

# Henry Stephens Randall and His Life of Thomas Jefferson

By W. DONALD RHINESMITH\*

Recent years have seen the stream of literature pertaining to Thomas Jefferson swell in an effervescent tide of research and publication. Every crevice of Jefferson's personal and public life has been probed. In spite of this fact, Henry Stephens Randall's *Life of Thomas Jefferson*, published in 1858, has gained in stature and has not suffered the loss of any of its original force. Contemporary scholars have had nothing but highest praise for the three-volume biography. Bernard Mayo has designated it the "classic . . . biography of Jefferson."<sup>1</sup> Dumas Malone has said that "no biography has yet matched Randall's in scope and impressiveness."<sup>2</sup> Marie Kimball observed that "the majority of more recent biographies are little more than a paraphrase and condensation of Randall."<sup>3</sup> The meaning of such laudation is only heightened when one realizes that in 1858 Randall was writing in a highly-charged atmosphere. The United States was about to embark on the "second American revolution" which dealt a death blow to Jefferson's agricultural society and confirmed the American industrial society. Likewise, the canons of current historical method had neither been developed nor would they have been fully appreciated had Randall utilized them. Randall's work was a pioneer effort, there being little precedent for his point of view in the stream of nineteenth-century Jeffersonian literature. It is indeed remarkable that a mid-nineteenth century New Yorker, far removed from Jefferson's Virginia, came to accept the challenge of biographer of Thomas Jefferson.

Born on May 3, 1811, in Madison County, New York, Henry Stephens Randall was the eldest son of Roswell and Harriet

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1. Bernard Mayo, *Myths and Men* (Athens, Georgia, 1959), 50.

2. Dumas Malone, *Jefferson The Virginian* (Boston, 1948), viii.

3. Marie Kimball, *Jefferson, The Road to Glory* (New York, 1943), 4-5.

Randall.<sup>4</sup> Two years after his birth, Randall's father moved his family to the frontier village of Cortland. Here Henry Stephens was to live and work until his death in 1876. Roswell Randall was a prosperous merchant and took a great interest in civic affairs.<sup>5</sup> Well educated himself, he saw to it that his children received the best formal education possible. Henry Stephens attended both the Cortland and Geneva Academies; by his nineteenth year, he was a graduate of Union College. He soon took up the study of law, although he had no intentions of ever practicing. In 1834, he was admitted to the bar. The same year saw his marriage to Jane Rebecca Polhemus and his return to Cortland where he took a major part in managing the family landholdings.

A lawyer by profession and a farmer and wool producer by choice, Randall was also an active participant in the political life of New York, especially in the three decades that preceded the War Between the States. Randall early cast his support to the Democratic Party. He then witnessed and was directly involved in the factional troubles that beset that party within New York State during the 1840's and 1850's. Siding with the Barnburner faction, Randall joined with many of his colleagues from that faction in the Free Soil crusade of 1848. After the election of 1848, Randall returned to the ranks of the Democracy and became its successful candidate in 1851 for the office of Secretary of State of New York.

Aside from politics, Henry Stephens Randall was an enthusiastic supporter of free public education and made some notable contributions to that cause. Much of his time and energy was expended in the promotion and protection of sheep husbandry in the United States. He was a recognized authority on sheep husbandry, and most of his published works dealt with that subject.

Henry Stephens Randall was a gentleman possessed by not one but many interests. Politician, educator, and farmer, he was also a lawyer and a writer. A man small in neither mind nor body (in 1856, he weighed over 200 pounds), Randall was intelligent, witty, and well read in history and biography. He was imbued with a strong sense of duty and responsibility. He observed the rules of propriety without being superficial. Overly sentimental at times, more egotistical than is pleasant on occasion, possessed of a zeal, an enthusiasm, an energy, a confidence that can only be envied in

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4. Paul K. Randall, *Genealogy of a Branch of the Randall Family, 1666-1879* (Norwich, New York, 1879), 14.

5. Henry P. Smith (ed.), *History of Cortland County* (Syracuse, New York, 1885), 257.

a less positive age, Henry Stephens Randall was well fitted to his task of creating a living Jefferson. A man of less complexity could hardly have accomplished the deed.

Randall had contemplated the idea of writing a work of history in the 1840's.<sup>6</sup> His first notion for a book was to extend the political history of New York already begun by Jabez D. Hammond.<sup>7</sup> That task, however, he left to Hammond himself, and in the early 1850's, he turned to the idea of writing a biography of Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States and the eminent leader of Randall's Democratic Party. It was not strange that Randall should choose this subject, nor was it strange that he should feel himself capable of dealing with it. Although the writing of American history and biography commanded much attention in the decades prior to the Civil War, very little of it was written by men who called themselves professional historians. There were giants in the land such as Bancroft, Hildreth, and Sparks, and they were laying foundations on which the profession would rear its structure, but that was a building for the future. Good history and biography were produced in the period by men who turned to the subject simply because they were fascinated by it or because they liked to write or because they could, by writing, memorialize a favorite subject or place.<sup>8</sup> Randall was fascinated by history—particularly political history, but he cannot be called a professional historian. History was one of his numerous hobbies, and the writing of history was an intellectual exercise in which he engaged for his own edification as well as for the end product which it produced.

The biographical form of history had gained in importance and popularity during the nineteenth century. For one who loved people as Randall did, it must have been particularly appealing. Beyond this, however, Randall felt the dire need of his times for a first-rate biography of Thomas Jefferson. The Jeffersonian tradition that became such a potent force in the political sphere of American life found almost no defenders among historians. Almost every political party prior to the Civil War made attempts to claim descentance from Thomas Jefferson, including Jacksonian Democrats, Whigs, and the Republican Party established during the 1850's. The men who wrote the history books shared none of this enthusiasm for Jeffer-

6. Robert Denniston to Randall, July 3, 1849, Randall Papers, New York State Library.

7. Jabez D. Hammond, *The History of Political Parties in the State of New York* (3 vols., Syracuse, New York, 1842-1852).

