

Chapter 1

Prologue

In 1814 ex-President Thomas Jefferson made a momentous offer. The Library of Congress had been burnt by British raiders during the War of 1812. Jefferson offered to sell his book collection – the largest private library in the USA, numbering about 6,700 books – to Congress, to form the nucleus of its replacement. After some political dispute, Congress narrowly agreed in 1815 to accept the offer, and paid \$23,950 to the deeply indebted ex-president (Gilreath and Wilson 1989: 1). Using the Bureau of Labor Statistics' annual inflation index, that translates to \$478,671.85 in 2023 dollars. Congress valued Jefferson's library at \$3.57 per book, which translates, on the same basis, to \$71.35 per book – the right ballpark for a run-of-the-mill collection of academic books, but mean for such a unique collection. The appraiser appointed by Congress had valued it by the cubic foot: \$10 for a folio book, \$6 for a quarto, \$3 for an octavo, and \$1 for a duodecimo (Joseph Milligan to TJ, Nov. 16 1814: *PTJ: RS* 8:83).

The books form the core of what is now one of the greatest libraries in the world. Many of them were lost in a fire in 1851, and the importance of preserving Jefferson's collection was not recognized until more recently. Now, the books that can be identified as coming from Jefferson's collection have a place of honor in the Library, which for many years has had a program to replace all of Jefferson's lost books with other copies of the same editions.

Jefferson must have felt bereft. He wrote to his old ally, later enemy, later again close friend John Adams:

mr Ticknor is particularly the best bibliograph I have met with, and very kindly and opportunely offered me the means of reprocurring some part of the literary treasures which I have ceded to Congress to replace the devastations of British Vandalism at Washington. I cannot live without books; but fewer will suffice where amusement, and not use, is the only future object (TJ to John Adams, Jun 10 1815.*PTJ: RS* 8: 523)

George Ticknor was a young Massachusetts academic whom Adams had introduced to Jefferson. He proved to be a man after Jefferson's heart. He visited Monticello early in 1815 while the library was being packed up, and Jefferson later wrote to commission him to rebuild it, with detailed instructions on which bookshops he should use in Philadelphia, London, and Paris (TJ to George Ticknor Jul. 4 1815 in *PTJ: RS* 8: 578-9).

Jefferson owned four libraries in his lifetime. He inherited his father's handful of books in 1757, and as soon as he went to study at the College of William & Mary he frequented the offices of the *Virginia Gazette* weekly to buy a big collection of books. Almost all of this collection, however, was lost when his birthplace home at Shadwell (at the bottom of the hill on which Monticello stands) burnt down in 1770. Nothing daunted, he started restocking immediately. He drew up a catalogue of his books in 1783, by which time he owned 2,640 (Gilreath and Wilson 1989: 1). They included purchases from the estates of two Virginia politicians, Richard Bland and Peyton Randolph (Malone 1977: 11).

For Jefferson, Paris was like Santa's grotto. He redoubled the pace of his book buying, and continued to order from Paris booksellers after his return to the USA. He also received a bequest from the estate of his mentor George Wythe, who was murdered by a disgruntled nephew in 1806. Hence the astonishing total of 6,700 books sold to Congress. The entire library sold to

Congress, including books from the Wythe bequest, may be regarded as Jefferson's second library.

The third and fourth libraries were the two that he started rebuilding immediately – one for Monticello and one for his other house in Poplar Forest near Lynchburg.

Jefferson was a meticulous cataloguer. Just how meticulous was not revealed until 1989. After the first Librarian of Congress, who failed to understand it, mutilated it in his published catalogue, Jefferson commissioned his young grandson-in-law Nicholas Trist to reconstitute it in the right order. This Trist catalogue was itself miscatalogued until recognized and published by Gilreath and Wilson (1989). An earlier devoted work of scholarship is due to E Millicent Sowerby (1952), who was commissioned by the Library to produce an annotated bibliography of the Jefferson books, using the 1815 printed catalogue whose defects were not then understood. Nevertheless, she did an extraordinary job in checking the books where they were still in the Library, and adding all the information she could find about each book, including any comments Jefferson may have made in or about the book and its authors.

