

Monticello

Monticello is the Virginia estate once owned by Thomas Jefferson. Its name is Italian, and means 'little mountain.'

I remember a Monticello of my childhood, though I have never been there. Fields of lush green; the Rotunda, a fresh whiteness; and a mood of bucolic serenity, a feel of quietness and slow time. I do not know where this impression came from. I had seen pictures of Monticello in books and on television, and I knew Jefferson – or rather, he was an emblem of my boyhood. But this is not enough to account for my Monticello: a place without history, almost without a past, and peopleless. The last, in particular, never seemed strange to me, though it does now. Not once did I imagine the house and the fields as anything but empty. Perhaps people would have spoiled the view; and brought with them noise, bustle – the world – which was just what my Monticello locked out. Even today, this sense of the place lingers in me. It has survived its clash with history and the views of others. It is one of those vague and powerful notions which survive any contact with reality. And so as I read about the place, and see the many different forms it has taken over time, those other Monticellos compete and meld with mine.

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Most Westerners take for granted the value of historical sites, the notion they should be preserved as 'heritage.' And yet we forget the idea is a recent one; its wide acceptance blinds us to its newness, its strangeness. True – even the ancient world had its travellers in search of relics, its pilgrims to the tombs of great men.¹ But our sense of the past, which insists on protecting the things of a lost world precisely because *it no longer exists*, is a different thing altogether. Not until the end of the nineteenth century did people begin to think that Monticello, as a historical place, should be preserved in something like its 'original state.' After Jefferson's death, it was sold in 1832 to James T. Barclay for seven thousand dollars. In sight of the Rotunda and its classical columns, in the fields where the author of the Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States had taken his walks, this man planned to grow silkworms. The scheme failed. In 1834, Uriah P. Levy bought the house and its two hundred and eighteen acres for \$2,700.²

¹ Polybius tried to map the route Hannibal took into Italy, and claimed he had found the stone pillar on which the general marked the number of his troops. Augustus went to Alexandria to see the body of the conqueror, and came back with a handful of dust.

² Peterson, M., 'Monticello,' in Leuchtenburg, W.E., ed., *American Places: Encounters with History*, (New York, 2000), p 278.

There is another reason, apart from the era's different sense of history, why it was possible for Monticello to be sold off as a commercial enterprise. It is surprisingly easy to forget, but the people who bought and sold Jefferson's home in the 1830s were his contemporaries. The man – and the place – had not yet been hallowed by history, by distance in the past. There were people alive who had seen Jefferson in the flesh, who had shaken his hand, who knew his faults. He was still a far more 'human' figure than he is today. Nevertheless, even in these early years there were visitors to Monticello who came because Jefferson had lived there. Sightseers disturbed the peace of Barclay's silkworm farm almost as soon as he moved in.³ The account of one of these sightseers, by John H.B Latrobe in 1832, shows the place was neglected. But it also reveals how at least one person already saw Monticello as a place made important by the things which happened there:

A steep and rough road led me to the summit, and on the esplanade formed there, partly by nature and partly by art, was the mansion house and its offices, now under the property of Dr. Barclay. The first thing that strikes you is the utter ruin and desolation of everything...[but] when his [Jefferson's] spirit took its flight from it, there remained a halo lingering around it, which has made it a monument to his memory. As such I visited it, and as such it will be visited until the history of America shall cease to have an influence on the conduct of its people.⁴

At first glance, this reads like descriptions of Monticello written much later. It seems as if the Monticello of the twentieth century – the site of historical tourism and a kind of Jefferson cult – was already a full-fledged reality less than ten years after Jefferson's death. But Latrobe, the writer, was far from typical. He was the son of Benjamin H. Latrobe, the architect and engineer who had worked for President Jefferson as superintendent of the federal buildings in Washington.⁵ He had a special interest in the late owner of the estate. More importantly, Latrobe was one of those people – they exist in every age – who unwittingly embody trends which only come to ripeness in the future.⁶ In 1862, thirty years after Latrobe's visit, the will of Uriah Levy did leave Monticello to the nation; but not as a monument to an important man in American history. Instead, the place was to become a school for the orphan children of naval warrant officers. (It is possible Jefferson would have approved. But then, he was vain; and maybe would have preferred the

³ Ibid, p 279.

