is treating, and of her special “intuition” into the minds of people. Perhaps it is time for non-Mormon historians to examine once again Fawn M. Brodie’s still-respected earlier work, *No Man Knows My History*; for that book may suffer from the same faults now so painfully evident to the reviewers of *Thomas Jefferson*.

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1. Fawn McKay Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1974).

2. Alan Green, “The Inner Man of Monticello,” *Saturday Review/World* 1 (6 April 1974):23.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

4. Edward Weeks, “The Peripatetic Reviewer,” *Atlantic* 233 (April 1974):118.

5. Alfred Stern, *Literary Journal*, 14 April 1974, p. 1122.

6. Frank X. J. Homer, *American*, 1 June 1974, p. 439.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Richard B. Morris, “The Very Private Jefferson,” *New Leader* 57, no. 11 (27 May 1974):25.

9. Holman Hamilton, book review in *Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 1 (February 1975):108.

10. Edwin M. Yoder, Jr., “An Unshaken Hero,” *National Review* 26, no. 19 (10 May 1974):542.

11. Mary-Jo Kline, book review in *New England Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (December 1974):642.
12. Eyre Methuen, book review in *Economist* 255, no. 6874 (24 May 1975):104.
13. Paul F. Boller, Jr., "Two Democrats: Aristocratic and Democratic," *Southwest Review* 59 (Summer 1974):323.
14. Hamilton, p. 108.
15. Lois W. Banner, book review in *American Historical Review* 80, no. 5 (December 1975):1390.
16. Kline, p. 623.
17. Winthrop D. Jordan, book review in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., vol. 32, no. 3 (July 1975), p. 512.
18. Max Beloff, "The Sally Hemings Affair," *Encounter* (London) 43 (September 1974):53.
19. Jordan, p. 511.
20. Bruce Mazlish, book review in *Journal of American History* 61, no. 4 (March 1975):1090.
21. Morris, "The Very Private Jefferson," p. 25.
22. Methuen, p. 104.
23. Jordan, p. 512.
24. David Herbert Donald, "By Sex Obsessed," *Commentary* 58, no. 1 (July 1974):98.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Garry Wills, "Uncle Thomas's Cabin," *New York Review of Books* 21 (18 April 1978):26.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
36. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).
37. Yoder, "An Unshaken Hero," p. 542.
38. Hugh Nibley, *No Ma'am That's Not History* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946).