The Life and Selected Writings of THOMAS JEFFERSON

Edited, and with an Introduction by

Adrienne Koch & William Peden

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THE LIFE AND
SELECTED WRITINGS
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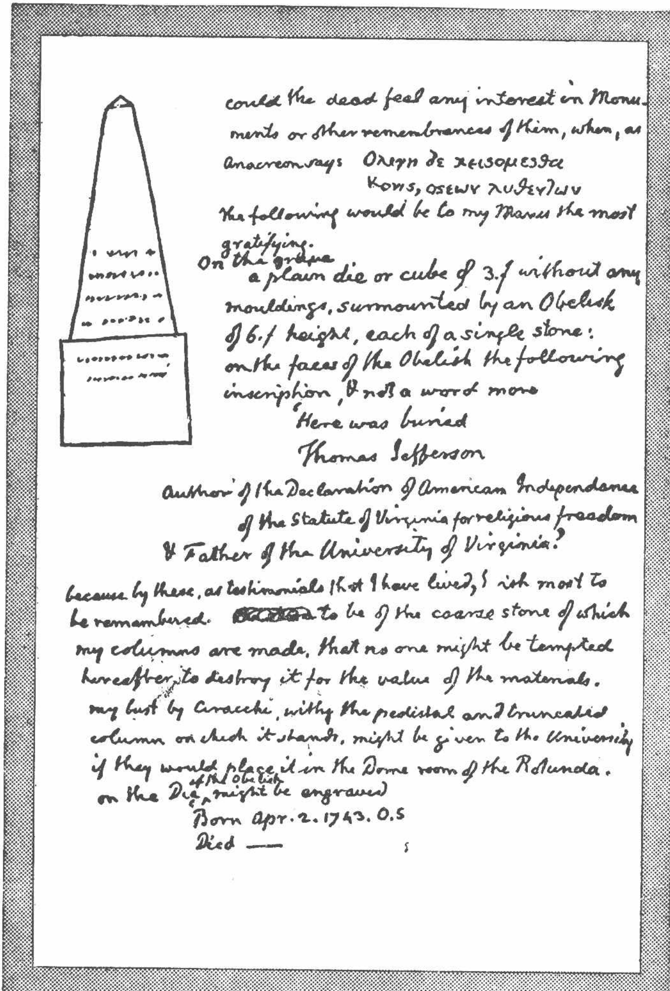
could the dead feel any interest in Monuments or other remembrances of them, when, as Anacreon says Ὀλίγη δὲ κεισόμεσθα κόνις, ὀστέων λυθέντων
the following would be to my Manes the most gratifying.
On the grave
a plain die or cube of 3.f without any mouldings, surmounted by an Obelisk of 6.f height, each of a single stone: on the faces of the Obelisk the following inscription, & not a word more
'Here was buried
Thomas Jefferson
Author of the Declaration of American Independance
of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom
& Father of the University of Virginia.'
because by these, as testimonials that I have lived, I wish most to be remembered. [illegible] to be of the coarse stone of which my columns are made, that no one might be tempted hereafter to destroy it for the value of the materials.
my bust by Ciracchi, with the pedistal and truncated column on which it stands, might be given to the University if they would place it in the Dome room of the Rotunda.
on the Die of the Obelisk might be engraved
Born Apr. 2. 1743. O.S
Died ——

Directions in Jefferson's handwriting for his tombstone, with instructions for the epitaph bearing testimony to the three achievements "most to be remembered"

PREFACE

THIS selection from the writings of Thomas Jefferson is planned to be a comprehensive presentation of his thought. The greatest amount of space has been allotted to his letters, in the belief that they are of primary importance in revealing the man and his intellect. Jefferson's two original full-length works, the *Notes on Virginia* and the *Autobiography,* are given virtually complete. Along with his best-known public papers, selections from his minor writings are also included. Together, all these serve to depict the man who more aptly than any of his countrymen might be called the American Leonardo.

Despite its limitations, the Memorial Edition (Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* 20 vols., The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, Washington, D. C., 1905) has been used as the basis of the text. The Ford Edition, though better edited, does not offer the quantity and variety of the Memorial Edition. Whenever the Memorial Edition is not the source, we have cited the editor or author, or the manuscript collection from which an item is taken.

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INTRODUCTION

by Adrienne Koch and William Peden

THE writings of Thomas Jefferson are today more meaningful than ever before in America's history. No better record of the social principles which are the heart of the American democratic "experiment" exists than these letters and documents. Those who are eager to know the varied and subtle character of the *man* will find in them another, not inconsiderable, reward. No leader in the period of the American Enlightenment was as articulate, as wise, as conscious of the implications and consequences of free society as he. To Jefferson, therefore, we must go for fresh contacts with the commanding personalities and events of those days, and for the fullest expression of government through consent, through reason, through law, and through energetic and progressive change.

Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13 (April 2, Old Style), 1743, at Shadwell, the most important of the tobacco plantations owned by his father Peter Jefferson, in the Virginia upcountry. A vigorous and intelligent man, although uneducated, Peter Jefferson became a successful surveyor, prosperous landowner, and member of the Virginia House of Burgesses from Albemarle County. His wife Jane Randolph, a member of one of the most distinguished Virginia families, could trace her pedigree far back in English and Scottish annals. Concerning this, Jefferson, late in life, laconically remarked, "To which let every one ascribe the faith and merit he chooses."

Perhaps the young Jefferson might not have made such a statement. Certainly as a child he enjoyed to the full the

numerous advantages accompanying his family's substantial position: the books, the horses, the good life of the "Big Houses" at Tuckahoe and Shadwell. And when Peter Jefferson died he left his fourteen-year-old son not only valuable lands and property—the base and measure of Virginia wealth at that time—but sound and loving advice. Denied a formal education himself, he was careful to direct that his son be given complete classical training. Years later, Thomas Jefferson often referred to the effect the classical moralists, philosophers, poets, and dramatists had had upon him. Quite honestly he could say, in 1800, "I thank on my knees, Him who directed my early education, for having put into my possession this rich source of delight; and I would not exchange it for anything which I could then have acquired. . . ." No matter how scientific and progressive Jefferson became in his outlook, the moral and political wisdom of Greece and Rome continued to give depth and flavor to his thought.

As his father had stipulated, Thomas studied at Reverend Mr. Maury's school, just a few miles from Shadwell. After two years' coaching by this "correct classical scholar," in the spring of 1760 he left his native Albemarle to attend William and Mary College.

During these early years in Williamsburg, colonial capital of Virginia, Jefferson gives every evidence of enjoying to the full the parties, the music, the dancing, the flirtations, the versifying, the punch-drinking—in short, the good society of the sparkling young Virginians who were his friends. Fond of cotillions, the theatre, and races, he is far from unhappy in these frivolous surroundings. No Beau Brummel, the tall gangling redhead possessed humor, warmth, and intelligence which won him many close friends. Apparently more successful in gaining the boon companionship of friends like John Page than in capturing the hearts of the Williamsburg belles, he occasionally luxuriates in the despondent mood of a romantic failure. Jefferson's letters devoted to this theme, sometimes gay, sometimes gloomy, but always dashed off in the extreme and

impetuous language of youth, are a good corrective to the serious picture painted of him by keepers of the public faith.

But indications of discipline and earnestness are present as solidly as rocks in a swirl of water. Jefferson's passion for rationalization, as well as his pose of stoic detachment, is well illustrated in his "love affair" with Rebecca Burwell. In the midst of a dance in the Apollo Room of the Raleigh Tavern, later the scene of momentous political stratagems, Jefferson blurted a stumbling marriage proposal to his "Belinda." Subjecting even this action to his habit of deliberation, shortly thereafter he confessed to Page careful plans for his travel and further education abroad. Meanwhile "Belinda," one surmises, must patiently await his return, schooling herself in the duties necessary for a Virginia housewife and manager. Jefferson alone was surprised, and even he did not claim to be morally injured, when the spirited girl announced her engagement to a less phlegmatic and more immediate suitor.

Jefferson had already matured intellectually more than the average diligent student. He became a favorite of the social and intellectual leaders of Williamsburg, including Dr. William Small, his learned professor of mathematics and moral philosophy, George Wythe, foremost legal mind in Virginia, and Governor Fauquier, finished gentleman and patron of the arts. Respected for his abundant intellectual curiosity and his modest but sympathetic nature, Jefferson was a welcome fourth at the dinner parties in the Governor's Palace where the group engaged in spirited discussions of ideas, politics, literature, and music. Jefferson was a good conversationalist—not in the sense of being a self-conscious perfectionist, but rather because of his almost organic interest in ideas, and his tireless curiosity about human nature, history, and science. His letters suggest the kind of talk he was capable of: courteous, deferential, mild; completely honest and sincere; steeped in the flavor of philosophy yet integrated with specific data drawn from his own experience and wide reading.

After graduating from William and Mary in the spring of

1762, Jefferson studied law five years under George Wythe. His attitude toward the law is in itself a good index to his sense of values. Knowledge of the law, an essential prerequisite to an understanding of governmental procedure, he respected. He recognized the fact that good government depended upon law as the stabilizer of national will. Realizing the terminological hair-splitting of lawyers as a group and aware of the crushing weight of precedent in law, he regarded it merely as an instrument of the people's service and protection rather than as their master. It was fitting, then, that he become a successful practicing lawyer, but even more fitting that he should forsake the single practice of law as a career.

