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Works of Historical Faith: Or, Who Wrote *Reason The Only Oracle Of Man?*

*Behold him move ye staunch divines!
His tall head bustling through the pines;
All front he seems like wall of brass,
And brays tremendous as an ass;
One hand is clench'd to batter noses,
While t'other scrawls 'gainst Paul and
Moses.*

Lemuel Hopkins on
General Ethan Allen¹

By MICHAEL A. BELLESILES

In November 1785 a book of massive size and presumption came from the Bennington presses of Haswell and Russell. *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* was the first deistic work published in America. In an act of enormous political courage, unrestrained egotism, or blatant plagiarism, the author ignored literary convention and placed his own name rather than a Latin pseudonym boldly on the title page. That author was none other than Ethan Allen, the most powerful man in Vermont, Revolutionary hero, and, by his own description, an uneducated frontier "clodhopper."²

Allen understood that the publication of *Reason* would end his political career. But as he told his friend Stephen Bradley, *Reason* was the most important work of his life. It was his duty to attempt to save "the human Species, from this ghostly Tyranny, (as far as in me lay)."³ In addition, it would demonstrate that Allen or any other American could be a philosopher as well as a man of action. Sending a copy of *Reason* to St. John Crèvecoeur, Allen requested that this famous supporter of America present the book to the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences in Paris. Appealing to the image of the rugged frontiersman, Allen hoped the French

might be "somewhat diverted with the untutored logic, and Sallies of a mind nursed principally in the Mountainous wilds of America." He reported that *Reason* had "pleased more individuals than I expected and caused considerable speculation & argumentation." But his "reputation as a reasoner (even in America) will depend in great measure on the reception that the work may yet meet with in the learned Cities of Paris and London."⁴ Instead, Allen was roundly ignored, and his book deliberately forgotten. But what Allen could never have guessed, and what would have offended him most, is that two centuries later it would become an accepted "fact" that he did not even write the book to which he devoted four years of his life.

Vermont History put the title page of *Reason* on the cover of its Spring 1985 issue and explained the curious story of the book's authorship. The book originated in Allen's "long conversations with his friend and mentor Dr. Thomas Young." In 1782 "Allen went to Albany and retrieved a manuscript and related notes from Young's widow." *Reason the Only Oracle* was therefore to some degree the result of a collaboration between Young and Allen, yet Allen gave his coauthor no credit.⁵

No one would dispute the basic outlines of this sad history of plagiarism. Many historians go further, giving Young credit for writing most of the book. Recently, such fine scholars as Henry May, Pauline Maier, and Edward Countryman have stated, with no effort at validation, that Young was the true author.⁶ There is only one problem with this widely accepted historical fact: there is not a shred of evidence for it.

Too often the confidence of historians' assertions seems sufficient validation.⁷ On the bicentennial of Ethan Allen's death, it seems appropriate to look again at the notorious crime. Examining the evidence not only clears up a great posthumous inequity, but also tells us a great deal about how historians operate, how they rely on one another for the facts from which they construct their scholarship. History requires constant re-examination, for too often a tale oft told becomes accepted wisdom. Or, as Ethan Allen liked to say, "One story is good till another is told."

For Ethan Allen, as for so many of his peers, the individual's place in the universe was the core problem confronting human intelligence. *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* was Allen's attempt at tackling this mystery. The depth of Allen's commitment to his theology may be better understood if we try to discover, or even imagine, a powerful modern politician devoting several years and a large portion of his resources to the publication of a work rejecting mainstream religious beliefs and offering a uniquely personal vision of humanity's relation to the deity.

In the early 1780s the Tory Justus Sherwood reported that his friend Ethan Allen was growing “weary of war” and longed “once more to enjoy the sweets of peace and to devote himself to his philosophical studies.” In the long lull between the Yorker trials of 1780 and the final battles around Guilford in 1784, Allen found the time to work on a manuscript that would explain his rather ambiguous and ambitious religious philosophy.⁸ Having attained the living proof of his fame, the independent republic of Vermont, Allen turned, as he put it, to the highest plain of universal good, philosophy. As Francis Bacon changed his mind late in life about the founder of nations holding the pinnacle of fame and placed the great philosophers in that coveted position, so Allen turned from action to thought with grandiose hopes of serving all mankind with his theological relativism.

Shortly after the Guilford battle, Haswell and Russell of Bennington agreed to print fifteen hundred copies of *Reason* with the stipulation that Allen pay them as printing progressed. *Reason* was a burden to its publishers, absorbing most of their paper stock and leading them to advertise their “urgent” need for rags to make more. To meet these expenses, Allen was forced to sell his portion of the family’s Sunderland property to his brother Ira for three hundred pounds, collected ninety-seven pounds from the Assembly for expenses accrued in the publication of works defending Vermont, called in several debts, and prosecuted a few lawsuits to raise more money.