⁴ Quoted in Semmes, J.E., *John H.B Latrobe and His Times, 1803 – 1891*, (Baltimore, 1917), p 248-50.

⁵ Ibid, p 2.

⁶ Historians are often surprised when they meet with a source which looks and sounds very contemporary; which seems to be outside the spirit of its age. They should not be. For where else are the seeds of the future to come, but from the past which came before it?

pristine shrine of today.) The plan never went ahead, because the Confederate Government sold Monticello in 1864 as “alien property.”⁷

It was a strange thing to call the home of one of Virginia’s favourites sons, a Governor of the state and the author of its Constitution. True – Levy was a Northerner, and the Richmond Government must have been desperate for money near the end of the Civil War. But after the Union occupied Virginia, they also failed to take up the offer of Levy’s will, and let the estate revert to the family.⁸ The Monticello of the twentieth century – a place fit only for a memorial and museum – was not yet a reality in the American imagination. Instead, visitors to the place before the 1880s were more inspired by the view from the mountain, by the natural beauty of the scene. Reverend Stephen Higginson Tyng, in 1840, recorded this:

The whole prospect is bounded by the Blue Ridge, which stretches off towards the north, and which Mr Jefferson estimated might be seen for near a hundred miles in its extent. The summits of these mountains form the horizon, cast into every shape of beauty...You stand and trace out this irregularly curving horizon, until it fades away in the distant north, perhaps sixty or eighty miles from your own position...How could an intelligent mind abide and dwell with the witness of this glory before it day by day, and fail to offer acknowledgement and homage to the great being who designed the whole?⁹

Tyng was not even an admirer of Jefferson. He disapproved of his ‘atheism’, and was pleased to see that “his [Jefferson’s] influence has passed away. I have never heard his name spoken with so little respect, and so much aversion, as in this very neighbourhood in which he lived and died.”¹⁰ Nevertheless – Tyng was not a man untouched by literary Romanticism. He wrote his account in 1840, forty years after writers like Coleridge and Wordsworth began to shape the tone of English and American letters. Their influence shows in his choice of words: not so much in his lyrical description of the mountains (though that was a Romantic trait), but in his invocation of the beauty of the natural world as proof of the Deity’s presence. Later visitors to Monticello would not share Tyng’s explicitly religious sense of the place. But they also saw the grandeur of the landscape in Romantic terms; and their accounts are enough alike to form a *genre* of writing about Monticello. Benson J. Lossing, in 1853, talked about “the magnificent mountains, the rolling plains garnished by the tiller’s hand...and the vast expanse of woods and fields which spread out in panoramic beauty...”¹¹ The members of the Jefferson Club of St. Louis, on a visit in 1902, were “impressed by the

⁷ Peterson, p 279.

⁸ By 1882, a Jefferson Levy – Uriah’s nephew – became the sole owner. Peterson, p 280.

⁹ Letter of Tyng, S.H., *The Episcopal Recorder*, June 13, 1840.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Lossing, B.J., ‘Monticello,’ *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 7, 1853, p 145-51, at 146.

sublimity of the scene...the disappearing mists of the morning, across valleys of rolling farm land to other mountains..."¹²

It is possible these people had read each other's accounts. But it is far more likely they were simply raised in the same literary *milieu*; their eyes had been trained, and their minds formed, to see in a place like Monticello a picture of pastoral beauty. Later, a new Monticello would be made from its historical, political, and national associations. And yet this vision of the place – as a largely natural space, not a spot of ground hallowed by particular thoughts and deeds – still lingers. In my own imagination for instance, it was always the landscape which filled the scene, and never the house. Now – I had never read the accounts of Tyng and Lossing, but I still somehow absorbed something close to their sense of the place. This may not be so surprising: the late twentieth century was still a post-Romantic world, particularly for a boy raised on 1950s Hollywood epics, and historical novels for children written by Englishwomen of a certain age and class. It may also be true that what the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga called "the ideal of the pastoral life, the bucolic sentiment," has a lasting appeal. Huizinga argued this longing for the gentle life was, even for the ancient Greeks, "a product of urban lassitude."¹³ The judgement may be too harsh; and yet perhaps only someone born in a city, whose days were spent in the inner west of Sydney, and for whom nature was a thing in books, could have dreamt my Monticello.

