

Conclusion

How then to summarize the intellectual life of the ‘Author of the Declaration of Independence, of the Virginia Declaration of Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia’? At some unknown date during the 1800 Presidential election campaign, Jefferson wrote a note-to-self which he headed ‘Summary of Public Service’. It opens:

I have sometimes asked myself whether my country is the better for my having lived at all? I do not know that it is. I have been the instrument of doing the following things; but they would have been done by others; some of them perhaps a little later.

The list that follows includes dredging the Rivanna river; the Declaration of Independence; the Virginia Declaration of Religious Freedom; abolition of entails and primogeniture; ending slave importation to Virginia; an act for apportioning crimes and punishments and another to establish primary schools throughout Virginia; and the import of olive trees and rice to grow in the South. It is an eclectic list, which outlines Thomas Jefferson’s Enlightenment (to that date) in his own words. He probably produced it to help his supporters compile a campaign biography, but the items on it were not all obvious vote-winners.

Again and again this book has recurred to the similarities and differences between the brightest stars of the American and French Enlightenments: Jefferson and Condorcet. They were both steeped in the classical world. Poignantly, this extends to their last reading. When Condorcet was arrested, his jailers listed the possessions of the supposed ‘Pierre Simon’, including a watch

engraved G (it belonged to Emmanuel de Grouchy, Sophie's brother) and "un livre dorace en latin" ("a book of Horace in Latin" in the jailer's semi-literate note: Badinter 1988: 615). The reading on Jefferson's bedside table on the day he died reportedly comprised two French political pamphlets, Aristotle's *Politics*, and the work of the Roman Stoic Seneca, who committed suicide (source: undated note in Nicholas Trist Papers cited by Davis 1964: 118). But their work led both of them to entirely new places: Condorcet through his social mathematics to modern probability and social choice; Jefferson to his "Revolution of 1800" and his wall of separation, among much else.

They were both applied scientists: Jefferson for wine, rice, moldboards, and river improvement; Condorcet for applications of probability theory and (through the Academy of Sciences) for practical designs for the canals of France (Baker 1975: 67-69); both of them for metrication and decimalization.

A remarkable trait that they shared was sunny optimism about the perfectibility of mankind while living through the French revolutionary Terror, which Condorcet did not survive.

Condorcet expressed his optimism through his *Esquisse* (Sketch) on the perfectibility of the human mind, written while in hiding from the Terror. Jefferson owned a copy, in which he disputed Condorcet's claim that France was the first country to grant religious freedom, but agreed with the *Esquisse* in general:

I am among those who think well of the human character generally. I consider man as formed for society, and endowed by nature with those dispositions which fit him for

society. I believe also, with Condorcet, ..., that his mind is perfectible to a degree of which we cannot as yet form any conception (TJ to William G. Munford, June 18 1799: *PTJ* 31: 127).

Jefferson, who was not at risk of death, was sometimes chillingly blind to the human tragedies of the French Revolution, which killed most of his Paris friends, sometimes in horrible ways. The French Revolution came home to him most painfully in the mission of Citizen Genêt.

Edmond Genêt was the first ambassador to the USA to be appointed by the French Republic, led at the time by Jefferson's Girondin friend Brissot. Although the Girondins were later portrayed as betrayers of the revolution by the Jacobins who had them massacred, in February 1793 they were militant exporters of revolution. Genêt's instructions were to recover American debt due to France, and use the proceeds to equip French warships in US ports for campaigns in the West Indies and Canada. Jefferson had already spoken of North America as an 'Empire of Liberty' (TJ to George Rogers Clark Dec. 25, 1780 in *PTJ* 4: 237). Genêt's instructions likewise referred to an *empire de la Liberté*. But it was a different empire. Washington's Cabinet rejected both demands, and Citizen Genêt appealed to the American people against their own government, first in Charleston SC, and later in Philadelphia, where he fitted out a British capture, the *Little Sarah*, as a French privateer. The Washington administration decided to demand Genêt's recall. Jefferson drafted a recall letter complaining of 'liberty warring on herself' (*PTJ* 26: 731). However, by the time the recall request reached Paris, the Girondins had fallen, and Genêt would certainly have been guillotined if returned to France. He was granted asylum – a magnanimous

gesture by Washington – and lived out his days in upstate New York (see *PTJ* 26: 685-692 and references cited therein).