Still it was not enough, and Allen attempted to secure a loan to cover printing costs. He wrote an Albany merchant requesting £150 worth of goods to trade, promising to return payment in eight months, at “which time I presume the Books will turn to money.” Besides, Allen added, “I have considerable money due me within the time. You will please to consider my proposition and act in the premises as may be consistent with your scheme of Trade.”⁹ Unfortunately, however, few shared Allen’s faith that systems of philosophy would turn into money, or even sound collateral, and Allen was forced to sell off even more of his property. Altogether Allen raised £1022 by land sales in 1784 and 1785, much of this sum going to fund the publication of his book. And finally in May 1785, Allen went to Philadelphia to commute his Continental pay into currency, which he persuaded his publishers to accept in final payment on his book.¹⁰

Publishing *Reason* was not a frivolous activity for Allen. He saw his theology as the most important work of his life, devoting more time to it than to any other writing, and spending an enormous amount of credit to see it through publication. As he wrote St. John Crèvecoeur, “My late publication has been expensive and has engrossed my attention” to the

point where he had no time to attend the legislature or pursue any other activities.¹¹ But as "it is almost the universal foible of Mankind to aspire to something or other beyond their natural or acquired abilities, I feel the infection."¹²

The deist Ethan Allen was a man of strong faiths. He had placed blind trust in his family, his neighbors, his state, and his cause. But above all else, he had faith in himself. He was as certain as any Calvinist was in the existence of a stern God that his words would convince others of the justice of his positions, political and religious. Allen anticipated that *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* would establish his reputation as a philosopher of note, the highest ambition of a man who wanted to attend Yale and had to settle for an iron forge.

Despite his certainty, *Reason* was not well received. To contemporaries, Allen's book was a deistic threat to morals and correct theology, if not the work of the devil. Because it did not agree with their vision of religion, most failed to take *Reason* seriously. Few people in the eighteenth century read his book as he intended, as a work of positive religion. While Allen defined deism as a religion based on the original agency of God in establishing the laws of nature, most of his peers dismissed it as the moral equivalent of atheism. As was well understood, deists and atheists were not to be trusted, especially with positions of community responsibility. Most of Allen's neighbors would have agreed with Samuel Johnson that "No honest man could be a deist."

Allen's critics refused even to mention *Reason's* contents, so disturbing were its arguments. The earliest reviews were angry letters and satiric poems in New England's newspapers. The tone was set by Lemuel Hopkins, who had Allen armed with his "mob-collecting club / Black from the forge of Belzebub, / And grim with metaphysic scowl" appearing "in hyperborean skies, / To tell the world the bible lies." Timothy Dwight called Allen that "great Clodhopping oracle of man," and his book a "contemptible plagerism of every rotten, worn-out dogma of the English deistical writers." Dwight beheld the "deformity, the venom, and the ill nature of the toad . . . in the sputterings" of the author against "Truth, virtue, providence, and the Creator." It was a shabby, awkward book, evidencing the "rusticity of the expression, the jolting of the stile, the head-and-tail pomposity of the dogmaticism, and general naggishness, affectedly puffed from the beginning to the end." Dwight did not like the book, but he offered no specific criticism, gave no examples of its failings, no indication of what it was actually about. Instead he called it "heathen" and dismissed it as the product of chance and of "the wilds of Vermont."¹³

Reason was rejected as a shallow attack on Christianity, its author castigated as a tool of Satan. When Ezra Stiles, that gentle Puritan, heard

of Allen's death in 1789, he confidently wrote that Allen was in hell getting his much-deserved punishment.¹⁴ Even those who admired Allen for his character and bravery, his political actions and opinions, despised him for writing *Reason*. It was the one crime that neither they nor America would forgive.¹⁵

For nineteenth-century Vermonters the question was how to deal with Ethan Allen. It was acceptable for Allen to have pulled houses down and run off surveyors, as long as his side won eventually. It was even acceptable to flirt with the enemy, as long as everyone believed it was all a trick anyway. But no one had ever risen high enough to question the sanctity of American Christianity. That was carrying rebellion one subject too far. And Ethan Allen paid the price.

Not content with making *Reason* a mistake on Allen's part, modern historians have sought to deny that he even wrote it. In 1867 there appeared a short biography of Allen by Reverend Zadock Thompson. Thompson reported that the late Jehiel Johns, who died in 1840 and had known Allen in the 1760s, had told him "that Allen was about that time on very intimate terms with that noted infidel . . . Dr. Thomas Young, and that from him he derived his own infidel notions, and the principal arguments by which he defended them." Thompson read a great deal into Johns's statements, the *probable* source of which is an unsigned letter written from Huntington, Vermont, just before the death of the eighty-five-year-old Johns. Information in this letter matches what is known of Johns, who was Huntington's first settler. The author of this letter notes that Allen "studied Deism with Doctor Thomas Young untill he thought himself a conjuror." That is all this writer cared to say about events that had occurred nearly eighty years earlier. Such caution is understandable, for if this letter was written by Johns, he would have been eight years old at the time Allen and Young knew each other.¹⁶

