

Diagnosing Mr. Jefferson: Retrospectives on developmental disabilities at Monticello.

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Abstract:

For a number of years, I have been intrigued by what might be termed the retrospective diagnosis of developmental disabilities. In my book *Minds Made Feeble: The Myth and Legacy of the Kallikaks* (J. Smith, 1985), I expressed amazement that psychologist Henry Goddard in his study of the “good” and “bad” Kallikak families pronounced that a woman who had an illegitimate child in 1776 was “feebleminded.” This was 136 years after the birth of the child. In fact, Goddard diagnosed entire generations of Kallikaks who neither he nor anyone alive at that time had ever seen, let alone tested with even the most rudimentary of diagnostic techniques. Yet when his study was published in 1912, he asserted with confidence that he had found proof of a genetic basis for intellectual disabilities in these families.

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For a number of years, I have been intrigued by what might be termed the retrospective diagnosis of developmental disabilities. In my book *Minds Made Feeble: The Myth and Legacy of the Kallikaks* (J. Smith, 1985), I expressed amazement that psychologist Henry Goddard in his study of the “good” and “bad” Kallikak families pronounced that a woman who had an illegitimate child in 1776 was “feebleminded.” This was 136 years after the birth of the child. In fact, Goddard diagnosed entire generations of Kallikaks who neither he nor anyone alive at that time had ever seen, let alone tested with even the most rudimentary of diagnostic techniques. Yet when his study was published in 1912, he asserted with confidence that he had found proof of a genetic basis for intellectual disabilities in these families.

Retrospective diagnosis by rumor or legend was common during the eugenics movement's zenith in the earth 20th century. It continued as a practice in the United States and Europe until well

after World War II (Black, 2003). Until recently, however, I mistakenly believed that retrospective diagnosis was now an historical artifact. I recognized how wrong I was when I happened on a book that proposed that a founding father belongs on the autism spectrum as well as on Mount Rushmore.

Autism at Monticello

In his book *Diagnosing Jefferson: Evidence of a Condition That Guided His Beliefs, Behavior, and Personal Associations*, Ledgin (2000) wrote with certainty that Thomas Jefferson was a person with autism (more specifically Asperger's syndrome). Three attributes are presented to support his argument that Jefferson had this developmental disability. The first is the founding of the University of Virginia. Ledgin described Jefferson's depth and intensity of involvement in designing the architecture, creating the curriculum, hand-picking the faculty, prescribing student housing, and personally cataloguing the more than 6,000 books in the original library of the University. According to Ledgin (2000), Jefferson actually referred to the University as “a tribute to his genius and, I have no doubt a monument to obsessive behavior linked strongly to traits of Asperger's Syndrome” (p. 44). He described Jefferson's library cataloging as a savant-like trait reminiscent of those often attributed to people with autism.

The second characteristic of Jefferson described by Ledgin (2000) as being indicative of autism is his lack of money management skills. He reported that Jefferson's inability to keep his income ahead of his debts is typical of individual's with Asperger's syndrome and argued that this was “self-deluding ... [with Jefferson] believing somehow everything relating to money management would end well, [this] together with his keeping irreconcilable financial records—had evidently induced the situation” (p. 44).

The third attribute that Ledgin (2000) discussed was perseveration. The evidence he presented for Jefferson's “belaboring a topic endlessly” is his letter writing. Ledgin pointed particularly to Jefferson's letters to Abigail Adams after a very intense political dispute with her husband, John Adams. His extensive correspondence with Abigail began when Jefferson's daughter Polly died, and it continued for years. After Jefferson and John Adams reconciled, they resumed direct correspondence. These later letters are described by Ledgin as “a treasure and a rich record of the outpourings of contrasting geniuses” (p. 45). This is quite a different point of view from the “perseveration” he found in Jefferson's earlier letters to Abigail.

Ledgin (2000) also ascribed several of Jefferson's personal relationship difficulties to autism. He argued that a lack of warmth toward his mother and Jefferson's reported inability to show affection to his own children are clearly indicative of Asperger's syndrome. Ledgin even made a connection between Jefferson's affair with Sally Hemings and his claim that the third president had Asperger's. He wrote that when Jefferson returned from France with Sally and had established a romantic relationship with her, "he faced the dilemma of balancing at home a private benefit that was taboo against his public image of propriety as a respecter of law and custom" (p. 27). Explaining the connection, Ledgin went on to describe people with Asperger's: They

live mentally and perhaps emotionally on two planes. They live in our world of nonautistics, but they carry with them a separate and otherworldly 'reality'—their reality ... autistics seem to convert it [their reality] into something palpable. (p. 58)

Disabilities and "The Sage of Monticello"

I am unconvinced by Ledgin's (2000) arguments. I think that his thesis that Jefferson had Asperger's syndrome is fraught with the same weakness and dangers that characterized the family pedigree studies of the eugenics movement. I appreciate the fact, however, that Ledgin's book led me to take another look at this remarkable individual and national icon.