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In most of the early descriptions of Monticello, the house itself is rarely mentioned; after the 1880s, it becomes the centre. This has much to do with the growth of an historical and antiquarian interest in Jefferson the man. He had, after all, lived in the house; and in the twentieth century it was reconstructed to look as if he were still living there. It also has to do with the melding of the older, Romanticised Monticello with the new political and nationalist shrine. 'Melding' is key: for the visit of the St Louis Jefferson Club in 1902, some ten years before the beginning of the campaign to make the place publicly owned, shows traces of both:

[The] members looked away from Jefferson's mountain through the disappearing mists of the morning, across valleys of rolling farm land...[and] each one experienced *an even deeper feeling* of standing on the ground forever rendered sacred by the life and deeds, the death and dust of one who had been the greatest benefactor of mankind...The scene, the air of the place, the memories aroused, the patriotic emotions vivified by the associations, the inrushing sense of the full meaning of

¹² Anonymous, *The Pilgrimage to Monticello by the Jefferson Club of St. Louis*, (St. Louis, 1902), p 5.

¹³ Huizinga, J., *Men and Ideas: History, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance*, (New York, 1959), p 84.

Jefferson in the history of the modern world of thought and action, all these made for a sentiment of tenderness for the man who died there only to live forever in a Nation's life...¹⁴

Certainly, the members of the Jefferson Club were far from typical. Some Americans had no doubt never heard of the place; and of those who had, few would likely have used the grand word 'sacred' to describe it. Nevertheless, the Club's choice of words is interesting: where previous visitors to Monticello talked mostly about the landscape, now it is "memories," "history," Jefferson's place in "the Nation's life," which are important. American nationalism was slowly building a new Monticello. And the growth in America of popular nationalism, and of a popular interest in history, has always been intertwined. Strangely, the American national myth has both historical *and* unhistorical tendencies. On the one hand, it relies on history for its content: American nationalism is founded on identifying the past with the present, the 'good fights' of the American Revolution and Civil War with whatever Americans are doing now. On the other hand, it can never get *too* historical, or the trick will not work: a close look at men like Jefferson and Washington – eighteenth century patrician planters who owned slaves – and it would be clear contemporary America has deep rifts with its past. Since the 1880s, the Monticello of popular imagination has been historical enough to be admired; but not so historical as to be a *problem*.¹⁵

By the time of the St Louis Club visit, enough time had passed since Jefferson's death to give Monticello a respectable aura, an historical 'sheen.' In 1853, fifty years earlier, Benson Lossing had still seen in the place "only the empty offerings of laudable curiosity."¹⁶ Lossing was writing for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, a popular paper with a large readership; his view may not have been unusual. What is harder to believe for a contemporary is what Lossing did for a living: the man was an historian. Clearly, times had changed by the turn of the century. Other motives, besides an interest in history, lay behind the St Louis pilgrimage. The Club was a Democratic group; its politics were Progressive, and opposed to the administration of Republican President William McKinley. Only five years before, William Jennings Bryan, the nation's most prominent Progressive politician, had been the first to call for

¹⁴ Italics added. *The Pilgrimage to Monticello*, p 5-6.