The Rev. Thompson did not share this caution. He mentions that Allen's sister-in-law recalled in the 1840s that Allen spent one summer writing about religion, which summer she did not remember. From these pieces of evidence, Thompson concluded that Allen and Thomas Young wrote a manuscript together in the 1760s, Young took it with him, Allen retrieved it from Young's widow in Dutchess County in the spring of 1778, "rewrote, altered and arranged them in the form of a book," and published it as his own in 1784.¹⁷

Seventy-two years later John Pell elevated this vague hypothesis into fact, a fact that has since appeared in every study of Allen. Pell does make a few changes. For instance, he has Allen retrieving the manuscript in 1782 from Mary W. Young in Philadelphia. When it was discovered that Mary Young was in Albany in 1782, the story was adjusted. The only

evidence of Young's involvement remained Zadock Thompson's story. But it made sense. As one historian pointed out, an uneducated bumpkin like Allen could never have written an extended piece of theology such as *Reason*. Since Young was a Yale graduate, he must have written it.¹⁸

The triumph of this elitism came in an article by George Anderson. "Who Wrote 'Ethan Allen's Bible'?" has since become the standard and seemingly definitive reference for anyone wishing to cite evidence that Young deserves credit for *Reason*. While Anderson's general conclusion—that Young was the true author—is often mentioned, his methods are not. Yet it is reasonable to inquire into Anderson's evidence.

Anderson was an accepting scholar. "The story goes that Allen and Young agreed to write together a book," and that is good enough for him. Beginning with this certainty—and "Doubtless there is some basis for the report"—everything falls into place, even the bolt of lightning that "tradition" states burned nearly every copy of *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*.¹⁹ Anderson was also an emphatic scholar, establishing to his own satisfaction that Allen wrote only one hundred of *Reason's* 470 pages. What Anderson did was count the number of Latin-root words per printed page. Those pages with fewer than thirty-five Latin root words were declared to be written by Allen, those with more were clearly by Young. Curiously, Anderson offers no examples, statistics, or reasons to support this bizarre theory because "one does not need the scientific accuracy of Edgar Poe to realize that two very different hands worked at the text."²⁰

This tautology should inspire many questions. Since the pagination was set by the printer, are we to assume that he demarcated precisely those pages by Young and those by Allen? And what of the Appendix to *Reason*, the words of which Anderson does not count, yet graciously attributes to Allen without explanation?²¹ How are we to paginate it so as to eliminate the random variation in Latin-root words so similar to that of *Reason*? Was Young also the unnamed coauthor of the Appendix? But more importantly, just why should those pages with more Latin-root words be attributed to Young? If we find the same disparity in the work of, say, George Anderson, are we to assume that another author's hand is present? Obviously not, for Anderson, like Young, was a college graduate, and therefore more likely to employ certain words than are those not educated by a major eastern university.

But there was more to Anderson's case. Allen was only seventeen when he met twenty-four-year-old Thomas Young in Salisbury in 1754, and "the older man's intellectual superiority much impressed the youth." Anderson offers no evidence for this judgment, which is just as well, for Allen did not move to Salisbury until 1761, when he was twenty-four.²² Nonetheless, piling error on assumption, Anderson declares that

Young must have been working on the manuscript in the years from 1754 until his death in 1777, while "it is almost inconceivable that at the age of seventeen Ethan Allen could have contributed any substantial part to a projected work on religion."²³

It is also inconceivable that Allen could have written any part of the manuscript later in life, for *Reason* demonstrated a "knowledge of medicine quite beyond the range of Ethan Allen." Anderson provides four examples of this "advanced medical knowledge": an offer to prepare a poison for believers, against which they are to test their faith; the statement that, "A blow on the head, or fracture of the perocranium . . . retard, and in some cases wholly prevent the exercise of reason"; the observation that the circulation of blood and proper nutrition are necessities; and the assertion that people are born with certain senses. These statements and observations "are so significantly medical that they could not have come from the hand or brain of Ethan Allen."²⁴

It should be obvious by now that every specific piece of evidence offered by Anderson is premised on the assumption that Ethan Allen was a man of extremely limited mental ability. Thus a reference in *Reason* to the Greek alphabet having twenty-four letters is yet more proof of Young's authorship, for Allen could not have known that fact. A mention of a Dutch law against sexual intercourse between the Cape settlers and the Hottentots "is obviously from the pen of Young," who "came from a section of New York where there were many of that nationality." Likewise, Young must have known Jonathan Edwards's works since they "did not live very far apart. A reference to hell-fire and brimstone [in *Reason*, 134-36] seems natural to a neighbor of the Northampton divine." Able to move Young linguistically closer to Edwards, Anderson ignores the fact that it was Ethan Allen who actually lived in Northampton. For Anderson the clincher is that "although God is mentioned more than seven hundred times, not once is He called Jehovah!"²⁵ This last argument is never explained, but seems to imply that since Allen could not avoid defying literary convention by writing Jehovah rather than God the whole book must be by Young. Such peculiar statements are piled higher and higher, until there seems to be a body of evidence.