8. George H. Callcott, "Historians in Early Nineteenth-Century America," *New England Quarterly*, XXXII (1959), 516.

sonian principles. They were, for the most part, conservatives who had fallen heir to the Federalist ideological legacy in politics. Merrill D. Peterson has noted,

The Jeffersonians got a poor show in the historical page. For the next century it seemed to many of them that the Federalists, defeated everywhere else, had retreated to the books, and there triumphed.<sup>9</sup>

In the period approaching the Civil War, Jefferson's stock in politics as well as in literature began to decline. Jefferson's undeniable consistency was lost in the confusion attendant upon the emotional state of the nation. Each political party called upon him to support their ideology. Consequently, Jefferson more often than not appeared as an apostate to himself. Riddled by supposed inconsistency, Jefferson was no honored national hero in 1861.

Randall was motivated to begin his work on Jefferson because he believed that history was a pleasant, intellectual exercise that an intelligent man could delve into with good results. He chose Jefferson as his subject because he felt the need for a defense of his political mentor; he also wanted to fill the vacuum that then existed in Jefferson literature. The subject was especially appealing to him because it would offer him many chances to write about the subject which he loved—politics. By 1850, he had resolved to write the *Life of Jefferson*. It was to be more than a mere narrative of an interesting life. It was also to be an "authentic history of the parties."<sup>10</sup> Randall remained true to his conception of the work. There is a good deal of party history as he interpreted it within the three volumes.

Randall had definite ideas about what composed good biography. He was neither a Mason Locke Weems nor a William Wirt, and he deplored the biographical writings of both.<sup>11</sup> The standards he set for himself were not too distant from the presently-accepted standards of "purity, body, and flavor." In his criticism of George Tucker's *Life of Jefferson* (1837), and elsewhere, his own position

9. Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1962), 36.

10. *Ibid.*, 151. Randall expressed this idea in a letter to Van Buren upon which Peterson draws.

11. H. S. Randall, "Common School Libraries," in S. S. Randall, *Mental and Moral Culture* (New York, 1905), I, 191; Randall to Grigsby, September, 1857, in Frank J. Klingberg and Frank W. Klingberg (eds.), *The Correspondence Between Henry Stephens Randall and Hugh Blair Grigsby, 1856-1861* (Berkeley, 1952), 29-31. Hereafter cited as *Correspondence*.

was made clear.<sup>12</sup> The work must be accurate in fact and fair in judgment. It must possess a good literary style and must not be inept in its defenses. The subject must be fathomed to his every depth. His character traits, habits, and customs must be recognized. The biographer must become one with the feelings of his subject. He must be precise and clear away all vagueness. The subject must move before the fully-stretched backdrop of history which, for Randall, meant "the inner history of the parties; *the spirit & soul of the times.*" It was the biographer's task to make the best possible case he could for his subject without injuring the reputation of others opposed to the subject. In order to obtain good biography, one's researches must go "vastly beyond official records." Randall himself did not remain true to all of these principles at all times. Yet in reading his *Life of Jefferson*, the effort expended to meet the standards is obvious. Too much concerned with the clatter created when the Federalist historians hurled down the gauntlet, Randall's objectivity was impaired.

Randall well realized the task before him as he wrote his *Life of Jefferson*. In the Preface to the first volume, he noted,

We are presented with the remarkable spectacle of a reputation more assailed by class and hereditary hate than any other, and all others, belonging to our early history—scarcely defended by a page where volumes have been written to traduce it—yet steadily and resistlessly spreading, until all parties seek to appropriate it. . . .<sup>13</sup>

To refute partisan attacks and present an honest image of Jefferson were his goals. Randall often stated that he felt the biography would become the object of strong censure upon its publication regardless of the opinions he expressed. Because he expected censure, he believed it was unnecessary to bow either to the image of Jefferson that had manifested itself in the public mind or to the unfavorable portrait of Jefferson held by the conservative interest within the country. This left him free to start afresh and report the whole story in the light of truth that came to him from his study of the sources.

Randall began his research early in the 1850's. He went to Vir-

12. Randall to Grigsby, December 8, 1856, in *Correspondence*, 70; H. S. Randall, "Common School Libraries," in S. S. Randall, *Mental and Moral Culture*, 213-214.

13. H. S. Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1858), I, vi-vii.

ginia, visited Thomas Jefferson Randolph at Edge Hill, and became acquainted with Jefferson's descendants.<sup>14</sup> He began to write numerous letters seeking information. He also began to publicize the fact that he was writing a biography of the great Virginian. People who thought they could be helpful with the project wrote to Randall offering him information and other services. His demanding duties as Secretary of State, however, caused him to delay the writing of the biography and almost forced him to lay it aside entirely. He continued to search for information, but the delay in publication caused some to fear that he had abandoned the project.<sup>15</sup> Randall assured them that he had not abandoned the project and that once he was free of official duties he would take his pen in hand and write the biography. Further delay was caused by acute illness which he suffered during his last days in office. When he retired from public office and returned to Cortland in the winter of 1854, it was with the sole intent of assuming the life of a cloistered scholar in order to organize his materials and to write the biography.

In the course of his investigations, Randall had amassed a great deal of information. The task of organizing it was clearly no small one. In one of his moments of self-laudation, Randall attested to his relentless tracking of material. "I have seen few men who entered an investigation with such zeal as myself," he wrote, adding, "I think I have blood hound staunchness in *running down game*."<sup>16</sup> Doubtless, Randall did exhaust the sources, secondary and primary, that were available to him. While he gives no bibliography, most of his sources can be determined from his abundant acknowledgments, various designations in the text, footnotes, and numerous appendices. His own statement on the amount of his source material came when he compared his research to that of George Tucker, whose biography, published in 1837, was the most thorough and balanced study before Randall's *Life of Jefferson*. Randall noted,

I am not at all sure I shall do better. But I shall tell a good deal *more*. I have about 300 family letters of Mr. J's unpublished, & none of their kind published. I have 50 reservoir of *important facts* from which it is certain Prof. T. never drew one. I believe, between you & I I

14. Randall, *Life*, I, 16n.

15. Henry Augustine Washington to Randall, March 30, 1852, June 8, 1852; R. A. West to Randall, November 23, 1852, Randall Papers.

16. Randall to Grigsby, January 18, 1856, in *Correspondence*, 57.

have read more volumes for my materials, than T. did tokens.<sup>17</sup>

The "50 reservoir of important facts" included secondary as well as untapped primary sources.