¹⁵ Thus the selective and almost *pseudo-historical* quality of many of America's 'house museums': Washington's Mount Vernon, Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House, and Jefferson's Monticello. The house museum was a motif of American history at this time. In 1925, Henry Ford restored the house in which he was born to look just as it did in 1876, the year he was thirteen. He even found a woman who he thought looked like his mother, dressed her in nineteenth century clothes, and filmed her spinning by the fireside. This was the man who said: "History is more or less bunk." And yet the contradiction is not as great as it seems. For the true historical instinct knows the impossibility of reconstructing the past in this way; it is precisely because the past *is past* which makes it interesting.

¹⁶ Lossing, p 151.

Monticello to be publicly owned.¹⁷ In the same year as the pilgrimage, former Democratic Congressman A.J Cummings wrote an article about the Levys' ownership. The title: 'A National Humiliation.'¹⁸ As Patricia West has argued, the campaign to oust the Levys from Monticello was "bound up with a Democratic Party struggling to employ the image of Jefferson to hold together factions: northern and southern, urban and rural, nativist and immigrant."¹⁹

And yet, West has missed some of the subtleties of the movement, the hidden currents of the politics surrounding the new national symbol. She argues the battle for Monticello became part of a larger campaign by Southerners to tarnish Reconstruction and recover 'the Old South' for the history books.²⁰ This is true as far as it goes; but it is far from the whole story. One of the more interesting things in Monticello's history is the relative *absence* of Southerners, either as visitors or as campaigners for a public memorial. If anywhere, the centre of the Monticello cult was in the Mid-West: the heartland of Progressive politics. Bryan was from Nebraska, and the members of the St Louis Club were from Missouri. When the Monticello Memorial Foundation was established in 1911 to campaign for public ownership full-time, its officers were in New York.²¹ Even President Woodrow Wilson, born in Virginia and a supporter of public ownership, was not really a Southerner: the inclinations of his mind were Yankee, almost Puritan, and more suited to New England than his native land.²²

Southerners may have been less interested in Monticello because the South was, until well into the twentieth century, less nationalistic than the North or Mid-West. Partly, this was to do with the Civil War. The South had, after all, lost; and so the event which bound the rest of the country together had at the same time made the South even more of a place apart. Just as important was the uneven spread of industrialisation and mass publishing. In the North, and to a lesser extent in the Mid-West, Americans were living more than ever in cities (though it would not be until the census of 1924 that a majority of citizens would be registered as living in 'urban' areas). Living in the same streets, reading the same newspapers: city life gave Americans a greater sense of living in one, 'imagined' community.²³ It is no contradiction that the

¹⁷ Peterson, p 279.

¹⁸ Cummings, A.J., 'A National Humiliation,' *The New York Sun*, August 15, 1902.

¹⁹ West, P., *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*, (Washington, 1999), p 103.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p 104.

²¹ Peterson, p 281.

²² Wilson had lived in the North, as an academic and then President of Princeton University, since leaving the University of Virginia as a young man. But on seeing *The Birth of a Nation*, W.D Griffith's sympathetic tale of the Klan released for cinemas in 1915, he did make a famous comment: "It is history written with lightning. And the terrible thing is, it's all true."

²³ Anderson, B., *Imagined Communities*, (London, 1991), p 5-15. The one great exception: the recent migrant population in places like New York.

'nationalist' Progressive movement, of which Bryan and the St Louis Club were part, was supposed to represent farmers against the overwhelming financial power of 'the city.' Bryan may have been a country boy; but the people in the Club were all urban party members, the kind of political activists who always lead movements, and only canvas their so-called supporters for votes. It is hard to say how far down the ranks their image of Monticello had spread. Jefferson was a convenient symbol for an agrarian movement; throughout his life, he preached the virtues of farming and the life of the soil. But to idolise an aristocratic planter, and make of his estate a place where a man could find "the full meaning of Jefferson in the history of the modern world of thought and action"? This kind of silliness took some education, and – perhaps – a dose of Huizinga's 'urban lassitude' as well.

