

Introduction

I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone. (John F. Kennedy, *Remarks at a Dinner Honoring Nobel Prize Winners of the Western Hemisphere* April 29, 1962. At <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-dinner-honoring-nobel-prize-winners-the-western-hemisphere>, accessed May 7 2024).

Thomas Jefferson remains as fascinating and contradictory as he has always been. A slaveholder whose draft of the Declaration of Independence says: *We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness.* From early in his political career until his long retirement at Monticello he held that slavery was unsustainable, but he freed no slaves except his mistress ('concubine' according to their son) Sally Hemings and some of her relatives including their children together. Sally was the half-sister of Jefferson's wife, who had died young; he never remarried. He went to Paris in 1784, soon to become American Minister there, accompanied by Sally's enslaved older brother James. Sally joined her brother in 1787 as maid to Jefferson's daughter. If they had stayed in France they would have been free; yet they returned with him to Virginia, James to become a French chef and Sally almost certainly to father at least five children by him, of whom four survived to adulthood. DNA evidence (Foster et al 1998) shows that their last child certainly had a Y-chromosome haplotype in common with Jefferson's paternal grandfather. In the light of that and the testimony of other family members,

there remains no serious doubt that Thomas fathered Sally Hemings' children (Brodie 1974; Lewis and Onuf 1999; Gordon-Reed 1997, 2008). And it is hard to read Jefferson's only published book, *Notes on Virginia*, without cringing when he turns to African-Americans. Why then is interest in an 18th century slaveholder as intense as it has been for two centuries?

Because he is an extraordinary figure in the American Enlightenment. His Enlightenment values suffused not only the American Revolution but also the French, in whose early stages he was much more deeply involved than an ambassador should have been. Author of the Declaration of Independence, bosom friend and critic of James Madison (without whom there would have been no US Constitution), third President of the USA, responsible for doubling its size in the Louisiana Purchase: all of this would alone justify a multi-volume study, had I but world enough and time.

Since I do not, it is fair to warn readers right at the beginning what this book is *not* about. It is not a family saga, about either his White family or his Black family. (For a magisterial survey of Jefferson biographies see Gordon-Reed 2012 and all the biographies she refers to). Although the five years Jefferson spent in Paris is at the heart of the book, it is not about his daily life there, fascinating though that is. With some regret I have nothing to say about the duchesse d'Enville, Maria Cosway, Mme de Tessé or Jefferson's emotionally needy protégé William Short (but see, e.g., Adams 1997; Gordon-Reed 2008; Thompson 2023). Nor is my focus on Jefferson's political career, except in so far as his American Enlightenment values infused his political decisions. It is not about what Jefferson categorized as 'imagination ... which [is] applied to the Fine Arts'. Therefore it is not about Jefferson and music (about which I might be qualified to write: the story

of Jefferson's harpsichord is as fascinating as the story of his giant moose, but for another place and time). Nor is it about wine, nor architecture (about which I am not qualified to write).

It is also not a biography. Nevertheless, it has to be a freestanding study that can be read without having to turn constantly to a biography. Therefore, there is a short chronology at the end. And at the beginning of many chapters I include a summary in Jefferson's own words of the relevant events in his life. Most of these summaries are drawn from his so-called Autobiography, a set of "Notes on Early Career" up to 1790, which he wrote down in 1821. Others come from his copious letters (and the 'Autobiography' itself draws on many of the letters he wrote, especially in Paris). Nobody is a reliable narrator of their own life. The gaps in the 'Autobiography' are obvious. It ends abruptly in 1790. Although Jefferson intended to continue, he told relatives and correspondents that he lacked access to the official documents he would need to take the story from 1790 to 1809. It says nothing about Jefferson's emotional life, and is totally silent about the Hemingses. Nevertheless, it is mostly factually correct and tells us, at least, what Jefferson wanted his White family to know about his life. Readers who are already familiar with the outlines of Jefferson's life may of course skip these passages, but I do not apologize for including them.