Jefferson's actual experience with disability is documented in several sources. It was not the kind of personal experience portrayed by Ledgin (2000); rather, it was a familial experience. Thomas Jefferson was the sibling of a sister and a brother with disabilities. His relationships with them reveal much about his character as a brother and, perhaps, the attitudes of his time and social class regarding disability.

Jefferson's younger sister Elizabeth has been characterized by a number of scholars as having a serious and persisting disability (Brodie, 1974; Mapp, 1987). She was described by one researcher with the words "rather deficient in intellect" (Randolph, 1958, p. 39). Jefferson cared for his sister after the death of their father. He administered his father's estate and saw to it that Elizabeth was attired and treated in a manner befitting a woman of her family's social status (Brodie, 1974).

Jefferson's account book records that on February 21, 1774, an intense nighttime earthquake forced all of the family to run outside their home at Monticello. Apparently, frightened by the darkness and confusion, Elizabeth became separated from the rest of the family. She was found dead 3 days later, and on March 7, he recorded his sister's funeral in his account book (Brodie, 1974). In her biography of Jefferson, Brodie suggested that his feelings for Elizabeth might best be symbolized by a clipping in one of his scrapbooks. It is entitled "Elegy on the Death of an Idiot Girl" and it includes the line: "Poor guileless thing! ... Heaven took thee spotless to his own" (p. 71).

Jefferson's only brother, Randolph, has been described in Jefferson biographies as "retarded" (Richards & Singer, 1998). It is clear, however, that he lived a life that was characteristic of Southern planters in the 18th century. He married twice, had seven children and lived on a large plantation (P. Smith, 1976; Risjord, 1994). On the other hand, he had limited verbal skills. His letters, many to his brother, are filled with grammatical errors, poor spelling, and scrawled handwriting. He was clearly no match for the famed intellect of his brother Thomas. Still, there is no clear and convincing evidence of an intellectual disability. The evidence that does exist has led two researchers to state that "we might best say that Jefferson's brother would today be considered to have learning disabilities rather than mental retardation" (Richards & Singer, 1998, p. 5).

Although the nature of Randolph's disabilities can only be the subject of speculation at this point, it is clear that he experienced difficulties in several areas of his personal and vocational life, that he frequently called on his brother for assistance and that he received the help he needed. Thomas advised Randolph on the running of his plantation and shared everything from dogs to vegetable seeds with him. He loaned him farming equipment and money, and took his brother's beloved watch to Richmond for repair. He also wrote his brother's will for him (Malone, 1981). In a deposition given in 1815, Thomas described his brother as "not possessing skill for the judicious management of his affairs" (cited in Malone, 1981, p. 155).

A man who lived as a slave at Monticello later dictated his memoirs of those years in 1847. Among the recollections of the man who was identified only as Isaac was a memory in which the former slave compared the intellect of Randolph Jefferson to his own in a self-deprecating manner. Isaac said: "Old Master's brother, Mass Randall, was a mighty simple man: used to come out among black people, play the fiddle and dance half the night; hadn't much more sense than Isaac" (cited in Bear, 1967, p. 22).

It may not be surprising that Isaac's comment has been used to claim that it was not Thomas but Randolph Jefferson who fathered Sally Hemings' children and that Thomas was not involved sexually with her. In a book published by the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society, Coates (2001) wrote that

It should be noted that Randolph would be more likely to have a sexual encounter with Sally than would Thomas. Randolph was known to socialize with the black slaves at Monticello when he visited there. ... And since Randolph was a widower at the time, it is easy to understand how he could become involved with one of the beautiful house servants. ... In addition, Randolph was age 51 when Eston [a child claimed to be the son of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings] was conceived while Thomas was 64. Randolph remarried a year after Eston was born, and fathered an additional son in that marriage, so he was evidently still sexually active throughout that time period. (p. 93)

When the issue of Randolph's possible paternity of the Jefferson–Hemings children was raised and questioned, a descendent of Thomas Jefferson remarked that it had not been discussed publicly before because

Good taste and respect for the privacy of others was the reason for this rarely mentioned topic. It was bad enough to be illegitimate, much less the illegitimate offspring of a half-witted no account, namely President Jefferson's brother, Randolph Jefferson. (McMurry, 1999, p. 2)

The Diagnosis: A Good Brother

In a review of the treatment of people with intellectual disabilities in Virginia from 1616 through 1860, Wickham (2006) offered an important perspective on the interaction of social class and “idiocy.” Wickham found that a two-tiered system existed. Poor and dependant people with intellectual disabilities often met with public scorn and rejection from even a place in Virginia's public mental institutions. On the other hand, prominent families responded with “silent avoidance” and hiding of what was perceived to be a family weakness (Wickham, 2006).

Thomas Jefferson was a man of means and elevated public stature. He was also a good brother. In one instance he protected the dignity and well-being of a sister with a severe disability. In the second, he promoted the independence and social inclusion of a brother with a disability who

needed his help. These are, indeed, additional reasons why his likeness rightfully belongs on Mount Rushmore.

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