Randall used only a nominal amount of secondary material. This was, in part, due to the barren nature of secondary sources. The unfavorable character of the majority of secondary works made them of little use to Randall. Such a work as George Bancroft's multi-volume history had not, in the 1850's, progressed to a point where it could have been very helpful to Randall. He did use biographies like John Marshall's *Life of Washington* and William Wirt's *Patrick Henry*, but, more often than not, these appeared in the position of being refuted rather than called upon for support. Certain works such as Jared Sparks' *Life and Writings of George Washington* or L. H. Girardin's *History of Virginia* were more heavily relied upon for evidence.

Two editions of Jefferson's works had been compiled and published by the time Randall began work on the *Life*. The Randolph edition, published in 1829, contained some errors in transcription. It was difficult to use because the papers selected for printing presented a fragmentary picture of Jefferson's thinking rather than any unified pattern which would have been needed to understand him. Much less accurate in transcription was the Congressional edition, edited by Henry Augustine Washington and published in 1853 and 1854. So poorly done was this work that Randall referred to it as a "blotch of errors."<sup>18</sup> Randall used the published writings and papers of Jefferson and other men. Most of these, of course, were limited in their scope to the public papers. This delimited their value considerably. Not only were many of the more private papers withheld from public scrutiny, but the scholarly editing of papers had not yet become an art. Consequently, Jared Sparks felt no pangs of conscience when he edited out some of Washington's less proper comments. Among other correspondence used were the *Works of Alexander Hamilton*, edited by John C. Hamilton, and the *Life and Works of John Adams*, edited by Charles Francis Adams. Those papers that had been published were mainly the writings of the Federalist leaders. This did not help Randall find his complete picture.

Henry S. Randall turned to the personal interview in order to

17. Randall to Grigsby, December 4, 1856, in *Ibid.*, 69.

18. Randall, *Life*, II, 330.

glean much of his material. William Wirt, Henry's biographer, had used this method but had been more fortunate in having men to answer his inquiries and give him opinions who had actually lived and fought the same battles as Henry. The men to whom Randall turned for information had perhaps known Jefferson, but they were of a later vintage than the revolutionary generation. For them, Jefferson was the "Sage of Monticello," not the "red-headed radical." Realizing this limitation, the details and anecdotes they imparted to Randall must not be underrated. He placed great store by them, and certainly one of the great features of the biography is the preservation of this material which otherwise might have been lost. Representative of the men with whom Randall talked were the gentlemen who composed the so-called "Jefferson Circle" in Philadelphia.<sup>19</sup> These men, dedicated to the memory of their former friend and associate, imparted to Randall some of the fresh and revealing information which made the biography a minor masterpiece. Of great interest also was the testimony of Wormley, Jefferson's personal slave.

Equally important to the biography was Randall's correspondence with other historians and scholars of the day. Randall did not hesitate writing Jared Sparks concerning the Washington-Jefferson correspondence. Sparks' reply added weight to Randall's argument against the hypothesis that some of the letters in this correspondence had been destroyed.<sup>20</sup> He questioned George Bancroft concerning the thorny problem of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence and asked Dr. Francis Wayland of Brown University for an opinion concerning the extent of monarchical sentiment in the country after the war.<sup>21</sup> George Tucker was asked for certain information. His reply clearly showed that he believed Randall was infringing on his domain, and he excused himself from answering all of Randall's questions because he was busy with his own work.<sup>22</sup> The letters that passed between Henry S. Randall and Hugh Blair Grigsby were of the utmost benefit to the finished work. The Randall-Grigsby correspondence covering the years between 1856 and 1861 shows not only a warm personal friendship, but also two historians

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19. The men who composed the "Jefferson Circle" were: Dr. Robley Dunglison, George Tucker, Nicholas P. Trist, Edward Coles, George Woodward, and Henry D. Gilpin.

20. Randall, *Life*, II, 370.

21. Randall to George Bancroft, February 24, March 24, March 27, 1858, Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Francis Wayland to Randall, May 20, 1856, Randall Papers.

22. George Tucker to Randall, January 8, 1856, Randall Papers.



at work; facts are traced, questions asked, causative factors pondered, and conclusions shared. Each drew upon the other's knowledge. Grigsby exercised a moderating influence over Randall, and Randall spurred the leisurely Grigsby to greater efforts.<sup>23</sup>

Randall's path was, at times, hindered by uncooperative individuals. William C. Rives failed to answer some of his inquiries.<sup>24</sup> Dr. Robley Dunglison, a member of the Jefferson Circle, refused at first to permit Randall to use his notes, saying, "So perfectly unreserved are the 'ana' that I would not let them pass into any other hands than my own. . . ." <sup>25</sup> Randall was more successful in soliciting information from the descendants of Thomas Jefferson. Particularly notable were the letters of Jefferson's granddaughter, Ellen Wayles Coolidge. Many of her replies to Henry Stephens Randall were printed with the biography.<sup>26</sup> Nicholas P. Trist, who had married another of Jefferson's granddaughters and lived at Monticello before the Sage's death, made notes on conversations held with Jefferson. These were made available to Randall. Even with these sources, something else was needed to make this the classic biography. The Sage's personal papers were the needed ingredient, and these were generously supplied to Randall by Jefferson's descendants.

The personal papers of Thomas Jefferson formed the keystone of Randall's materials. The Randolph edition of Jefferson's writings at best included only a very small fraction of the papers Jefferson had so carefully preserved. The Congressional edition was compiled basically from the public papers. The family laid before Henry S. Randall the private correspondence and other personal documents, the account books, the garden book—in short, all that was necessary to discover Jefferson himself. Placing their utmost faith in Randall's good taste and judgment, few restrictions, if any, were made upon his use of this unprecedented wealth of material. Writing to Martin Van Buren, Randall noted the family's generosity and said,

Since leaving Albany, I have been in rather indifferent health a considerable share of the time, and I have been absorbingly engaged in writing a biography of Mr. Jeffer-

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23. A. G. Bigelow, "Hugh Blair Grigsby: Historian and Antiquarian," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1957, 151.