Rather, I focus on Thomas Jefferson's Enlightenment. It is unique to him. He was born in frontier Virginia with little access to books and neither good schools nor a good university. What he said about music ('the favorite passion of my soul, & fortune has cast my lot in a country where it is in a state of deplorable barbarism' – TJ to G. Fabbioni, Jun. 8 1778, in *PTJ* 2: 195-8) applied to many other things. However, he had absorbed Greek and Latin classics by his early teenage years. He soon became the second-best-informed Virginian on the common law and

equity background of Virginia law. He absorbed the politics of radical English Whigs and transmuted them into his two manifestoes (*A Summary View...* 1774, and his draft of the Declaration of Independence). From his teacher William Small he absorbed principles of the Scottish Enlightenment, which are not at all the same of those of English Whiggery. He put those to use in his campaign for religious freedom in Virginia and, in due course, the whole United States. He absorbed a third strain of the Enlightenment when he went to France and met some of its intellectual leaders. But he was teacher as well as learner there, as when he helped to draft what became the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* of 1789. As that document is still embodied in the French Constitution, he has paternity rights, not only over a family of White descendants and another family of Black descendants, but also over the two most important sets of constitutional rights in the democratic world.

Those who come at Jefferson through the eyes of his bitter enemy Alexander Hamilton may get a balanced view of their titanic conflict (see, e.g, Chernow 2004, 389- 408), or a more entertaining but less balanced view from Miranda (2016) whose inspiration was Chernow 2004. Those who come at Jefferson through the favorite tropes of the Old South (e.g., Mitchell 1936; Malone 1948-74) risk seeing him as a mythical upholder of the values of antebellum Virginia, full of honor codes and ball gowns. My own fascination with Thomas Jefferson began long ago in the Shenandoah Valley, where I absorbed more of the mythology of the 'Lost Cause' than was good for me. In the four decades since, I have been struggling for a more balanced view which does not go as far as, but (I hope) is more historically authentic than, Lin-Manuel Miranda's. In particular, the struggle between Jefferson and Hamilton is a struggle between two powerful intellects and personalities, who, as I aim to show below, were both right.

This book is organised as follows. The Prologue introduces Jefferson's libraries, and explains that knowing what books he owned, when he acquired them, and, equally important, what books he did not own, opens a window into his intellectual life. The main part of the book is in four sections. As they cover Jefferson's intellectual rather than his personal or political life, they are not strictly chronological. Part I, 'England', traces the young Jefferson, profoundly influenced by English opposition ("country") whig lawyers, politicians, scientists, and philosophers as he studied under the "Rev^d. mr Maury a correct classical scholar", then at the College of William & Mary and under the supervision of the pre-eminent Virginia lawyer George Wythe. His first published work, the "Summary View of the rights of British America," is infused through and through with the ideology of English country Whiggery.

Part II, "Scotland" introduces the Scottish Enlightenment, which Jefferson first met at William & Mary under the tutelage of "Dr. William Small of Scotland" which "probably fixed the destinies of my life". I try to explain what made the Scottish Enlightenment possible, how it differs from English opposition Whiggery, and how it can be shown to influence Jefferson's writing from his draft of the Declaration of Independence onwards.

Part III, "France" deals with Jefferson's momentous time as American Minister to France (the title he held for most of his sojourn there from 1784 to 1789). Not only did he (quite improperly for an ambassador) help liberal reformers draft what became the 1789 *Declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen*, but he also engaged with the leading scientists and philosophers of Europe. The most important of these were the comte de Buffon and the marquis de Condorcet.

Although he began his *Notes on the State of Virginia* before he left for Paris, he completed and published them there.

Part IV, “Monticello” deals with Jefferson’s intellectual life after Paris. He was not always at his beloved Monticello, having the sometimes tiresome duties of Secretary of State in the Washington administration, Vice-President in the Adams administration and the presidency of the USA. But he always yearned to be there, and never left after 1809. It was at Monticello that the three streams of Mr Jefferson’s enlightenment merged into a uniquely American – indeed uniquely Jeffersonian – river.