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Not every pilgrim to Monticello saw what the members of the Jefferson Club saw. Maud Littleton was the wife of a former Democratic Congressman, and the founder of the Monticello Memorial Foundation.²⁴ In 1912, she testified before Congress about the need for public ownership:

[When I was there] I did not get the feeling of being in the house Thomas Jefferson loved and built and made sacred, and of paying tribute to him. I did not seem to feel his spirit hovering over around those portraits. My heart sunk. My dream was spoiled. Jefferson seemed detached from Monticello. He seemed to have been brushed to one side and to be fading into a dim tradition. Somebody else was taking his place in Monticello – an outsider. A rank outsider...It seemed to me that the people of the United States should own Monticello; that it should be public property like Mount Vernon...*that it should be furnished as much like Mr Jefferson had it as possible...*²⁵

Though Littleton's sense of the place was very different from the others, she came back to the same word: 'sacred.'²⁶ By it, she meant only the house where

²⁴ Peterson, M., ed., *Visitors to Monticello*, (Charlottesville, 1989), p 183.

²⁵ Italics added. Statement of Mrs. Maud Littleton before the House Rules Committee, July 24, 1912, *Congressional Record*, 62nd Cong., 2nd Sess., Appendix, 859.

²⁶ When secular Westerners use 'sacred,' they rarely mean it in the sense it once had. For as the great religious historian Mircea Eliade has shown, the purpose of a 'true' sacred site is to do away with time. Building an alter or temple requires a re-enactment of the creation, a going back to the beginning of things: the time before time when man and the gods were not yet sundered, and could speak to each other. Eliade, M., Trask, W., trans., *The Sacred and the Profane*, (New York, 1961). For secular people, a 'sacred' site is another thing altogether; usually a place hallowed by *history*, by an association with particular people and events from the past (thus the hidden wisdom of words: the Latin root of secular means 'age', 'time', or 'of the time'). V.S Naipaul, an astute writer with a keen sense of history, has written about Vijayanager in India, the great Hindu city sacked by the Muslim invaders in 1565. The place is well known to Westerners interested in Indian history. In India, even students of history

Thomas Jefferson had lived. Not once in her testimony does she mention the landscape, the view from the mountaintop which had so taken nearly all the visitors who came before her. For Littleton, all the value of Monticello is in its historical associations; the place will not be whole until the Levys are turfed out, and the house is rebuilt to look just as it did in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. This kind of thinking is a long way from Benson Lossing, writing over fifty years before and seeing only “curiosity” in the place. And yet Lossing was an historian for a living, while Littleton was not. Nevertheless, hers was the more sensitive – if not the deeper – sense of history. In the period between 1853 and 1912, an historical profession, inspired by German ideas of craft and scholarship, had grown up in American universities. At the same time, there emerged a more *popular* interest in the past (as always in history, it is hard to say if one inspired the other; or if the two movements were of a piece.) Maud Littleton’s Monticello – a place very like the austere, World Heritage Listed monument of today – belongs firmly to this time in American history.

The fact seems surprising; but despite all the fuss from the likes of Bryan and Littleton, Monticello never became publicly owned. Littleton’s campaign only drew from Congress a joint resolution declaring Monticello “the Mecca of all lovers of liberty,” and noting a petition, signed by “thousands of patriotic American citizens,” which complained about the Levys barring the public from the house.²⁷ The meaning of this failure is far from clear at first glance. Mount Vernon, Washington’s home, was publicly owned: did this mean Jefferson and Monticello did not have as important a place in the American imagination? Maybe – but there could have been other reasons why Congress failed to vote the money. Mount Vernon had been a house museum since before the Civil War; by the 1900s, buying up a large estate in Virginia was far more difficult and costly. Bryan and Littleton – and, by association, Jefferson and Monticello – were closely linked with the Democrats; in the years of the campaign, Congress was controlled by the Republicans. In 1923, the Levys gave in and sold the place to group called the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation. According to a supporter, it was

An organization of patriotic citizens who reflect and unite the aspirations of all those who have wished and worked to see Monticello a national shrine. Its purpose is to...restore it to the condition in which Jefferson knew it, and so to maintain it, dedicated to the memory of that great man.²⁸

have never heard of it. Pilgrims still visit a temple which survives amidst the ruins; but they come because it is a temple, not because it is a place with a past. Naipaul, V.S., *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, (London, 1979), p 4-5.

