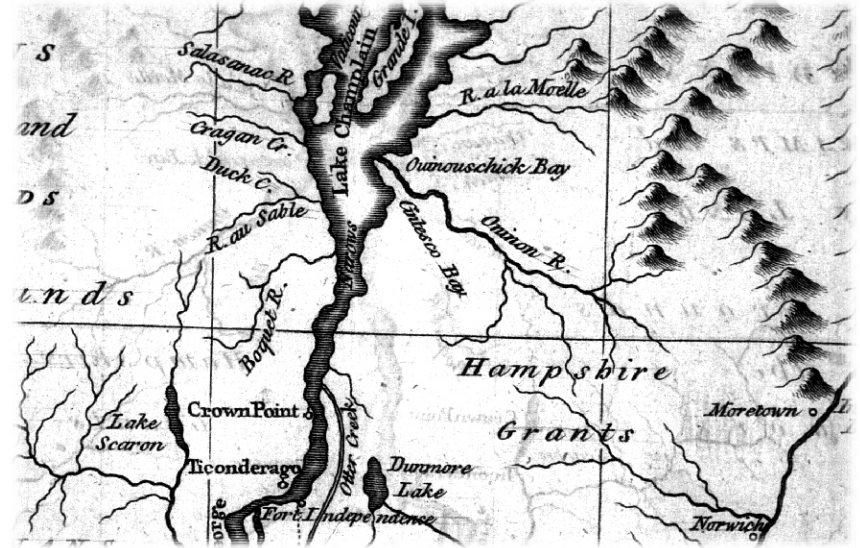


## A detailed black and white woodcut-style portrait of a man, likely a historical figure, shown from the chest up. He has thick, curly hair and a serious expression, looking slightly to the left. He is wearing a dark, high-collared coat with visible buttons and lapels. The portrait is enclosed within a simple oval border.

Key passages from:  
Reason: the Only Oracle of Man (1784)



A black and white photograph of a large, winding river or lake, likely the Columbia River, with a large island in the middle. The island is densely packed with white buildings, possibly a military installation or a large settlement. The surrounding landscape is hilly and forested, with mountains visible in the background. A large evergreen tree is prominent on the left side of the foreground.

"The Gods of the valley are not the Gods of the hills."  
Ethan Allen

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# On Natural Religion...

Selections from

## R E A S O N T H E O N L Y ORACLE OF MAN, By Ethan Allen, Esq;

Edited and Abridged by  
J. Michael McKnight, Ph.d.

Burlington, VT. 2005

[www.essentialteachings.com](http://www.essentialteachings.com)

In the state of Vermont, the name of Ethan Allen is so popular that it is used to denote everything from a furniture company to a large military firing range. The name of his band of soldiers, the Green Mountain Boys, is used for the state's air national guard corps.

Although his name is ubiquitous, the man who made it legendary is still somewhat mysterious. Who was Ethan Allen? To answer this, I made a short pilgrimage to his gravesite in Burlington, Vermont.

At the base of an imposing monument in Burlington's Green Mountain Cemetery one finds the following description of Ethan Allen and his importance in Vermont's history: "Wielding the pen as well as the sword, he was the sagacious and intrepid DEFENDER of the New Hampshire Grants and the MASTER SPIRIT in the arduous struggle which resulted in the sovereignty and independence of this state."

At the base of the heroic statue on top of the column is one word: Ticonderoga. This alludes to his greatest military feat, the capture of Fort Ticonderoga from the British in 1775. This adventure went well, but he had subsequent ventures such as his attack on Montreal that were complete failures. That one nearly cost him his life and put him in a British prison for almost three years.

Part of the mythic character of Ethan Allen is his documented willingness to set off on seemingly impossible and dangerous quests and sometimes pull them off. He threw his all into whatever he set his mind on and could motivate people to follow him.



He is remembered as a charismatic man of action, but he had an introspective side of his character which deepens the mystery of the man. After he was set free from prison, he sought to devote himself to philosophic pursuits. Above all, he wanted to complete and publish his monumental work, Reason, the Only Oracle of Man, which he had begun years before when studying with Dr. Thomas Young in Connecticut. The question of how much of the work should really be credited to Dr. Young is debatable. Ethan claims not to have read any of the Deistical authors such as Charles Blount or John Tolland, but it is likely that he absorbed their views through conversations with his mentor. I think it is fair to say that it started as a collaboration, but it was left to Ethan to finish it after Dr. Young's death. He put his stamp on it.

The story of how the book came to be and how it has survived is a wonder by itself. Ethan could not find a publisher for his anti-clerical tome of five hundred pages in length. This is not surprising. He ended up by going into debt to self-publish the work through a printer in Bennington in 1784. Many of the original copies were soon lost in a fire. The remaining copies were enough to outrage many of the people who read it. It is probable that many of those who were scandalized by the book never actually took the time to read it.