24. Randall to Grigsby, January 1, 1859, in *Correspondence*, 152.

25. Robley Dunglison to H. S. Randall, August 29, 1855, *Dunglison Papers*, University of Virginia.

26. Randall to Grigsby, December 27, 1856, in *Correspondence*, 87.

son.—I am in possession of a great quantity of Mr. J's private papers from his early youth to the close of his life, including recollections of his entire family—extending to some thousands of pages of letters—with a *carte-blanche* to use substance of words, and to quote where I judge fit, the names of any male members of the family. This places me in the best possible position any biographer can occupy. I am fond of my task, and keep myself constantly absorbed in it when health permits. I am therefore a *recluse*.<sup>27</sup>

When Randall completed his work, the papers were returned to Edge Hill, but while he had them, he was almost entirely free to use them as he pleased.<sup>28</sup> If Randall was looking for the truth, he had, indeed, found the source of it. He was the first and only man to have the privilege of viewing the private papers before they were scattered throughout the land. Only now—a century later—is an effort being made to assemble Jefferson's papers so that they can be readily used by scholars.

The cooperation Randall received from the family led him to consider his biography as the authorized one.<sup>29</sup> It was so considered by many others.<sup>30</sup> In the strictest sense of the term, it was not an authorized biography. The family had not selected Randall as the biographer of Thomas Jefferson; he had sought out the family, but they had accepted him as a gentleman qualified to do justice to their ancestor. They perhaps felt that the life of the great Virginian could best be written by someone other than a native of his own state. The family had also arrived at the "profoundly sensible idea," as Randall later said, "that their grandfather would 'pass muster' with posterity *exactly as he was*;—that exaggeration would both injure and discredit the whole picture."<sup>31</sup> The best way for anyone to find him "exactly as he was" was for the family to open all the personal files it possessed. This was done for Randall as it had not been done for any previous

27. Randall to Van Buren, September 5, 1856, Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress.

28. Sarah Nicholas Randolph to Hugh Blair Grigsby, August 18, 1875, in Clayton Torrence (ed.), "Letters of Sarah Nicholas Randolph to Hugh Blair Grigsby," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 59, (July, 1951), 334-335; Randall to Grigsby, September 9, 1859, in *Correspondence*, 170.

29. Randall to Grigsby, January 1, 1859, in *Correspondence*, 152-153.

30. Randall to Grigsby, July 26, 1857, in *Ibid.*, 95; Peterson, *Jefferson Image*, 152.

31. *New York Commercial Advertiser*, March 24, 1858.

biographer, including George Tucker. In a broad sense, then, Randall was indeed the authorized biographer. He accepted a responsibility to the family in this light. On such a highly-charged topic as Jefferson's views of slavery, he submitted his final conclusions to the family for their approval before including them in the biography. George Wythe Randolph replied that Randall's findings were perfectly acceptable.<sup>32</sup> Generally, the family was well pleased with the finished work of the man in whom they had placed their trust. Several years after the *Life* was published, Sarah Nicholas Randolph, in preparing the Preface of her own tribute to her great-grandfather wrote the family sentiment when she commented,

I am well aware that the tale of Jefferson's life, both public and private, has been well told by the most faithful of biographers in "Randall's Life of Jefferson," and that much of what is contained in these pages will be found in that admirable work, which, from the author's zealous devotion to truth, and his indefatigable industry in collecting his materials, must ever stand chief among the most valuable contributions to American history.<sup>33</sup>

It is not incorrect to say that the biography in many important respects was the authorized biography of Thomas Jefferson.

Organizing this mass of material that he had collected was a problem which Randall tackled with great love and energy. Amidst the seeming disorder of his study, he wrote what he referred to as his "magnum opus." His study was cluttered with Jeffersonia, and he wrote, "My literary debris or *chips* reach to *cords* including the most miscellaneous papers, that one cares but little for, but hardly likes to burn. . . ." <sup>34</sup> His description of attempts to find a reference for Grigsby among this "literary debris" is vicariously amusing. Randall once commented that he rarely confused the papers himself, but when he did he suffered one of his "*pi* fits." <sup>35</sup> A "*pi* fit," it might be added, was enough of a *cause célèbre* to stop the day's writing activity. When he was not suffering from the effects of a "*pi* fit," Randall remained at his desk from eight to ten hours a day.

Henry Stephens Randall was an industrious worker, but he

32. Randall to Grigsby, July 26, 1857, in *Correspondence*, 95.

33. Sarah Nicholas Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1958), 9.

34. Randall to Grigsby, December 12, 1856, in *Correspondence*, 78.

35. Randall to Grigsby, April 29, 1857, in *Ibid.*, 91.

worked during spurts of energy rather than with continuous effort. Writing to Hugh Blair Grigsby, he said, "I hear people talk about writing when they are in the mood—I am *always* in the mood."<sup>36</sup> Subject, however, to the inadequacy of the human body, exhaustion followed these intense periods of mental activity. In such states of fatigue, he complained, "I can't tell whether I have got in all the words I want & have not the faintest conception whether they are spelled accurately."<sup>37</sup> Grigsby, the godfather of Randall's creation, constantly urged the biographer to take more time for leisure. "You sit too long and too solidly on your center," he wrote.<sup>38</sup> Grigsby also counseled his friend to maintain a strict vegetable diet. Randall's healthy appearance was deceptive, and while engaged in writing the biography, he suffered frequent attacks of illness.

Randall was released from his official duties in January of 1854, and after he had regained sufficient strength following his prolonged illness, he set about the task of writing the biography. He worked at the manuscript for two years, and it was not until the spring of 1856 that he could tell Hugh Blair Grigsby that he was nearing the completion of his task.

I am now in 1822. I think eight days will suffice for the four remaining years—ten certainly will.—Then I have got a tough chapter before me on the subject of Mr. J's religious beliefs.<sup>39</sup>

Randall considered his progress slow. Indeed, he could have moved faster had he been in better health, but he was frequently brought to a cessation of his work by illness. The demands of his own family grew increasingly in these years as well. His parents, who lived not a block from him, came more and more to lean on their son.