We may wonder why no one came forward before that "man of discernment and education," Rev. Thompson, to condemn the thief. Why did Mary Young and her six children, all alive in the 1780s, keep quiet? Anderson states that "in the general grief in Vermont over the loss of so strong a figure, nobody rose to cast a doubt on his authorship of the *Oracles*."²⁶ This grief was apparently widespread and of long duration, reaching the Young family in Albany, and silencing all Allen's contemporaries.

Language and logic are hopelessly muddled in Anderson's expose. He reports that there "are sound reasons for supporting, or suspecting, that Dr. Thomas Young wrote the bulk of the book." While some of these reasons are "more impressive than others," taken as a whole "they strengthen Young's title to most of the text." Therefore, by "putting himself forward as the sole author of the book, Allen laid himself open to the charge of intellectual dishonesty, if not downright plagiarism." As with any conspiracy theory, with the basic fact unassailable, all else follows. Even Allen's efforts to get a Vermont land grant for Young's widow in 1786 becomes in Anderson's hands evidence of a guilty conscience, a guilt apparently shared by Thomas Chittenden and Jonas Fay, who also signed the petition. By continuously repeating the core supposition that "By no reasonable theory or explanation can Ethan Allen . . . be accepted as the author," Anderson hoped that it would eventually gain currency, which it clearly has done.²⁷

The year after Anderson's article appeared, Dana Doten published "Ethan Allen's Original Something." That originality alleged theft, for Doten seconded Anderson, finding the evidence "overwhelming" that Allen had plagiarized the "egregious *Oracle of Reason*." Doten offered two reasons for this conclusion. The first was a personal letter by Allen, which summarizes chapter 12 of *Reason* in what Doten finds to be a "crude and jumbled" fashion, whereas the text is eminently clear — perhaps the only time that this claim has been made. Further, repeating Anderson, Doten could not imagine how someone without a proper education could write a work of theology. There was simply no way that Allen could have had "a command of academic technique." Allen "was not, by birth, a gentleman; it was presumption for him to pretend so." Such a perspective disregards contemporary standards; an eighteenth-century republican was a gentleman as a consequence of conduct, not birth.²⁸

No longer glorifying the common man, many twentieth century historians sought to put him down. There is a clear elitism in the considerations of Allen as an uneducated rustic who could not have understood the medical metaphors used in *Reason* and certainly could not have written them, while much is made of Young's college-trained intellect. Charles Jellison wrote that "Ethan had never before had access to such great erudition, nor would he ever again." Stewart Holbrook gave Young "the best library in northern Connecticut" (though Young lived in New York).²⁹ Another scholar even credits Young as the secret source of Allen's political ideas. "Young had made excerpts from many of the texts which he had read at Yale and it is possible that Allen had these notes before him as he composed his own tracts in which Lockean phrases so frequently appear."³⁰

The irony is that Young was not a Yale graduate; he only claimed to be one.³¹ Like Ethan Allen, Young was self-taught, and they were probably attracted to each other in the early 1760s precisely because both were young autodidacts. Nonetheless, a recent biographer of Thomas Young states flatly that "Young wrote the major part" of *Reason*, a "fact" accepted by all recent biographers of both Young and Allen, with one exception.³²

That exception, Charles Jellison, argues both sides of the question. Jellison finds Anderson's evidence "impressive enough to call into serious question the actual legitimacy of Ethan's claim to authorship." Yet he is troubled, asking, "who among those familiar with Ethan's other writings can read *Oracles* and doubt" Allen's authorship. Curiously, Zadock Thompson concluded that "I am very confident, however, that no person who is familiar with Allen's other writings, can read the *Oracles of Reason* without suspicion that some other person beside himself was concerned in its composition." Another biographer wrote that "No person who is familiar with Allen's other writings, can read the *Oracle of Reason* without suspicion that some other person was concerned in its composition."³³ This similarity of language is very revealing. Like nearly every other aspect of the historical case against Allen the plagiarist, the scholars rely on one another, repeat the accepted fact (and terminology), and proceed to the judgments, which are usually unfavorable and based more on sentiment than reason. As the author of *Reason the Only Oracle* wrote, it is "facts which constitute truth," and we should question the motives of those who, not knowing such, are "obliged to substitute sincerity in the place of knowledge."³⁴

Lacking any evidence to support the theory that Thomas Young was the coauthor of *Reason the Only Oracle*, just why have several generations of scholars repeated this "fact"? The answer, I believe, lies in the unwillingness of many Americans to accept complex heroes. In short, the great American hero cannot be either intellectual or skeptical.

America has had no use for heroes who think too much. A man of wisdom, Franklin or Edison, must prove his pragmatism and love of gain before he can be accepted. To generalize, American intellectuals and scientists do not form the stuff of myth; ideas are subject to suspicion, easy categories are appreciated. It is appropriate that what eventually worked to disqualify Ethan Allen as a national hero was no flaw in his character nor any defeat he suffered, but his one effort at sustained thought.