Sowerby and her successors have been able to track Jefferson's own holdings by a detail that is characteristic in its meticulousness. Eighteenth-century and earlier books were printed and bound as two separate processes, and indeed were often sold unbound or uncut. A printer's sheet would comprise 4, 8, 12, or 16 printed pages, so arranged on both sides of the sheet that when cut to size and then bound, the pages would appear in the right order and the right way up. Bibliophiles call such a sheet a 'signature'. To instruct the binder in what order to print the signatures, printers put a unique identifying letter at the bottom left of the first page of each signature. These would run from A as far on into the alphabet as required by the number of pages in the book. Jefferson signalled his ownership of a book by writing 'T' before signature J (or I if, as usual,

there was no J) and ‘J’ after signature T. Jefferson’s handwriting is so distinctive that there is little risk of fraud or forgery in assigning a book to his ownership by this method.

Between them, the four libraries have multiple catalogues, or documents that can serve to recreate catalogues. Full details are on the Thomas Jefferson Foundation’s pages at <https://tjlibraries.monticello.org/index.html>. The most important of these lists, which I use in this book, are as follows:

- 1 The Shadwell Library, Reconstructed;
- 2 The 1783 Catalogue, retrofitted to remove TJ’s additions of books acquired later;
- 3 The 1789 Catalogue, recording books Jefferson bought in Paris;
- 4 Books sold to Congress – the Sowerby and Trist/Gilreath/Wilson Catalogues;
- 5 Poplar Forest Library;
- 6 Retirement Library.

This book is about the intellectual influences on Jefferson. He cannot have been influenced by something he never read. If each of these catalogues were a perfect record of the books Jefferson owned at any one time, then we would be able to say with some certainty when, at earliest, he would have read any book that he owned. However, it will probably never be possible to know when Jefferson first acquired every book in his collections. A few details on how some of these lists have been compiled are necessary in order to show this.

If he had a catalogue of his books at Shadwell, it was lost in the fire. The reconstructed Shadwell list at <https://tjlibraries.monticello.org/transcripts/shadwell/shadwell.html> has four sources. They are: books in the inventory of Peter Jefferson’s possessions at his death; books that Jefferson is

known to have bought at the *Virginia Gazette* office; books from which he wrote down extracts ('commonplaces' in the jargon of his day) in his three Commonplace Books; and a letter to Robert Skipwith (TJ to Robert Skipwith, 3 Aug. 1771, *PTJ* 1: 76-81). The Skipwith letter, discussed later in this book, was a response to a request for building a library, and the recommendations already show Jefferson's classification of knowledge which he was to refine in successive versions of his library catalogue.

The title of the '1783 Catalogue' is misleading. It is a 246-page manuscript held by the Massachusetts Historical Society. Jefferson started it before 1783, and he continued adding books to it for decades. The date 1783 relates only to an entry he made in that year recording how many books he owned (2640). As a result, it is not an easy read. It is fully described at, and accessible in facsimile from, <https://www.masshist.org/thomasjeffersonpapers/catalog1783/> The 'Thomas Jefferson Libraries' project has attempted to strip out the post-1783 purchases from the catalogue, in order to present a snapshot of Jefferson's holdings in that year.

There are three versions of the catalogue of the books sold to Congress in 1815. The Librarian of Congress published a list containing the titles and Jefferson's subject divisions, but hopelessly mixing up Jefferson's ordering of the books within chapters. The Sowerby (1952) Catalogue, which adds a mine of information, is based on the printed 1815 catalogue. As already noted, however, Gilreath and Wilson (1989) reinstated Jefferson's catalogue. In 1823, Jefferson commissioned Nicholas Trist, who was working as his private secretary and would shortly marry one of Jefferson's granddaughters, to reconstitute his list. It is assumed that Jefferson gave Trist a marked-up copy of the printed list with instructions on how to rearrange the books within each chapter. This Trist catalogue is the one that was first recognized and published by Gilreath and

Wilson, after having disappeared from view for a century and then been wrongly classified as a catalogue of the University of Virginia library.