Randall also worried considerably about the writing of the biography. Of its contents, he was extremely confident, but of his own manner of expressing it, he had honest doubts. This was, after all, an age that put great emphasis on the literary quality of written history. Randall's style, for all its pretensions, was hardly literary. He realized his deficiency and frankly admitted it on several occasions. He was particularly aware of it when he was in the midst of his materials trying to battle his way to the end. On one occasion, he wrote the Albany editor, William Cassidy, asking the gen-

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. Grigsby to Randall, August 1, 1857, in *Ibid.*, 97.

39. Randall to Grigsby, May 25, 1856, in *Ibid.*, 50.

tleman to help him with the style of the biography. Cassidy replied that he could hardly be of help to Randall; that style depended on many things of which he knew nothing; and finally, that it was an element in writing that must be the creation of the author alone. Having said this, he encouraged Randall to hurry and publish for the times were ripe for a good work on Jefferson. He also told Randall to have the work translated into German because "the whole race admired the Virginian and him alone of our public men."<sup>40</sup> Randall pushed on without Cassidy's aid, but his concern over style did hinder the progress of the work. Once he had completed the manuscript, it took him a year to revise and rework it to his own satisfaction. By the latter part of July, 1857, he was able to tell Grigsby that "my literary craft is sliding down the stays into the water—publishing."<sup>41</sup> Despite the fact that the book was going down the "ways" rather than the "stays," it was at long last entering the final stages before being brought to the eyes of the public.

Randall took a great interest in the publication of his work, partly because he hoped to reap some benefit from his labor, but also because, like any proud author, he wanted his work to be presented to its best advantage. Randall had given much thought to the problem of publishing his biography. Seeking advice on such matters, Randall was frankly informed that "a work like yours will not, of course, run away from the counters of the stores like Fanny Fern's bad-in-grain volume, or 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' or the 'Wide World' and a hundred other equally perishable productions, and the time for clearing itself will be proportionately remote—of its paying profits remoter still—which facts are to be borne in mind."<sup>42</sup> In the end, he decided to retain the copyright and take, instead, a percentage of whatever profits the book made. After negotiations with several firms, he chose the small and young, but enterprising firm of Derby and Jackson which was located in New York City. The terms they offered him were the same that had been made to Washington Irving who was then in the process of publishing his five-volume *Life of George Washington*; these terms Randall found acceptable. Randall chose a smaller firm because they had "fewer irons in the fire" and could give more attention to promoting his *Life of Jefferson*. Their terms were liberal for adding steel engravings, facsim-

40. William Cassidy to Randall, October 28, 1854, Randall Papers.

41. Randall to Grigsby, July 26, 1857, in *Correspondence*, 95.

42. R. A. West to Randall, January 8, 1855, Randall Papers.

iles, and other items that would give the biography an attractive format and appearance.<sup>43</sup>

Derby and Jackson made careful plans to secure for the biography a large initial sale. It was decided that the work would best succeed if it were sold by subscription through book agents. A circular, printed in the fall of 1857, was designed as an introduction to the *Life* and was sent to prominent men throughout the country alerting them of its imminent publication. It was carefully worded so as to convey the knowledge that the work was not a piece written by some rabid abolitionist.<sup>44</sup>

While the plans to obtain a large audience for the book were being pursued, the publishers and Randall were preparing the volumes for publication. Derby and Jackson were setting the proofs, and Randall was reading them and making his final revisions and corrections. The work moved slowly and was not in the least tasteful to Randall. Throughout the winter of 1857, he worked away at the process when he felt well enough to do so. Following another delay caused by the panic of 1857, a small edition of the first volume was gotten out for advance readers and reviewers in December.<sup>45</sup> Hugh Blair Grigsby received a volume of this edition but must have found it as disappointing as Randall did. It was marred by typographical errors, which Randall excused by the fact that he was ill, overworked, and forced to rely "too much, of necessity, on proof readers."<sup>46</sup> The "devils of printerdom" kept possession of Randall into the winter and early spring of 1858.<sup>47</sup> The second volume was issued during the first week of March. Even though he was nearing the successful completion of his work and had received encouraging first notices, Randall remained bored and exhausted by the tedious work. Writing to Grigsby he complained,

I am much worn out & vexed with proof reading & *settling points* deferred for the last. In this latter business how invaluable would be the counsel & assistance of some friend like yourself, but I have none at hand who unites critical

43. Randall to Grigsby, July 25, 1857, in *Correspondence*, 95.

44. Randall to Grigsby, August 24, 1857, September 3, 1857, in *Ibid.*, 102, 106.

45. Randall to Grigsby, November 3, 1857; Grigsby to Randall, November 12, 1857, in *Correspondence*, 113, 114.

46. Randall to Grigsby, December 24, 1858; Grigsby to Randall, December 29, 1857, in *Ibid.*, 113, 114.

47. Randall to Grigsby, January 25, 1858, in George Green Shackelford (ed.), "New Letters Between Hugh Blair Grigsby and Henry Stephens Randall, 1856-1861," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 64 (July, 1956), 330.

knowledge with ability & so all falls on me, & I am wearied & worried out.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, in May, the printers completed their work on the third volume, and the finished work was given to the public. Eight years after Randall had taken the notion to do a biography of his political mentor, the work at long last stood before him in three stout volumes.

For all the troubles and cares that had hindered him while he was writing the biography, and for all the tedium and boredom of preparing the manuscript and reading the proofs of which he had so frequently complained before the volumes were put between hard covers, Randall now felt the emptiness which comes when a great task has been performed and laid to rest. Randall wrote to Grigsby,

St. Thomas is done! I have *taken his life!* My song is ended! . . . What shall I have to get up early & set up late for hereafter. What shall soothe me in sorrow, cure me in illness, & drive away the black dog when he comes to worry me! More bereaved am I than the man who lost his shadow, I have lost my aim, my hobby!<sup>49</sup>

In losing his aim and hobby, Henry Stephens Randall had created one of the most memorable biographies written during the nineteenth century as well as one of the most significant items in Jefferson historiography. This, however, was not as clear in 1858 as it is a hundred years later. Randall still had to face the critics, and he harbored much anxiety over the manner in which his labor would be treated. Randall was satisfied, and the advance notices on the work had been encouraging, but he knew that there was much in the work that would not please everyone. In May of 1858, his labor was ended, and he could only sit back and wait for the verdict of the critics.

