

Thomas Jefferson's Enlightenment

By Iain McLean

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book has been an extremely long time in the making. Its genesis was a long-ago exchange teaching semester at Washington & Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, which was founded in 1749, refounded with an endowment from George Washington in 1796, and re-refounded after the Civil War when Robert E. Lee became its president. That semester created my lifelong love of Virginia, and fascination with Thomas Jefferson and multiple aspects of Virginia history and culture. My sponsor, William “Buck” Buchanan, bore a proud Ulster-Scots surname. He liked to tell that his father had been visited by a genealogist who wish to prove that he was descended from President James Buchanan, and that he had asked the genealogist rather to prove that he was not. (As President Buchanan was gay and unmarried, that should not have been difficult.) I also met another unrelated Ulster-Scots Buchanan – James M. Buchanan, whose Center for the Study of Public Choice was then at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA. The influence of public choice and its cousin, social choice, took me on a long intellectual loop, which did not bring me back to Jefferson for two decades.

This trip also led to my first hillbilly elegy as I explored the very different world to the west. I salute the memory of Jack Showalter, then owner of the Allegheny Central Railroad in Covington, VA, on whose steam locomotives I acted as his stoker despite not understanding a word he said to begin with. I hope my wife has forgiven me for taking her on a nostalgic trip on the Cass Scenic Railroad in West Virginia, another scene of my stoking exploits, on our honeymoon.

I was born in Scotland and went to school there, before going to Oxford University where the history curriculum that I studied required students to show knowledge of “the history of England (and of Scotland, Ireland, and the British Empire in so far as they are relevant to the history of England)”. This was my first encounter with English condescension towards (not to say incomprehension of) Scotland, a country which has been part of the United Kingdom since 1707, but which has a separate legal system, a different established church, and a different political culture. These aspects really mattered in the 18th century, and as I argue in this book, they are, uniquely, what made the Scottish Enlightenment possible.

That the American Enlightenment had Scottish roots is not a new claim. The most forthright version of the claim was made by Garry Wills in his *Inventing America* (Wills 1978). Wills’ claim has been very influential but in places was seriously overstated. In this book, I reassess the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on Jefferson specifically. I do not repeat earlier work in which, with coauthors, I have shown that two Framers of the US Constitution in particular – James Madison and James Wilson – were directly (Wilson) or at one remove (Madison) products of Scottish Enlightenment thought (McLean, 2003, 2012b, 2015; McLean and Peterson 2010, 2011a, 2011b). But the lifelong collaboration between Madison and Jefferson means that Jefferson unquestionably absorbed Scottish Enlightenment thought through his bosom friend’s influence, as well as by other routes which I explore in this book.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the focus of my research, with colleagues, was on rediscovering the lost history of social choice – that is, of axiomatic reasoning about the properties of choice systems such as electoral systems. A combined British and American translating team published two

volumes of fundamental works in social choice which had never previously appeared in English (McLean and Hewitt 1994; McLean and Urken 1995). Our central figure was the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), whose revolutionary work was scarcely understood in his own time and only started to be understood in the 1950s. When we discovered that Jefferson had sent a copy of Condorcet's masterwork (Condorcet 1785) to James Madison and Edmund Randolph in Virginia, I and others started to speculate on how or whether Jefferson and/or Madison understood Condorcet's *mathématique sociale* (McLean and Urken 1992; McLean 1995, 2006b; Schofield 2006; Urken and McLean 2007).

Thus the loop took me back to Jefferson in Paris, and what an extraordinary conjunction that was. I first started preparing this book by means of an advanced course I taught at Yale in 2001, of which the highlight was demonstrating to the class a harpsichord of Jefferson's era by the same builder as his own at the Yale Collection of Musical Instruments: playing Jefferson's music. Amid the distractions of academic life, the project continued by fits and starts. I was very grateful to be offered a post as *Professeur étranger invité*, Séminaire d'Histoire du Calcul des Probabilités et de la Statistique (EHESS, Paris), and a fellowship at the International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello (ICJS) in 2009 and 2010. These resulted in two papers and a book chapter (McLean 2009, 2010, 2012) but still no book. The final impetus came from the peerless Annette Gordon-Reed, doyenne of contemporary Jefferson studies, who, while visiting Oxford as Harmsworth Professor of American History in 2014-15, firmly encouraged me to get a move on. Retirement from teaching, a pandemic, and a second stint at the ICJS have finally brought the project to fruition.

Over all these years I have discussed Jefferson with so many scholars that I have lost track, and I feebly acknowledge only those whose suggestions have stuck in my mind. In rough chronological order they are:

- The Master and Fellows of University College, Oxford, for making possible my first visit to Virginia;
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- The Leverhulme Trust and the (UK) Economic & Social Research Council for funding some of my work on the history of social choice;
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- Scot Peterson, for many years of collaboration on Scotland, England, church and state, and the implications for and from the First Amendment's religion clause;
- Ian Shapiro, then director of the EPE (Ethics, Politics, & Economics) program, Yale University;
- The members of my *Jefferson in Paris* class at Yale;
- Curators and librarians at the Yale Collection of Musical Instruments, Yale University Art Gallery, Library of Congress Special Collections, Huntington Library, Bibliothèque Nationale, Pierpont Morgan Library, and the libraries of Oxford University, Nuffield College, and the University of Virginia;

- Directors and docents at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest and James Madison's Montpelier;
- The *REHSEIS* (later Histoire du Calcul des Probabilités et de la Statistique) research unit of the *CNRS*, Paris ;
- The successive directors of the ICJS, Andrew O'Shaughnessy and Frank Cogliano;
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- The Vere Harmsworth Library of Oxford University, where I started my Jefferson research in the hard copies of the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* and completed it using their subscription to the University of Virginia's marvellous Rotunda collection of Jefferson's and other Founders' papers;
- John Owen, Amb. Henry J. and Mrs. Marion R. Taylor Professor of Politics, University of Virginia, for facilitating my first visit to Charlottesville and keeping me abreast of all relevant developments at Mr Jefferson's university;
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- Individual Jefferson-and-adjacent scholars including Andrew Burstein, Martin Clagett, William Ewald, Samuel Kernell, Jack Rakove, †R.K. Ramazani, and †Norman Schofield, and, above all...
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