The Retirement Library can be reconstructed from an MS catalogue made by Jefferson around 1820, and from the 1829 auction sale of his books at Monticello (some of them had by then been bequeathed to the University of Virginia). It shows that he reacquired many titles in Ethics and Religion that he had sold to Congress. The Poplar Forest Library has been reconstituted from various sources, including an auction catalogue from 1873 when Jefferson's grandson sold the remaining collection. It was more literary than philosophical (including a large collection of literature and poetry in 'petit' format, copies of which may be seen at Poplar Forest today). But it yet again included Jefferson's favorite Stoic philosophers.

I will draw on these catalogues throughout this book, while trying to trace both Jefferson's intellectual interests and his work as a scientific classifier. Because we have far more detailed information on Jefferson's library than on that of any other Founding Father – indeed, more information, probably, than for any other 18th-century intellectual - we can use this in offense and in defense. By that I mean that we can make inferences about his intellectual world from books he owned, and we must be very cautious about making inferences about any book he did not own. This book uses both strategies.

There were four centers of academic publishing in Jefferson's Anglophone Atlantic world: London; central Scotland (Edinburgh and Glasgow); Dublin; and Philadelphia. Any title might be published in more than one of these. For instance, thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment published both in Edinburgh and London (and individual publishers had connections in both). Some English-language books were published, or republished, or simply pirated, in Dublin or Philadelphia to avoid payments to copyright holders. (Possibly relevant fact: W.S. Gilbert and

Arthur Sullivan's second hit operetta is called *The Pirates of Penzance*. Why Penzance? Probably because their previous hit, *HMS Pinafore*, had been extensively pirated in the USA; and Penzance, a small town in Cornwall, is the town in England closest to the USA).

Scotland had a much smaller population than either England or Ireland. So it is important for understanding Jefferson's world to note that he owned a disproportionate number of Scottish imprints. Table 1.1 attempts to establish how disproportionate.

[Table 1.1 here]

The last two columns of table 1.1 attempt to relate Jefferson's book-buying to the relative populations of countries in the Atlantic world where books were published in his time. Naturally, English-speaking countries feature most strongly. Of non-English-speaking countries, the prominence of the Netherlands and Switzerland is probably because there was no effective censorship in either. Book by figures of the French Enlightenment, notably, often carried imprints from Leiden or Geneva (which may have been fake or genuine). But the Netherlands were in their own right a center of liberal Protestantism; the place where Scottish intellectuals got their advanced education; and therefore a feeder of the Scottish enlightenment.

Of English-speaking countries, of course the USA has prominence disproportionate to its population, as does England. But so does Scotland, whereas Ireland does not. There are particular Scottish imprints of note. One is the network around William Strahan and his associates Andrew Millar and Thomas Cadell, who published titles of the Scottish Enlightenment in Edinburgh and London. The other is the Foulis Press, run by two brothers from Glasgow University (where they rather annoyed the *de facto* provost, Adam Smith, by the amount of space they took up: McLean 2006a: 11, 80). The Foulis imprint was widely recognised as the best

publisher of Latin and Greek classics. Jefferson owned many of their titles. For more on this research and its methodological limitations, see Sher 2006; McLean 2011.

Conjectural intellectual history is tempting but dangerous. Reading Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence throws up immediate puzzles (why does John Locke's 'Life, liberty and property' become Jefferson's 'Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'? Where did the idea of self-evident truths come from?) So do other documents from the Founding era (e.g., Condorcet's phrase 'certitude morale' turns up as 'moral certainty' in the *Federalist Papers*. Coincidence or borrowing?) Two eminent intellectual historians – Douglass Adair (1998, 2000, but written much earlier) and Garry Wills (1978 / 2018) - have written extensively on the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on the Founders including Jefferson. It undoubtedly was influential, and will be discussed later in this book. But we need to be very careful about sources. Wills, for instance, quotes extensively from Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and Thomas Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind*. Jefferson's thought has a strong family resemblance to Smith's, and possibly to Reid's. But there is no evidence that he actually owned either of these works. Of all the lists just cited, they appear only in Jefferson's purchase recommendations for Robert Skipwith. Even the most conscientious of us sometimes recommends books they have not read. To substantiate Jefferson's debts to Smith and Reid requires more work than that. It often involves heroic assumptions. In what follows I try not to be a hero.