For the forty years following his death, Allen was still proper material for the American pantheon. His *Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Cap-*

tivity remained popular, and early historians gave lengthy coverage to the capture of Ticonderoga and Allen's part in the campaign on Lake Champlain. Some even discussed his exploits in resisting New York and establishing Vermont. Allen was the central figure in the earliest histories of Vermont: his acts defined Vermont. The almanacs carried stories of his heroics, most exaggerated or manufactured, and public officials referred to his example in their speeches. There was even some mild interest in *Reason*, with several editions appearing and excerpts published in magazines of free thought.³⁵

But all this changed with the Second Great Awakening. By the 1840s America had little room for deists or the irreligious, except in the easily-dismissed working class. It was déclassé not to adhere publicly to some form of Protestant Christianity, and America could only have heroes who upheld this standard: Washington was to be seen kneeling in the snow at Valley Forge, not questioning divine revelation in his private letters. Those who believed in the unlimited virtue of America demanded perfection of their heroes. For the rest of the nineteenth century Allen would appear in histories as the leader of the forces that took Ticonderoga, and no more. He was allowed one line in the historical drama: "Surrender in the name of the great Jehovah and the Continental Congress." And some even rejected that, as they resented Congress's receiving equal billing.

It was relatively simple for historians of the United States to write Allen out of their texts. It was more difficult for Vermont historians, a peculiar group of hagiographers who have fluttered around the initial act of creation with a reverence often exceeding that extended to the national "Founding Fathers." To them went the unenviable task of explaining how the most righteous community in America came to be led by a rank deist. There have been many approaches, comparable in some ways to the efforts of modern German historians to find an alibi for their nation during the 1930s. Many sought to warp the founding of Vermont into a conservative act in which Allen was tolerated by the better sort of people. Others preserved the Revolution by depicting his book as an aberration. Writers placed the halo firmly above Ethan Allen's heroic brow and then found some inconspicuous place to mention, in a paragraph or less, that in his dotage he temporarily lost touch with virtue and produced an unfortunate attack on Christianity called the *Oracle of Reason*, an insignificant book whose "theology may be expressed in few words," usually in a single sentence.³⁶

Such scholars saw *Reason* as little more than a mean-spirited attack on revealed religion, also known as "the Truth."³⁷ Even the socialist John Spargo felt compelled to apologize for Allen's poor taste or eccentricity in publishing his opinions.³⁸ That even one of America's heroes violated

the canons of Protestant Christianity was more than nationalist historians could tolerate. At least Jefferson, Washington, and the rest had the discretion to keep their opinions to themselves while making the appropriate public genuflections in the direction of a vague civic religion. Tom Paine may have gone public with *The Age of Reason*, but he had done so in France, was originally English, and was an alcoholic. But Allen was a home product, a real American. Better to suggest that the whole thing was an error in judgment than to explain Allen's understanding of religion. Thus most writers agreed with the nineteenth century historian who said that "General Allen was brave, humane, and generous; yet his conduct does not seem to have been much influenced by considerations respecting that holy and merciful Being, whose character and whose commands are disclosed to us in Scriptures. His notions with regard to religion were loose and absurd." As Zadock Thompson explained, Ethan Allen was simply *too* self-sufficient.³⁹

Allen was also uneducated. And, as it did for George Anderson, this flaw explained much. John A. Graham set the tone as early as 1797, describing Allen as "a man of extraordinary character" and "great talents, but deficient in education." As a consequence "he laboured under many disadvantages," the primary of which was his effort to "turn the whole System of Religion and Revelation into ridicule." Fortunately, Graham thought, *Reason* was "so gross and monstrous" that it quickly sank "into the oblivion and contempt it merited," thus preserving Allen's reputation as a man of "the strictest sense of honour, integrity, and uprightness."⁴⁰

To make the transient nature of Allen's deism clear, Timothy Dwight either heard or invented a marvelous story to prove the hero's true inner piety. In 1784 Allen's eldest daughter, Loraine, died at age twenty-one. In the oft-repeated Dwight story, Loraine, between age thirteen and sixteen, is on her deathbed when she calls for her father. Looking up at the proud deist, Loraine asks which faith she should die in, the comforting Christianity of her mother or the cold hard reason of her father. With tears rolling down his face, Allen tells her, "in thy mother's holy faith." Allen's grandson, General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, later quoted his mother, who was present, to the effect that the entire story was contrived years after Loraine's death. Hitchcock felt that the clergy made up the story as revenge on Ethan Allen, especially as there is no evidence that Mary Allen was herself religious. For biographers of Ethan Allen, though, the meaning was clear. "Tradition fully attests" the validity of his behavior at Loraine's deathbed and proves that "his religious opinions were not grounded in absolute conviction."⁴¹

Biographers of Ethan Allen have crafted the facts to conform to their opinions. In the absence of a supportive fact, they create one. A story

is repeated for decades, almost word for word, as if the transcript existed.⁴² The wording quickly becomes recognizable, the stories tumble repetitiously over one another as historians suspend their professional standards and quote each other as evidence. Most Ethan Allen stories originated in the 1830s and 1840s, when Vermonters were trying to find some way of living with their errant hero. They hit upon the notion of making him someone different, a secret Christian. Drawing upon the story of Loraine Allen's death, the religious were able to conclude that Allen only "indulged in the exercise of fancy, upon religious matters" and was actually, "in principle, attached to the beautiful and holy precepts inculcated by our Savior."⁴³ A tombstone was even placed over Allen's grave that read "The Corporeal Part of Gen. Ethan Allen rests beneath this stone . . . His spirit tried the mercies of his God, / In whom he believed, and strongly trusted." When a statue was rededicated to Allen in 1941, the sermon and speech delivered made Allen into a tool of "a wise and all-powerful Providence." Ethan Allen, it seems, "had the zeal and faith of a crusader."⁴⁴

