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**Hannah Spahn, *Thomas Jefferson, Time, and History*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. Pp x + 292, illus. USD\$45.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8139-3168-5.**

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Hannah Spahn's *Thomas Jefferson, Time, and History*, like an incisive Shakespeare commentary, answers questions we did not even know to ask. Jefferson's views on historiography have been noted, as has his impulse in his dotage to put himself in the best light before posterity. Spahn is the first historian to chart changes in Jefferson's philosophically coherent views concerning time and historiography across his adult lifetime. Her account of this aspect of Jefferson's intellectual life is by turns merely illuminating and absolutely compelling. Everyone who wants to understand him must henceforth read this book.

Spahn says that her goal is to provide "a better understanding of the contingent origins of [Jefferson's] influential interpretation of American history" (8). One result of success, she hopes, will be to clarify that Jefferson disagreed with later critics not about the wrongness of slavery, but about the timing of its abolition. Jefferson's ideas concerning the ending of slavery changed from the expectation that it would transpire in his lifetime, which held during the eighteenth century, to growing acceptance of the idea that it would occur at a more distant date in the nineteenth. This gradualism was commonplace among liberals of Jefferson's Enlightenment generation, both in America and in Europe.

Spahn devotes the first section of her study to the subject of "Time." In Jefferson's thought, there were two types: the subjective time of human perception and the objective time of Newtonian laws. For Jefferson, time was a kind of fixation, creeping into virtually all of his writings — the Declaration of Independence, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774), *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), and the First Inaugural, for example — in one way or another. He tried to superordinate objective time in his early life but eventually he would wallow in subjective experience. In this light, Spahn's consideration of her subject's famous dialogue between the Head and the Heart is particularly instructive. The Head in Jefferson's account advocates the objective, while the Heart is all about the alternative. Prior to encountering Spahn's account, I had never noticed the extent to which time is foregrounded in this famous love letter; the Heart's reference to its refusal to "ride 'above the concerns of this mortal world'" (26) amounts to an argument against striking the philosopher's pose and in favor of the specifically human.

In the chapter on objective which is dubbed "rational" time, Jefferson the scientist takes center stage. Here is Jefferson the clock-maker, the measurer, the forward-looking philosophe. Most fascinating of all is Spahn's description of the Great Clock in the main hallway at Monticello, whose outdoor face is marked only by hours, while its indoor face includes both minutes and seconds. As she puts it, the outdoor face looked backward to a time that was subject to a supernatural telos, while the other measured time more precisely in recognition of the elevation of the philosophical significance of the here-

and-now. Spahn finds similar significance in Jefferson's path-breaking meteorological record-keeping. Yet, Jefferson remained incongruously averse "to employ[ing] rational time systematically for a comprehensive analysis of his plantation economy" (39). Spahn guesses that the reason may have been his distaste for slavery.

One area in which Jefferson famously was quite rational, even cold-blooded, was in advising young relatives and acquaintances concerning education. He cut their days up into measured sections and counseled that they should become the same kind of "misers," in his grandson's word, as he was. Jefferson's letters to his daughters instructing them that he will love them better if they learn their lessons now strike as quite repellant, but Jefferson sincerely believed that this was the advice a father must give. "Lost" time was "never found again," he insisted (43).

Jefferson seems to have distinguished American whites from black slaves and European nobles by reference to their relationships to time. The former were rational, he held, while the latter groups wasted their time. For him, the best relationship to time was that of the forward-looking Enlightenment figure — at least, until he changed his mind. Spahn thinks this forward-looking pose, which often strikes contemporary readers as boundless (naïve) optimism, accounts for Jefferson's persistent refusal to take a side on the question whether blacks really were genetically inferior. Time would tell.

Ultimately, Jefferson would begin to dwell in the sentimental more often. "Loss, rupture, and separation" were unavoidable elements of human experience. One might downplay them but Jefferson considered mortality from very early in his life. Jefferson's favorite author, Laurence Sterne, dealt with this subject more successfully perhaps than any other writer. Readers of Andrew Burstein's *The Inner Jefferson*<sup>1</sup> will see Jefferson's relationship to Sterne put into an entirely new light: where Burstein found in Sterne Jefferson's model of a sentimental man, Spahn has Jefferson learning from Sterne how to understand "sentimental time."

The second section of Spahn's book takes up the subject of history. Jefferson is seen oscillating through his life between two poles. On one hand was the idea of "a teleological concept of history that emphasized less the factual precision than the universal didactic function of historical studies." On the other stood "a concept that stressed the contingency of history and saw the primary function of historical studies not in teaching timeless moral lessons for the future but in coming as close as possible to a unique reality in the past" (103). Jefferson began his intellectual quest in thrall to the first of those concepts. For somebody with this idea of history, historiography was a nearly trivial pursuit that might provide some diversion when the day's work was done. While still subscribing to this idea, Jefferson famously made disparaging remarks about historians and their work. His experience in the American Revolution and thereafter, however, changed Jefferson's mind. Here were momentous events, in some of which he had participated and during which he had had the distinct impression that time had sped up. History might have plodded along through most of time, but Jefferson's time was different.

Far from dismissing historians' endeavors, then, the mature Jefferson and the old Jefferson entered the historiographical lists. If he had his way, future generations would be able to understand what the Revolutionary generation had done in their own sense. With that in mind, he collected his papers, wrote memoranda of his experiences in Washington's Cabinet, wrote an autobiographical sketch, and prodded John Trumbull to embark upon his suite of grand paintings depicting major events in the Revolution — one of them featuring Jefferson on center stage. Jefferson had become certain after reading early second-hand accounts of Revolutionary high politics that much of historical truth had been and would be lost. He commiserated with his friend John Adams concerning the unlikelihood that anyone ever would truly understand what they had lived through. He would do what he could to make some of it survive. Beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Burstein, *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 1995.

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that, Jefferson's experience led him, in common with many of his contemporaries, to a radical conclusion: cause and effect in human affairs were not consistent through time. Rather, lessons from stories of the past might be inapplicable to current problems.

In the last chapter in this section, "Beyond Example?," Spahn takes up the thorny question of Jefferson's attitude toward history in the wake of the failure of the French Revolution. Essentially, he decided that American history was *sui generis*, and so study of other nations' history was not useful. In his own day, the course of European events was only putting off the happy republican millennium which seemed to be fading further into the future. Europeans' behavior not only was delaying their happiness, but, by forcing them into the War of 1812, the Americans' as well.

In sum, Hannah Spahn's study is short, but it is very dense. Each page approaches familiar material from a startlingly new direction. *Thomas Jefferson, Time, and History* is essential reading.