Condorcet, then in power, sent Jefferson a flattering letter introducing Genêt, in which he said:

Notre republique fondée comme la votre Sur la raison, Sur les droits de la nature, Sur l'égalité, doit être votre veritable, alliée, nous ne devons plus en quelque sorte former qu'un Seul peuple, nous avons les mêmes intérêts, et Surtout celui de detruire toutes les institutions anti naturelles. Les Rois de l'Europe ne cachent plus le projet de se reunir pour détruire partout la liberté.

Our republic being founded, like yours, on Reason, natural rights, and equality, must be your true ally. We must in some sense become a single people: we have the same interests, above all that of destroying all unnatural institutions. The kings of Europe are no longer hiding their scheme to unite to destroy liberty everywhere (Condorcet to TJ, Dec. 1 [1792], in *PTJ* 24: 760-2; my translation).

The letter goes on to denounce Lafayette, who had changed sides. This, plus Genêt's behaviour, is probably what led Jefferson to cool on Condorcet for a while (TJ to William Short, Oct. 31 1819: *PTJ*: *RS* 15: 165), but his opinion of Condorcet had recovered by 1799 (see above, and TJ to Thomas Law, June 13 1814: *PTJ*: *RS* 7: 413)

Everybody is now aware of the dark side. Good Thomas protested against slavery; bad Thomas did nothing about it. Good Thomas wanted to believe that Benjamin Banneker stood for the intellectual abilities of Blacks; bad Thomas denied it. Good Thomas treated his Hemings kin relatively well, and apprenticed Madison and Eston to their uncle John. Bad Thomas had other slaves whipped or sold. Good Thomas cared deeply about his white family. Bad Thomas died hopelessly in debt thanks to overspending and rash guarantees, so that his grandson and executor had to sell **130 VALUABLE NEGROES** (bold caps in the original advertisement) as the most valuable fixture and fitting from Monticello. The 130 included the eleven-year-old Peter Fossett, who was separated from his family, and was not freed until many years later (Fossett 1898). Jefferson's French friends, and some of his American friends, were not stained by slavery. The USA is still marked by the stain. Good Thomas helped bring about the abolition of slave trading to Virginia, and wrote uplifting words about the stain in *Notes on Virginia* and in some public papers drafted in the 1770s and 1780s. Even Good Thomas, however, could not contemplate freed slaves and white citizens living together in Virginia. By the last decade of his life, Bad Thomas saw the 'Missouri Compromise' (viz., an agreement that future slaves would be admitted into the union in pairs, one permitting slavery, the other forbidding it, so as to preserve the balance in the Senate) in the terms described in one of his most famous letters:

I had for a long time ceased to read newspapers or pay any attention to public affairs, confident they were in good hands, and content to be a passenger in our bark to the shore from which I am not distant. but this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. it is hushed indeed for the moment. but this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence.... we have

the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other. (TJ to John Holmes, 22 Apr 1820. *PTJ: RS* 15: 550. For Jefferson, westward expansion, and the Missouri Compromise see, e.g., Riker 1982: 215-219; Kennedy 2003; Van Atta 2015).

The 77-year-old Jefferson chose self-preservation.

On the other hand... The Virginia Declaration of Religious Freedom has given rise to the most successful separation of church and state in the democratic world: successful for both sides, as Jefferson pointed out. The Declaration of Independence is as Jefferson described it to the Mayor of Washington, DC in his last published letter:

the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government.

The University of Virginia has become one of the best public universities in the USA. Jefferson's tastes in food, wine, music, and above all architecture have shaped the public realm. Monticello is, fittingly, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Jefferson was not solely responsible for any of these, of course. But none of them would have happened without him.

Jefferson's racism has been there for all to see since 1788, when the authorized version of the *Notes on Virginia* was published. The existence of his Black second family has been beyond

doubt since 1998 (Foster et al 1998). The *Société des Amis des Noirs* was unable to shift him, and he abandoned his translation of Condorcet's *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des Nègres* before getting to the challenging bits. It is trite but true to say "Nobody's perfect". Jefferson, for all his imperfections – partly *because* of his imperfections – remains the most dazzling and fascinating figure of the American Enlightenment.