The three volumes numbering over two thousand pages were presented in substantial bindings with a pleasing design and format. Steel engravings of Jefferson and Monticello, as well as facsimile reproductions on fold-out pages of letters and other documents penned by the statesman, enhanced the volumes. Running through the text of the work and its thirty-eight appendices were many hitherto unpublished documents. These complemented the text and added to the value of the biography.

48. Randall to Grigsby, March 8, 1858, in *Ibid.*, 332.

49. Randall to Grigsby, May 6, 1858, in *Ibid.*, 338.

Volume One carried the story from a statement of Jefferson's family background and his birth in 1743 to 1790 and the establishment of the government under the Constitution. Randall had intended to write a history of the parties using Jefferson as his vehicle. Consequently, it is not surprising to find almost the entire text of Volume Two devoted to the years falling between 1790 and 1801, the years of party beginnings and greatest conflict. Volume Three, which covered the period from the Presidency in 1802 to Jefferson's death in 1826, brought the story to a conclusion. In a final catch-all chapter devoted more to Jefferson's religious views than anything else, the narrative was continued to 1848. Approximately a fourth of the entire work was devoted to the personal and family side of Jefferson which had never before been revealed. The plan of organization followed strict chronological lines. Thus, the marriage of Jefferson's daughter, Maria, was relegated to a paragraph and several extracts from letters sandwiched between a brief discussion of Jefferson's parliamentary manual and the Mazzei Letter.

Randall's work might well have worn two separate titles, *The Private Life of Thomas Jefferson* and *The Public Life of Thomas Jefferson*, and have been published each by itself. Both narratives were there, but Randall was incapable of interrelating the two.<sup>50</sup> Revealing the private life was a new field. None of the previous biographers had done more than skim the surface of Jefferson's personal side. Randall, however, had drunk Jefferson's "life to the lees." Jefferson, who had been attacked by Federalists as a visionary, now was shown to have been a practical farmer. Jefferson, who, it was charged, had robbed widows and orphans, was discovered to have a home overflowing with grandchildren to whom he frequently wrote letters of instruction and who repaid his affections in kind. Jefferson the atheist, about whose religious views New England ministers had been careful to warn their flocks, was found to be in reality a most accommodating neighbor who risked and lost his fortune in attempts to help a friend. Jefferson, who had appeared in many political harangues as a demagogue, was actually the founder of a university where men might be educated to defend their liberties. Jefferson, who invented the mould-board for the plow, who was fascinated by Indians, who in the finest Virginia tradition enjoyed horses and horse racing, who drank only little and never played cards—all facets of the same personality—was clearly and carefully presented to the American people in Randall's pages. Ran-

50. Peterson, *Jefferson Image*, 154.



dall had found the warmth of human flesh and blood and transmitted it to his readers and the generations of readers to follow. Jefferson, in all his complexity, would continue to baffle men just as he had Randall, but never could he become more monument than man as was the case with his contemporary, George Washington.

The political portrait Randall painted was a different matter. In this area, he could not separate himself from the prevailing concept of political history. He had raised a standard to vindicate Jefferson and exonerate him from Federalist charges. Randall felt that to achieve this he must enter the political arena. Randall believed in absolute right and absolute wrong, and for him, Jefferson usually stood with absolute right. That Jefferson believed there was a monarchist party in the United States in 1800 is well-founded. However, Randall took Jefferson's belief to mean that *there was* a monarchist party. It was, then, his duty to prove true what his chieftain believed.<sup>51</sup>

Assuming the position of Jefferson's guardian, Randall felt it necessary to discredit, or as he would have it, put in their proper place all those contemporaries who had cast aspersions on Jefferson's reputation. Such men as Alexander Hamilton, Josiah Quincy, and John Randolph of Roanoke received sound drubbings. Randall came to feel that to oppose Jefferson was to oppose democracy. Yet Randall was sincere. Writing to Grigsby, he said,

Yes, I shall here and there step on several toes! . . . I have never intentionally traveled out of my path to blame.—But I have recorded the honest convictions of my own mind. Of course, then I have not whitewashed *everybody* . . . Yet I spurn the man who will carry a conspicuous personal or partisan resentment into a book *intended* for preservation.<sup>52</sup>

Randall's convictions were so strongly felt that he failed to see his own faults.

A strong partisan spirit coursed through the political pages of the biography. Randall cannot be harshly condemned for this. Standing behind Randall was a long line of partisan vituperation. He himself had stood amidst the heat of political battle and tasted defeat and victory. He had strongly identified himself with the political principles which he believed descended from Jefferson. He

51. See *Virginia University Magazine*, III (March, 1859), 283.

52. Randall to Grigsby, November 3, 1857, in *Correspondence*, 1091.

had seen his political chieftain maligned on many fronts, even to the denial that Jefferson had written the first American Declaration of Independence.<sup>53</sup> That he credited Jefferson with too much and gave, on occasion, his facts a curious turn of logic was to be expected. His vindication of Jefferson was not without merit; it presented a much-needed contrast to the majority of the literature surrounding Jefferson. Randall's political interpretation, overstated as it was, beckoned to the future, although it was couched in terms of the past.

Henry S. Randall had fears for the acceptance of his book. In part, this was the consequence of a nervous author about to have his first scholarly work published. Richard Hildreth had only a few years before published his *History of the United States* with its pro-Federalist and anti-Jefferson views.<sup>54</sup> Randall saw competition from this work for his own.<sup>55</sup> Randall wanted to avoid as much controversy as possible. He wanted to answer any and all charges brought against Jefferson without at the same time giving unnecessary stress and emphasis to old issues that would only serve to agitate the spirit of Thomas Jefferson. Therefore, he saved any discussion of Jefferson's religious attitudes until his final chapter where he set down what he knew without comment, leaving his readers to arrive at their own conclusions. In revising his work for the publisher, he purposely deleted some of the more aggressive passages because he feared they might be regarded as irrelevant and therefore improperly aggressive.<sup>56</sup> For whatever number he deleted, Randall retained abundant attacks under Jefferson's standard, making the work anything but colorless. Randall also feared that by bringing out the work volume by volume, people would jump to conclusions before they read his own carefully wrought ones in the last volume, and therefore certain issues would be misunderstood. Randall knew that abolitionists would find little in the biography to please them, and this bothered him little. Precautions were taken in deference to the times, and in the circular announcing the publication of the biography, it was carefully noted that this was not the work of an abolitionist.<sup>57</sup> Randall's correspondence with Hugh Blair Grigsby during the period is filled with comment on

53. See Randall, *Life*, III, 570-582.

54. Richard Hildreth, *The History of the United States* (6 vols., New York, 1849-1852). His views of Jefferson are in *Ibid.*, VI, 138-141.