²⁷ West, p 103.

²⁸ Wiltach, P., *Jefferson and Monticello*, (New York, 1925), p 223.

The quote is from a book about Jefferson's private life published in 1925: almost a hagiography of the man's daily habits and household inventions at Monticello. The author, Wilstach, had already written a book about Mount Vernon. Though the publisher – Doubleday – survives to this day, the records about the book are either lost or impossible to find without travelling to the United States. Though I cannot prove it, I suspect Wilstach was encouraged to write this book by people connected to the sale of Monticello (speculation of course; but then, perhaps not unworthy of an historian). The tone of the work is unnaturally pious: "Monticello was never without children while [Jefferson] lived. It is a permanent pleasant picture that – the great wise and loving man and the love and laughter of children all around the house."²⁹ The reference to the Foundation quoted above reads like a press release.

Postscript:

In 1956, President Sukarno of Indonesia, a Muslim, made a trip to Monticello. According to a report in *The New York Times*,

He described [the visit] as a pilgrimage...placed a wreath on Jefferson's tomb...[then] reminded his audience he had come to the United States to look for 'a state of mind' and said that he had found it already, 'centered here in Virginia, where my great teacher, Jefferson, lived.'³⁰

It is hard to say what all this meant. Publicly owned or not, Monticello had been established after the 1920s as one of America's 'bona fide' national monuments. Sukarno's visit may have been sincere; proof of Monticello's fame abroad, at least amongst the educated elites of certain countries. But it may also have been mere form and ceremony, a ploy to curry favour with a powerful ally. 1956 was the height of the Cold War, and Sukarno's government was dependant on the US for money and arms. Nevertheless, the mere fact of the visit says something: the Indonesian wanted to make a statement in America, and he felt Monticello was the place to do it.

May Sarton was not the sort of person usually associated with American nationalism. She was a lyric and confessional poet, and a lesbian. Her most

²⁹ Did Wilstach mean to include in this scene the mulatto children of the household's slaves?

³⁰ Durdin, T., 'Sukarno Homage Paid to Jefferson,' *New York Times*, May 21, 1956.

famous work was a novel about McCarthyism.³¹ And yet, in 1948, she wrote this about Monticello:

This legendary house, this dear enchanted tomb,
Once so supremely lived in, and for life designed,
Will none of moldy death nor give it room,
Charged with the presence of a living mind...

All the joys of invention and craft and wit,
Are freely granted here, all given rein,
But taut within the classic form and ruled by it,
Elegant, various, magnificent – and plain...

The time must come when, from the people's heart,
Government grows to meet the stature of a man,
And freedom finds its form, that great unruly art,
And the state is a house designed by Jefferson.³²

There are a number of motifs here. First, Sarton appeals to something like the sense of place experienced by the members of the St Louis Jefferson Club. They too saw eternity at Monticello: for them, it was “forever rendered sacred” by Jefferson’s life; for Sarton, it will have “none of moldy death.” Like the bucolic, Romantic Monticello, this Monticello owes a great deal to the traditions of Western – and especially English – literature. Shakespeare and Shelly, in the same scheme of rhyming couplets used by Sarton, wrote about how love, verses, or monuments can survive the death of the people who made them.³³ Like Littleton though, Sarton did not see in Monticello a pastoral scene. Not once does she mention the grounds or landscape. Instead, Sarton brought something new: a sense of Monticello as an architectural wonder, a beautiful house in itself. By 1948, the Foundation had restored the place, and the ‘ruin’ seen by earlier visitors was gone. Sarton could now speak of a structure “Elegant, various, magnificent – and plain”: as good as a description yet written of the neo-classical façade.