In the mid- nineteenth century, Ethan Allen was "resurrected" as a hero of superhuman proportions, but his book on natural religion was not celebrated as part of the myth. The historian John Fiske wrote in 1891, "The capture of Ticonderoga had also been secretly planned in Connecticut and was entrusted to Ethan Allen, the eccentric but sagacious author of that now-forgotten deistical book The Oracles of Reason." Fortunately, the book was not completely forgotten. It was valued by a few freethinkers as the first work of its kind to be published in the United States. It was printed a full decade before a similar work by Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason.

One of the challenges of reading Reason the Only Oracle of Man is first to find a copy. There is an 1854 abridgement that can be found on the internet (<http://www.infidels.com>) After reading the abridged version, it is recommended to look at the original. There are only two dozen of the first editions in

existence, but a facsimile edition is still in print.

I have wrestled with both versions of the work over the past year struggling to make Ethan Allen's views more accessible for the reader of today. His prose style can be dense with many run-on sentences and paragraphs that go on for pages. I found myself editing his writing as I read it just to make it comprehensible..

This booklet is the result of these efforts. I believe that Reason the Only Oracle still has much to offer and is much more than a literary curiosity. The attentive reader will find that Ethan Allen undertook his quest to answer life's biggest questions with the same determination he showed on the battlefield. I have tried to let his forays and sorties move without the weight of the extra baggage he packed on in the original edition. The enemy he attacks with reckless abandon is dogmatic religion and supernaturalism in general. As he makes clear in numerous passages, he sought to debunk some of the rigid religious beliefs of his day, especially Calvinism, in order to free people's minds for the practice of what he considered primary or "natural" religion. This is iconoclasm with a higher purpose.

So, the strange history of "Ethan Allen's Bible" as it was sometimes called comes down to today in the form of this booklet. It seems to me that he might have reached more people in the eighteenth century if he had kept it short and simple: an abridged version for the general reader. I have attempted to do exactly this some two hundred and twenty years after the original edition was published. As far as possible, his original language and argumentative style have been preserved in the following selections.

John Michael McKnight  
Underhill Center, VT.  
February 2005.

R E A S O N  
T H E O N L Y  
ORACLE OF MAN,  
O R A  
Compenduous System  
O F  
Natural Religion.  
Alternately A D O R N E D with Confutations  
of a variety of D O C T R I N E S  
incompatible to its ;  
Deduced from the from the moft exalted ideas which  
we are able to form of the  
D I V I N E and Human  
C H A R A C T E R  
A N D F R O M T H E  
Univerfe in General.

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By Ethan Allen, Esq;

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B E N N I N G T O N :  
STATE of V E R M O N T :  
Printed by H A S W E L L & R U S S E L L .  
M , D C C , L X X X I V .



In my youth, I was much disposed to contemplation. I committed to manuscript such sentiments or arguments as appeared most consonant to reason. I practiced this method for many years, and I experienced great advantages in the progression of my learning and knowledge. Since I was deficient in education, I had to acquire the knowledge of grammar and language as well as the art of reasoning principally from a studious application to it. This treatise may be deficient, but I am confident that I have struck the outlines of a consistent system which I recommend to abler writers to perfect.

I have endeavored to make reason my guide throughout the system, and expect that they who read it will approve or disapprove it according to that original principle. If the arguments are rightly stated and the inferences justly drawn, they will stand the test of truth.

In the circle of my acquaintance, I have generally been called a Deist, the reality of which I never disputed. I know I am no Christian, except mere infant baptism make me one.

As to being a Deist, I know not whether I am one or not, for I have never read their writings. This book will determine the matter, for I have not in the least disguised my sentiments, but have written freely without any conscious knowledge of prejudice for or against any man, sect, or party whatever. I only wish that good sense, truth and virtue maybe promoted and flourish in the world, and that delusion, superstition and false religion be driven out. I ask no favor at the hands of philosophers, divines or critics, but hope and expect they will severely chastise me for my errors and mistakes. My errors in this treatise, which may be rationally pointed out, will be readily rescinded.

The desire of knowledge has engaged the attention of the wise and curious among mankind in all ages which has been productive of extending the arts and sciences far and wide...until philosophy, astronomy, geography, and history, with many other branches of science, have arrived to a degree of perfection.

It is nevertheless to be regretted that the bulk of mankind, even in those nations which are most celebrated for learning and wisdom, are still carried down the torrents of superstition, and entertain very unworthy notions of the BEING, PERFECTIONS, CREATION, and PROVIDENCE OF GOD, and their duty to him. This lays an indispensable obligation on the philosophic friends of nature to exert themselves in every lawful, wise, and prudent method, to endeavor to reclaim mankind from their ignorance and delusion by enlightening their minds in those great and sublime truths concerning God and his providence and their obligations to moral rectitude which in this world and that which is to come cannot fail to affect their happiness and well being.

Though "none by searching can find out God or the Almighty to perfection", yet I am persuaded that if mankind would dare to exercise their reason as freely on those divine topics as they do in the common concerns of life, they would, in a great measure, rid themselves of their blindness and superstition. They would gain more exalted ideas of God and their obligations to him and one another, and be proportionally delighted and blessed with the views of his moral government, make better members of society, and acquire many powerful incentives to the practice of morality which is the greatest perfection that human nature is capable of.