Jefferson was just turning thirty when he began his political career in earnest. In January of 1772 he had married the much-courted and girlish widow, Martha Wayles Skelton. With her, he had established residence in his still incompleted Monticello, not far from his old home Shadwell, which had been destroyed by fire in 1770. By the time of his marriage, he already possessed some political experience. As law student in Williamsburg, he had been impressed by Patrick Henry's "splendid display" of oratory in the Virginia House of Burgess debates concerning the Anti-Stamp Act Resolutions of 1765. He had been a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses from 1769, where his first action was an unsuccessful bill allowing owners to free their slaves.

The impending crisis in British-Colonial relations, however, soon overshadowed routine affairs of legislature. In 1772 public indignation against George the Third's political and economic tyranny had culminated in the burning of the British revenue cutter *Gaspee*. When the Crown threatened to transport to England the "traitors" suspected of the deed, a small group of Virginia patriots, including Jefferson and Patrick Henry, decided that colonial committees of correspondence were needed as protection against further British encroachments.

Inevitably, inter-colonial bonds were cemented by such ac-

tions. In 1774, for example, the first of the "Intolerable Acts" closed the port of Boston until Massachusetts should pay for the Boston Tea Party of the preceding year. When this news reached Williamsburg, Jefferson and other younger members of the Virginia Assembly, now in control of formulating Virginia policy, ordained a day of fasting and prayer to demonstrate their sympathy with Massachusetts. Thereupon, Virginia's Royal Governor Dunmore once again dissolved the Assembly. Meeting, as usual, in the Apollo Room of the Raleigh Tavern, the members then planned to call together an inter-colonial congress.

The machinery for this dynamic national action having been set up, Jefferson began writing resolutions which were more radical and better written than those from other counties and colonies. He rehearsed some arguments against British tyranny in his "Resolves for Albemarle County." This was soon followed by Jefferson's impassioned tract on natural rights and limited privileges, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America." Read at the Virginia convention in Williamsburg (August, 1774), these resolutions were considered too revolutionary and not adopted. They were printed, however, and widely circulated. Thenceforth, important writing assignments almost automatically were entrusted to Jefferson.

When Jefferson arrived in Philadelphia in June, 1775, as a Virginia delegate to the Second Continental Congress, he already possessed, as John Adams remarked, "a reputation for literature, science, and a happy talent of composition." It was inevitable that the Congress make full use of this happy talent, and almost immediately Jefferson's pen was enlisted in the cause of independence. When he returned to the Congress the following year, he was appointed to the five-man committee, including Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, which was charged with the most momentous assignment ever given in the history of America: the drafting of a formal declaration of independence from Great Britain. On Jefferson alone was placed the responsibility of preparing the draft. The confidence

body of the law some of its flagrant redundancies. Further, he surveyed the whole field of education, and proposed a systematic plan of statewide education. And, as his crowning effort, he attempted to write religious toleration into the laws of Virginia by separating Church and State; when the "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom" was finally passed in 1785, he considered it a major contribution to American society.

In addition to leading this social revolution in Virginia, Jefferson found time to enjoy the companionship of his wife and children, to study nature and delight in its wonders, to cultivate his lands and manage his private affairs, to ride and read and write vigorous letters to his many friends and acquaintances. It was not long, however, before public life again claimed him.

In June of 1779, Jefferson was elected Governor of Virginia He commenced his career as a public executive sanguine, confident of his abilities, assured of the respect and almost the affection of his commonwealth. Any other years, however would have been less fraught with pitfalls for the head of a state. Jefferson took up his duties at a time when the British were raiding Virginia; in control of the sea, they could send forth plundering parties to capture food and ammunition, and destroy property. Indian warfare on Virginia's western border was a perpetual source of worry and unrest. The treasury funds were at their lowest ebb in Virginia's history. General Washington needed support from Virginia in the north. Men and supplies were required to support the new nation on battlefields in the Carolinas. By 1781 the Governor found himself in the plight of watching, with hands almost tied, the British sweep through his state, burning and ravaging as they advanced. Jefferson petitioned General Washington to dispatch troops to meet the threat of Cornwallis's invasion, but Washington, hard pressed in the north and short of men, could do nothing. Consequently the burden of Virginia's defense fell upon an untrained and insufficient militia. Jefferson himself

narrowly escaped capture at the hands of troops dispatched by Colonel Tarleton. The legislators, at considerable loss of face, were forced to flee their new capital city of Richmond. Jefferson, as head of the state, was inevitably singled out for criticism and abuse.