Like Littleton and the members of the St Louis Club, Sarton admired Jefferson. But her Monticello was more complicated than theirs (an interesting question: had Sarton actually been to Monticello, or was hers, like mine, an imagined place?). The last stanza of the poem suggests the America she knew had not lived up to Jefferson’s dream: “the time” she speaks of, when “government grows to meet the stature of a man,” has not yet come. In the

³¹ *Faithful Are the Wounds* (New York, 1955). See Fredericksen, E., ‘Sarton, May,’ *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000, at ><http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-03336.html>, ac. 27 May 2006.

³² Sarton, M., ‘Monticello,’ in *The Lion and the Rose*, (New York, 1948), p 15.

³³ Eg, Sonnet XVIII: “Nor shall death brag thou wander’st in his shade...” Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’: “Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things...” Sarton would almost certainly have read these poems.

same year Sarton wrote these lines, President Truman gave a speech in which he called the US “the greatest nation the sun ever shone upon.” He may have had reason to boast: America was the richest nation in the history of the world, she had just won a World War, and her armies occupied Western Europe and Japan. Nevertheless, Sarton did not share in the sense of easy satisfaction. Unlike the people who made Jefferson’s home a national shrine, she saw the place as something of a reproach, rather than an affirmation of things already achieved. Her Monticello was a promise, not a monument.

Another complicated vision of Monticello is found in a kind of prose poem published in 2003. It is both a short story and a non-fiction reflective piece, with the narration going back and forth in time between a contemporary tour of Monticello, and imaginary scenes from the life of the plantation’s slaves. The piece was published in *Callaloo*, a journal produced by Johns Hopkins University for African and African-American writers. The author was Vesper Osborne, a black woman:

Monticello, ‘little mountain’ in Italian, was home – refuge – for Jefferson and the white family born of his flesh and blood. For the slave, Monticello was an invisible cage. A prison. An existence with no choices, no voice...Monticello inspires and angers me, simultaneously. I am torn between the ideal of a free democracy and the reality of slavery. Monticello is majestic, elegant, but a symbol of the sweat and toil of my slave ancestors...Monticello you are magnificent. Monticello, you are a sorrow.³⁴

The writing may be overblown; yet it reflects a movement of recent years which, though it may not have *tarnished* Monticello as a national monument, has at least made its place in the American imagination more ambiguous. Certainly, Osborne is hardly a ‘popular’ writer, and her work was probably read by only a handful of Americans. But the story of Sally Hemmings, the slave Thomas supposedly had children with, *has* become part of popular culture since a DNA test in 1998 suggested the descendents of Hemmings had Jefferson blood in their veins.³⁵ A best-selling book – *Sally Hemmings: A Novel* –has been made into a telemovie starring Sam Neil.³⁶ In neither of these works is Jefferson portrayed as a bad man. Rather, he is seen as a flawed human being imprisoned by the assumptions of his time. Jefferson knows slavery is wrong and goes against his declared principles; but he cannot bring himself to free even his own slaves. This split-minded character of the pot-boiler and daytime television is actually more *historical* than the glass-museum figure admired by Maud Littleton. The irony is that it was a growing popular

³⁴ Osborne, Vesper., ‘Monticello’, *Callaloo*, vol. 26, no. 3, (2003), p 590-2

³⁵ Transcript from ‘The News Hour with Jim Lehrer,’ August 23, 1998, at >www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/white_house/july-dec98/Jefferson_11-2.htm, ac. 23 May 2006.

³⁶ Chase-Riboud, B., *Sally Hemmings: A Novel*, (New York, 2000). Haid, C., dir., *Sally Hemmings: An American Scandal* (2000).

interest in the past which helped make Monticello a shrine in the first place; now, nearly a hundred years later, it has made it more complicated, more difficult, and more interesting.