55. Grigsby to Randall, April 6, 1857, in *Correspondence*, 90.

56. Randall to Grigsby, January 25, 1858, in Shackelford, "New Letters," 330.

57. Randall to Grigsby, September 1, 1857, in *Correspondence*, 106.

various parts of the book which he believed would be torn apart by men inclined to strong sectional prejudices. "The truth is the work cannot suit sectionalists—or anybody affected with the Southern-phobia," he wrote Grigsby, adding, "I could hope for nothing, finally, but for the approbation of old fashioned State right democrats . . . my fate, in the life of J. hangs mainly on Va. If the presses of that state vigorously sustain me, I shall 'flourish' despite all else. . . ." <sup>58</sup>

The presses of Virginia did sustain Randall. William F. Ritchie, editor of the Richmond *Enquirer*, wrote Randall saying, "Allow me to thank you most heartily for the rare pleasure you have given to myself & to all true Virginians by your able, interesting & delightful book." <sup>59</sup> Other honors from Virginia and Virginians were not long in coming. In February, 1858, when Thomas Crawford's statues of Washington, Henry, and Jefferson were unveiled in Richmond, Randall was invited as a guest of the state to be present as the biographer of Jefferson along with Washington Irving, who was invited as the biographer of George Washington. On a more personal and individual basis, Dr. E. O. Balfour, a friend and neighbor of Hugh Blair Grigsby's in Norfolk, cut a hickory cane from the grave of Jefferson and sent it to Randall. <sup>60</sup> Others too—the Jefferson family, the "Jefferson Circle" in Philadelphia, many Northern newspapers and reviewers—praised the work. Randall, somewhat more than amazed, announced soon after the publication of his second volume, "I seem in a dream. . . . Suddenly all *are praising Jefferson!*" <sup>61</sup>

The "Jefferson Circle," whose members had provided details, anecdotes, and other items from their recollections, extended their approbation to the work. Dr. Robley Dunglison, who permitted Randall to use material from his recollections of Thomas Jefferson, including the death scene, politely scolded Randall for making the work too long. <sup>62</sup> He felt, however, that the *Life of Jefferson* would add greatly "to the proper appreciation of one of the country's most illustrious sons." <sup>63</sup> Dunglison echoed similar comment that came from Governor Coles and Henry Gilpin. George Tucker was the

58. Randall to Grigsby, December 24, 1857, in *Ibid.*, 113.

59. W. R. Ritchie to Randall, January 2, 1858, in *Ibid.*, 120.

60. Grigsby to Randall, July 20, 1858, in *Ibid.*, 133.

61. Randall to Grigsby, March 12, 1858, in Shackelford, "New Letters," 334.

62. Robley Dunglison to H. S. Randall, July 26, 1857, Dunglison Papers.

63. *Ibid.*, June 17, 1858.

only one of the "Jefferson Circle" who held a different opinion of the work, and that for obvious reasons. Hugh Blair Grigsby was, of course, much pleased by the finished project. He termed the biography "a southern book; and *par excellence* a Virginia book."<sup>64</sup> This was high praise, coming from so thorough and established a Virginian as Grigsby. Grigsby later wrote reviews of Volumes One and Three, and these were reprinted in numerous newspapers in Virginia and elsewhere. They were among the most complimentary that the work received.

If the friends and family of Jefferson were satisfied, so it seemed were many others who reviewed the book for newspapers and periodicals. The highest praise was for the new light shed upon the private life of Thomas Jefferson. One reviewer noted this and then went on at length discussing Jefferson's love of horses, his abilities as a horseman, and the various anecdotes Randall related concerning Jefferson as a horseman. The same reviewer complained, however, that Randall "has often been seduced into a prolixity of detail which, in these days of rapid movement, must often try the patience of his readers."<sup>65</sup> Perhaps the highest single praise was extended by the *Southern Literary Messenger* which made no reservations like some of its Northern counterparts, saying, "These noble volumes, evincing so much labor and research, will take a place . . . with the most celebrated biographies of the world."<sup>66</sup>

The most severe criticisms were of Randall's attempts to prove the existence of a monarchial party when Jefferson became President. The reviews, including that of the *Virginia University Magazine*, also criticized Randall for the grave injustices he had perpetrated against Hamilton and other Federalist leaders. Horace Greeley gave Randall a stern reprimand for this. Writing to Randall, he pronounced his impending doom of the work, "If we ever get through with this LeCompton Knavery I mean to take up your book and show how unjust you are to Hamilton with regard to our Public Creditors."<sup>67</sup>

Perhaps the most brilliant review of the *Life of Jefferson* appeared in James Russell Lowell's *Atlantic Monthly* and was written by William Dorsheimer. Dorsheimer, a political scientist, admired Jef-

64. H. B. Grigsby to W. R. Ritchie, December 30, 1857, in *Correspondence*, 117.

65. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, XVI (March, 1858), 548-550.

66. *Southern Literary Messenger*, XXVI (April, 1858), 319.