Saved from the devil in this way, Ethan Allen could become the symbol of what really mattered: America's right to conquest. It has often been noted that the writing of history in the nineteenth century (and later) carried the responsibility of teaching the proper political morality.⁴⁵ Facts could thus be routinely omitted when they might contradict desired modes of behavior. Likewise, legends were perfectly acceptable as "evidence," as were stories recently heard from aged "eyewitnesses" or made up on the spot. The heroes of the Revolution had to be sized to fit the needs of the times. Like John Ward's Andrew Jackson, Ethan Allen was to combine the virtues of living close to nature with the gentility of republican civilization. The first made America better than Europe, the second justified the conquest of the continent and the extermination of the Indians. Allen was thus to be both the rude frontier democrat and the honorable gentleman.

It was in this context that Zadock Thompson created the myth of authorship; inertia kept it going. Despite dramatic changes in social attitudes, historians continue to accept and perpetuate this convoluted tale of plagiarism without effort at validation. After more than a century, it seems appropriate finally to apply Ockham's razor to the tangled knot of this historical conundrum. It is time to ask why, if there is not a single piece of evidence to the contrary, should we believe that anyone other than Ethan Allen wrote *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*?⁴⁶

NOTES

¹ Elihu H. Smith, ed., *American Poems Selected and Original* (Litchfield, Conn.: Collier & Buel, 1793), 142.

² Even the date of publication of *Reason* seems to be in dispute. Most authors take the title page at face value and date the work 1784. See, for instance, George P. Anderson, "Who Wrote 'Ethan Allen's Bible'?" *New England Quarterly* 10 (1937): 685; Dana Doten, "Ethan Allen's Original Something," *New England Quarterly* 11 (1938): 361; Darline Shapiro, "Ethan Allen: Philosopher-Theologian to a Generation of American Revolutionaries," *William & Mary Quarterly* 11 (1964): 237. Charles A. Jellison states that the book was published in early 1785, *Ethan Allen: Frontier Rebel* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1969), 305, 310. Allen himself places the publication date in November, 1785; Allen to Benjamin Stiles, Nov. 16, 1785, in William Cothren, *History of Ancient Woodbury, Connecticut, From the First Indian Deed in 1659* (Waterbury, Conn.: Bronson Brothers, 1854-1879), 1: 414. A letter Allen wrote Stephen R. Bradley on Sept. 7, 1785, states that Haswell is in the process of printing chapter 12; Ethan Allen Papers, Stevens Collection, Vermont State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Montpelier, Vermont (hereafter, Ethan Allen Papers).

³ Allen to Bradley, Sept. 7, 1785, Ethan Allen Papers. Some scholars have insisted that the Allen faction was on its way out in the mid-1780s anyway, so Ethan Allen took no chances in publishing *Reason*. But what changed in 1784 was the Allens' *uncontested* dominance of Vermont politics. They and their allies—Thomas Chittenden, Stephen Bradley, Ira Allen, Matthew Lyon—remained preeminent in Vermont through the end of the century. The conservatives under Chipman and Tichenor contested that rule and occasionally won on important issues, but the Allens did not just give up and walk away. If Ethan Allen had stayed politically active, it is highly likely that the Allen faction would have been even more successful.

⁴ Allen to Crèvecoeur, March 2, 1786, Ethan Allen Papers.

⁵ *Vermont History* 53 (1985): 134.

⁶ Pauline Maier, *The Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 125-26; Edward Countryman, "'Out of the Bonds of the Law': Northern Land Rioters in the Eighteenth Century," in Alfred E. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 59; Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 123.

⁷ For instance, Stewart H. Holbrook, *Ethan Allen* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), wrote that "There can be no doubt it [Reason] was a collaboration." (234) Yet he offers absolutely no evidence for this certainty.

⁸ Justus Sherwood, "Journal," *Vermont History* 24 (1956): 220.

⁹ *Vermont Gazette* for 1784; Allen to James Caldwell, Feb., 7, 1785, *Magazine of American History* 14 (1885), 320; Allen to Van Schaick, Aug. 5, 1784, Ethan Allen Papers.

¹⁰ Sunderland Land Records, 3: 23 (Aug. 10, 1784); Shaftsbury Land Records, 1: n.p., 129, 183 (May 3, 1784, March 8, May 5, 1785); Charlotte Land Records, 1: n.p., 30 (Nov. 24, Dec. 4, 10, 21, 1784, May 1, 1785); Hubbardton Land Records, 1: 101 (May 7, 1785); Rutland Land Records, 4: 331 (June 30, 1785); Allen v. Samuel Hunt, Aug., 1785, Superior Court Records; Ethan Allen's receipt for commuting his pay, May 25, 1785, Ethan Allen Papers.