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Since the Foundation bought Monticello in 1923, a whole 'Jefferson industry' has grown up around the estate and nearby University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Merrill D. Peterson, whose chapter on Monticello in *American Places* was useful for this essay, is Thomas Jefferson Foundation Professor of History at UVA. Supported by grants from the Foundation and University, he has made a fine scholarly career out of writing about the third President. The Foundation itself has a web-site devoted to Monticello, where the viewer can take virtual tours of the house.³⁷ They also sell Monticello-themed mugs, t-shirts and action-figures, and release their own newsletter, called, imaginatively, *Monticello*. From the 'President's Letter' in the Winter 2004 edition:

In the spring of 2000, the trustees of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation announced *Jefferson Lives: A Campaign for Monticello in the Twenty-First Century*. With an ambitious goal of reaching \$100 million by April 2005, this campaign was initiated to raise funds to support virtually all aspects of our Jeffersonian stewardship. I am proud to announce that, thanks to the generosity of our donors, *Jefferson Lives* reached its goal June 30.³⁸

Clearly, the finances of Monticello have not suffered under private ownership. The Foundation also does its best to spread a certain image of the place in the public sphere. It has founded its own publishing company called *The Monacelli Press*. One of its offerings, a photographic portrait done in a lush coffee-table edition, had its introduction written by David McCullough and its blurb by Ken Burns.³⁹ This was the pair who famously produced *The Civil War*, a television series for PBS in the early 1990s. Without slighting the scholarship of either of these men – McCullough, in particular, is a well respected historian – they are associated with what is now almost a *brand* of popular history. Their Monticello is like their Civil War: grand yet homely, unquestionably something to be admired, and a touch sentimental.

³⁷ The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation *Monticello: The Home of Thomas Jefferson*, (2003), at > <http://explorer.monticello.org/content.html>, ac. 24 May 2006.

³⁸ The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, *Monticello Newsletter*, vol. 15, no. 2, (Winter, 2004).

³⁹ Lautman, R.C., photog. *Thomas Jefferson's Monticello: A Photographic Portrait*, (New York, 1997).

McCullough describes Jefferson's home as a place which "touches the spirit of nearly everyone of whatever origin."⁴⁰

In 2003, something very interesting happened: the US Treasury took Monticello off the reverse side of the five-cent coin, the nickel. This was not meant as a dig at Jefferson; his profile had been on the observe side, and a picture of Monticello on the reverse side, since 1938. The new coins – which celebrated the bicentennial of the Jefferson sponsored Lewis and Clark expedition – would be minted for only two years, after which a newly designed Jefferson/Monticello coin would come back in. Nevertheless, people complained. Congressman Eric I. Cantor, with the support of the Virginia delegation in the House, proposed legislation specifying that the five-cent coin "shall bear an image of Monticello." He also released a press statement:

The images of Thomas Jefferson and Monticello represent to America so much of what this nation is founded upon...I introduced the 'Keep Monticello on the Nickel Act' to make sure that our heritage as Americans and Virginians is accurately represented...⁴¹

It is hard to say if there was any real 'public outrage' behind this effort. The President of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation itself, assured that Monticello would return to the coin in 2006, was "totally supportive" of the US Treasury.⁴² Most likely, the majority of Americans never heard of the battle, and failed to notice the new coins when, despite the protests, they came into circulation the next year. Nevertheless, the fight – and the agreement by all parties that Monticello would ultimately stay on the coin – says something. Jefferson's old home remains one of America's 'public places.' No one has suggested it is has become tarnished or irrelevant. Though different, its image is as vital as it was in 1938. Today, Monticello is back on the coin; and when millions of Americans buy and sell things each day, it passes through their fingers, whether they see it or not.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p 10.

⁴¹ Anonymous, 'Virginia reels over plan to redesign Jefferson 5c – Legislators seek to block Monticello's removal,' *Coin World*, 18 June, 2002, at ><http://coinworld.com/news/070102/news-1.asp>, ac. 25 May 2006.

⁴² Anonymous, 'The Jefferson Nickel: Monticello image will take hiatus from coin,' *Virginia Online: The University of Virginia Alumni News*, (Winter, 2002), at ><http://web.archive.org/web/20040220124128/www.alumni.virginia.edu>, ac. 25 May 2006.

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