67. Horace Greeley to H. S. Randall, March 18, 1858, University of Virginia.

person quite as much as Randall. He seized upon the occasion of reviewing Randall's work to air his own thoughts concerning Jefferson. His criticisms centered first upon Randall's excessive emphasis of the monarchical party and, second, on his failure to give an analysis of Jefferson's political system. Dorsheimer utilized his review to fill this particular gap in Randall's work and with brilliant results. He also criticized Randall's style. Randall, he felt, lacked preciseness and filled his book with "diffuse and digressive irrelevant material." Stylistically, Randall's most serious fault was his desire "to be thought a fine writer," which caused him to "neglect . . . a few wholesome rules which he must have learned when a school-boy. . . ." Yet, Dorsheimer continued, "We take leave of this book with reluctance. It is verbose and dull, but it has led us along the path of American renown. . . ." <sup>68</sup>

Randall had anticipated much of the adverse criticism that was directed toward the work. The style of the work had worried him a good deal. Writing to George Bancroft, he had noted, "As a *word artist* I make no pretensions. I have neither time, health, taste nor skill to trouble myself much about words beyond clearly explaining my meaning." <sup>69</sup> Randall had, unfortunately, not always clearly explained himself. He must also have been disappointed by the attacks made on his political conclusions. He had, however, expected this. His great aim had been to vindicate Thomas Jefferson and to write a history of the parties. In writing his history of the parties, he had included much material that was irrelevant to a life of Thomas Jefferson. Still Randall was convinced that all the political matter he had included was necessary to honestly portray Jefferson as the founder of one of the parties. The information that Randall presented on Jefferson's personal life had been an interesting sidelight to him, and one that he had discovered with the help of the family. To write a personal history of the Virginian had not, however, been his chief aim. Yet his contemporaries and all since have proclaimed the work for this new area of Jefferson that Randall explored and presented.

The biography was in reality many things. It was a statement of party. It was an account to vindicate Jefferson and discredit his detractors. It was an interesting and informative account of Jefferson and the "Age of Jefferson." Above all, it was a zealous statement by a man dedicated to Jefferson and the principles for which he

68. *Atlantic Monthly*, II (November, 1858), 706-717; (December, 1858), 789-803.

69. Randall to George Bancroft, March 3, 1857, Bancroft Papers.

stood. At a time when sectionalism was threatening to disrupt the Union, Randall was earnestly attempting to show Jefferson as a great national figure as well as a great state leader. He wrote unhindered by the necessity of paying homage to the intricacies of economic interpretation or of the influence of frontiers on Jeffersonian Democracy. Doubtless, this limited his work for twentieth-century readers, but without these concepts, he was permitted a mode of interpretation which is no longer possible and which has its own merits and interests. Randall wrote in a period when the United States was in a transitional stage, but the mood and temper of the "Age of Jefferson" were still understood for their own worth. Randall successfully preserved some of this spirit for industrial America. His account does not display that impartiality for which critics of modern historical writing clamor. Yet in its preservation and use of documents, he rendered a valuable service not only to the memory of Jefferson but also to the historical image of Jefferson. Perhaps the key to the enduring quality of the work is to be found in Randall's use of documents which closely approximates the practices of the twentieth century. Randall was a careful researcher. He pursued information—usually from his study in Cortland—with amazing energy. He does not appear either to have edited or suppressed any documents that came before him. A look at the volumes will prove his thoroughness of documentation. Neither are the volumes marred by the general nineteenth-century stress on nationalism and patriotism. In this sense, Randall was close to the scientific, documentary approach of the twentieth century.<sup>70</sup>

It will perhaps never be known exactly how popular the book was and how well it sold upon its publication in 1858. The printing records of Randall's *Life* were destroyed by fire in 1899.<sup>71</sup> Judging from the Randall-Grigsby correspondence, however, the work seems to have enjoyed much success immediately upon publication. Grigsby kept Randall posted on the sale of the work in Norfolk where over a hundred copies of the volumes had been sold by the end of July, 1858. Other comments made throughout the correspondence lead to the conclusion that the sales of the work did not displease Randall.<sup>72</sup> The upheaval of the Civil War possibly eclipsed the sale of the book, particularly in the South. As Jefferson's stock

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70. *Correspondence*, 3.

71. Robert D. Mead for J. B. Lippincott Company to the author, August 21, 1964.

72. Grigsby to Randall, July 25, 1858, in *Correspondence*, 139.

began to rise in value, Randall's *Life* again commanded the respect it so well deserved and which it has maintained to the present day.

While Randall and Grigsby discussed the possibilities of his doing a life of Patrick Henry, Randall busily employed himself in abridging his three-volume *Life of Jefferson*. Dr. Dunlison and others had stated that one of the chief faults of the biography was that it was too long and therefore would neither be bought nor read by the great majority of the public. Thus, a large element of the American population would be deprived of Randall's enlightened view of Jefferson. Randall planned "to raze my three frigates into one cock boat—make a 12 mo. which can be sold at retail at \$1.25."<sup>73</sup> At first, the work moved rapidly and easily for Randall. He averaged the abridgment of a chapter a day, and in the spring of 1859 had already reduced Volume One and was at work on Volume Two.<sup>74</sup> As the events that brought the storm clouds of 1861 began to absorb his attention, however, Randall laid the abridgment aside and never returned to it. That he never finished the abridgment is unfortunate because the work promised to be a more judicious and concise rendition of Jefferson and his struggles than that contained in the larger account. "Hang it," he wrote to Grigsby, "how queer it looks to see how independently I slashed right and left, when the heat of battle was on me."<sup>75</sup> In the "cock-boat edition," Randall planned to leave out the controversial discussion of Thomas Jefferson's relations with the Lees and other points of high argument. The abridgment was never finished, although he was encouraged by a "prominent publishing house" to do so. The Civil War caused him to suspend the work, and he never returned to "mount [his] old hobby."<sup>76</sup>

So it was that a New Yorker came to write a biography of the Virginian, Thomas Jefferson. An educator, an agricultural enthusiast, a lawyer, a politician, and a biographer, Randall led a diverse life like the subject of his greatest work. Perhaps this helps to account for the momentous way he was able to deal with his subject. Yet irony, which had often crossed the path of Thomas Jefferson, also tampered with the life of Henry Stephens Randall. His aim in the biography was a justification of the Democratic Party which

73. Randall to Grigsby, April 25, 1859, in *Ibid.*, 164.

74. *Ibid.*, 164.

75. *Ibid.*

76. H. S. Randall to James Parton, June 1, 1868, in Milton E. Flower, *James Parton, The Father of Modern Biography* (Durham, North Carolina, 1951), 236-239.

he believed Jefferson had founded. Not for this, however, but for the revelation of Jefferson's personal and private life was his *Life of Jefferson* most warmly received in his day and ours. The work for over a century has been the standard treatment of Jefferson. It is only now being superseded, but it will never be replaced.