¹¹ Allen to Crèvecoeur, May 31, 1785, Ethan Allen Papers.

¹² Allen to Crèvecoeur, March 2, 1786, Ethan Allen Papers.

¹³ Hopkins in Smith, *American Poems*, 142; Dwight, *The Triumph of Infidelity: A Poem* (n.p., 1788), iii; *American Museum* (Philadelphia) 2 (Aug., 1787): 171, (Oct., 1787): 408-10.

¹⁴ Franklin B. Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1901), 3: 345. See also, Uzel Ogden, *Antidote to Deism* (Newark, N.J.: John Woods, 1795) 1: vii (note).

¹⁵ John J. Henry, *Account of Arnold's Campaign Against Quebec* (Albany: J. Munsell, 1877), 120-21. For other contemporary responses see "Ethan Nomatterwho" letters in Ethan Allen Papers; *Vermont Gazette*, June 15, Sept. 19, 1786; *New-Haven Gazette*, April 19, 1787; Josiah Sherman, *Oracles of Reason: As Found by the Deists, are husks for Deistical and Heathen Swine* (Litchfield, Conn.: Thomas Collier, 1787), and *A Sermon to Swine: From Luke XV.16* (Litchfield, Conn.: Thomas Collier, 1787).

¹⁶ Abby M. Hemenway, ed., *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* (Burlington, Vt.: A. M. Hemenway, 1868), 1: 563; unsigned letter to George W. Benedict, May 29, 1840, Stevens Family Papers, 9-18, Bailey / Howe Library, University of Vermont.

¹⁷ Hemenway, *Vermont Gazetteer* 1: 568. Thompson's precise wording is: "It seemed at this time, to be generally understood that he [Allen] and Young were engaged in company, in a preparation of a work in support of infidel principles, and that there was an agreement between them that the one who outlived the other would publish it." There is no known source for this information.

¹⁸ George P. Anderson, "Who Wrote 'Ethan Allen's Bible'?" *New England Quarterly* 10 (1937): 685-96. See also, Doten, "Ethan Allen's Original Something," 361-66; Jacob G. Ullery, *Men of Vermont: An Illustrated Biographical History of Vermonters and Sons of Vermont* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Transcript

Publishing, 1894), 33; Pell, *Ethan Allen*, 226, 283; Henry H. Edes, "Memoir of Thomas Young, 1731-1777," *Publications*, Colonial Society of Massachusetts 11 (1910): 2-54; Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 305.

¹⁹ Anderson, "Who Wrote 'Ethan Allen's Bible?'" 686, 696. A tale oft repeated. See, for instance, Shapiro, "Ethan Allen," 238.

²⁰ Anderson, "Who Wrote 'Ethan Allen's Bible?'" 686, 693. Anderson presents two quotations from *Reason* dealing with very different subjects, the sun and Shakers. Since the first is scientific, he proclaims it to be Young's, since the second is in a "common" style, it is Allen's.

²¹ Anderson, "Who Wrote 'Ethan Allen's Bible?'" 696n. Likewise, Jellison dismissed the Appendix as "second-rate at best, perhaps because this time Ethan was forced to do the job alone, without the help of his one-time collaborator Thomas Young," 327.

²² Biographers cannot agree on when the two men met nor on their ages. For instance, Jellison has the two meeting in 1763 and states that Young (b. 1731) was five years older than Allen (b. 1738), *Ethan Allen*, 15; Maier refers vaguely to their meeting in "these years," the 1750s and 1760s, *Old Revolutionaries*, 116.

²³ Anderson, "Who Wrote 'Ethan Allen's Bible?'" 686, 689. Jellison insists that Young did not work on the manuscript in the intervening years, *Ethan Allen*, 305. How either historian knew remains a mystery.

²⁴ Anderson, "Who Wrote 'Ethan Allen's Bible?'" 690-92; examples from *Reason*, 139-40, 142-43, 182-83, 265-66.

²⁵ Anderson, "Who Wrote 'Ethan Allen's Bible?'" 689, 692-93.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 687.

²⁷ Anderson, "Who Wrote 'Ethan Allen's Bible?'" 685, 688-90, 694-96; Edward A. Hoyt, ed. *General Petitions, 1778-1787 (State Papers of Vermont, Montpelier, Vt., 1952)*, 8: 272-73. Jellison also thought this petition an indication of a guilty conscience. Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 308-09.

²⁸ Doten, "Ethan Allen's Original Something," 361-66. In the same tone, Jellison's Allen "subscribes" to Young's ideas, *Ethan Allen*, 16.

²⁹ Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 15. Holbrook, like Anderson, had Young living in Salisbury; *Ethan Allen (New York, 1940)*, 28-29.

³⁰ Shapiro, "Ethan Allen," 243n.

³¹ As recently as 1964 Darline Shapiro passed on this false information in the *William & Mary Quarterly*, one of the most prominent historical journals. Shapiro, "Ethan Allen," 236. Young's name does not appear in Franklin B. Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College* (6 vols., New York and New Haven: H. Holt & Co., 1885-1912), nor in any other college record.

³² David F. Hawke, "Dr. Thomas Young - 'Eternal Fisher in Troubled Waters': Notes for a Biography," *Quarterly*, New-York Historical Society 54 (1970): 7-29; Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 308-09; Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Damndest Yankees: Ethan Allen & His Clan* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Stephen Greene Press, 1976), 13-14, 225-26; Shapiro, "Ethan Allen"; Kenneth S. Davis, "In the Name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress!" *American Heritage* 14 (Oct. 1963): 69; John McWilliams, "The Faces of Ethan Allen, 1760-1860," *New England Quarterly* 49 (1976): 257-82; Pauline Maier, "Reason and Revolution: The Radicalism of Dr. Thomas Young," *American Quarterly* 28 (1976): 229-49. And not surprisingly, these unsubstantiated assertions become facts for other historians. See, for instance, Russel B. Nye, *The Cultural Life of the New Nation, 1776-1830* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 63, 211.

³³ Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 308-09; Hemenway, *Vermont Gazetteer*, 1: 569; Charles W. Brown, *Ethan Allen, of Green Mountain Fame* (Chicago: M. A. Donohue & Co., 1902), 233.

³⁴ Allen, *Reason*, 86-87, 324.

³⁵ Senex, *Leterz, Moral, Political and Theological* (Winooski Falls, Vt.: Jon R. Forest, 1858), 2: 1-8; John J. Duffy and H. Nicholas Muller III, *An Anxious Democracy: Aspects of the 1830s* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 124, 137, 145-46; G. Adolf Koch, *Republican Religion: The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason* (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1933), 47-50, 115-16, 191-92.

³⁶ Hemenway, *Vermont Gazetteer* 1: 569.

³⁷ Jared Sparks wrote that Allen's "crude and worthless performance," and his religious skepticism, were due to his mistaking "some of the errors of Christian sects for the true doctrines of revealed religion." If Allen had but known the true faith - by which I take it Sparks meant whatever faith he belonged to - then he would not have been a deist. Sparks, *The Library of American Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1844-1848), 1: 350-51. See also John W. Barber, *The History and Antiquities of New England, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania* (Hartford, Conn.: H. S. Parsons & Co., 1842), 578-79; Henry W. DePuy, *Ethan Allen and the Green-Mountain Heroes of '76* (Boston: Dayton & Wentworth, 1853), 423-24; Gilbert H. Doane, "Ethan Allen," in Allen Johnson, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1928-1958), 1: 188; Herman Melville, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 108; Hiland Hall, *The History of Vermont from Its Discovery to Its Admission into the Union in 1791* (Albany: J. Munsell, 1868), 453; Thomas J. Rogers, *A New American Biographical Dictionary* (Easton, Pa.: T. J. Rogers, 1824), 21-25; L. Carrol Judson, *The Sages and Heroes of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Moss and Brothers, 1853), 415-16.

³⁸ John Spargo, *Notes on the Ancestors and Immediate Descendants of Ethan and Ira Allen* (Bennington, Vt.: by author, 1948), and *Ethan Allen at Ticonderoga* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle Co., 1926).

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³⁹ Amos Blanchard, *American Military Biography; Containing the Lives and Characters of the Officers of the Revolution* (New York: E. J. Swords, 1830), 40; Hemenway, *Vermont Gazetteer*, 1: 569. See also, DePuy, *Ethan Allen*, 426.

⁴⁰ John A. Graham, *A Descriptive Sketch of the Present State of Vermont* (London, 1797; repr., Bennington, Vt.: Vermont Heritage Press, 1987), 140-41, 143-44.

⁴¹ Benson J. Lossing, "Ethan Allen," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 17 (1858), 742-43. There are dozens of versions of this story, including a poem from the 1850s and a moving etching from the same period. Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York* (Cambridge, Ma.: Belknap Press, 1969), Barbara Solomon, ed., vol. 2: 409n; Hemenway, *Vermont Gazetteer* 1: 569; Ethan Allen Hitchcock to *The Herald of Progress* (St. Louis), Dec. 23, 1860.

⁴² Several historians seem to know precisely what Allen and Young discussed and where these conversations were held. See Holbrook, *Ethan Allen*, 29; Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 15-17.

⁴³ Hugh Moore, *Memoirs of Col. Ethan Allen* (Plattsburgh, N.Y.: O. R. Cook, 1834), 243, 246. Moore fails to mention *Reason*. See also, Lossing, "Ethan Allen," 742-43; Leon W. Dean, *The Admission of Vermont into the Union* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1941), 5; Ullery, *Men of Vermont*, 34.

⁴⁴ *Proceedings*, Vermont Historical Society 10 (1942): 136-47.

⁴⁵ John W. Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Little Brown, 1980); McWilliams, "Faces of Ethan Allen," 264.

⁴⁶ The author wishes to thank Gregory Sanford for his help and sound advice in the preparation of this article.