No evidence has ever shown that Jefferson failed in his attempts to provide a suitable defense for Virginia. Later material indeed, including his letters to Generals Washington and Greene, shows him to have been an extraordinarily conscientious Governor, diligent, zealous, careful of the welfare of his fellow-citizens. Perhaps a dictator was wanted. This Jefferson would not and could not be. The crisis over and his second term at an end, he influenced his friends to support a military governor and announced his retirement.

Washington's complete approval of Jefferson's actions as Governor is in marked contrast to the heated charges of dereliction of duty made by certain members of the legislature. When the war fever subsided, the same legislature shamefacedly passed a resolution officially clearing Jefferson of all such charges. These experiences would have been cruel for any public figure; for Jefferson, with his whole-souled attitude toward public service and his extreme sensitivity to hostility of any kind, his last months as Governor had been crushing ones. Nevertheless, politically and intellectually he was a tougher man from that point onward; he had developed a realism which was to stand him in good stead in later years.

Home at Monticello, Jefferson buried himself in writing. In June of 1781 he had injured his wrist and was unable to ride for some time. During this period of enforced idleness, he wrote careful replies to a series of questions about Virginia put him by the Marquis de Marbois, Secretary of the French Legation at Philadelphia. The careful observations Jefferson had been making for years about the surrounding country, its climate, its natural beauties, its fauna and flora, minerals, waterways, agriculture, and its government somehow added up to an impressive total. The manuscript was later the *Notes on*

Virginia. This remarkable book, as rich in its minute analysis of the details of external nature as in its clarification of moral, political, and social issues, was read by savants and scientists of two continents for years to come.

The intellectual exhilaration and comfort Jefferson derived from these months of writing was soon submerged by the greatest personal tragedy he had ever borne. His wife, ill since the birth of their last daughter in May, 1782, died early in September of the same year. Jefferson kept to his room for three weeks thereafter, pacing, in the words of his daughter Martha, "almost incessantly night and day, only lying down occasionally, when nature was completely exhausted." A man of extreme reserve, he rarely mentioned his wife in his letters. Yet it was well known among his intimates that he never forgot this woman he had lived with and loved for ten years. Many, many, years later, when Lafayette lost his own wife, he wrote to Jefferson as the one man who could best understand the peculiar depth of sorrow he was then enduring.

In the months following Mrs. Jefferson's death, Monticello lost much of its normal charm for the lonely refugee from politics. Previously he had steadily declined numerous appointments. But the day came when he was in a mood to accept an offer from Congress to go to Europe to negotiate peace. His mission, however, was cancelled when it was learned that preliminary negotiations had already been engineered. Shortly thereafter (in June, 1783), the General Assembly of Virginia elected Jefferson a delegate to the Confederation Congress where he again headed important committees and drafted many reports and official papers. Here, he criticized the proposed currency system and provided, in his "Notes on the Establishment of a Money Unit," a sound coinage system to take its place. He drew up a draft for temporary government of the Western Territory (the original of his better-known "Ordinance of the Northwestern Territory"), stressing the importance of equality between the original and the new states, and attempting to exclude slavery from all the territories. He

advocated the necessity of more favorable international commercial relations, and compiled, in April and May of 1784, instructions for ministers negotiating commercial treaties with European nations.

Finally, on May 7, 1784, Jefferson was appointed Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States to assist Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, both of whom had preceded him to Europe to arrange commercial agreements. Thus, through the medium of commerce, Jefferson entered the European stage where diplomacy and society, arts and sciences, revolution and love were to provide him the richest years of his life.

In one sense, Jefferson was experienced and highly civilized before he set out for Paris. In another, his real understanding of men and ideas matured in Europe. That complex pattern of habits which had characterized Jefferson up to this time—his curiosity, his patient observation, his learning, his attention to the manners, the personalities and the needs of the people around him—was crystallized during his five-year residence abroad. He listened attentively to foreign philosophers, to foreign writers, to foreign politicians and statesmen of all creeds, doctrines, and dogmas. He bought books, many of them, wandering by the hour among the second-hand bookstalls on the Quai, "hand-picking" his volumes, gathering the treasures of classical learning, of humanism and the Renaissance, of the advanced, rational European age in which he was then so active. He met the leaders of French society. He became a favored *habitué* of the most intellectual and powerful salons in Paris. In 1785, on Franklin's departure for America, Jefferson was made Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of France. He was regarded favorably as a symbol of rational, republican America, Virginia-gentleman style—not, as he had so gracefully commented, "replacing" Franklin, but "succeeding" him admirably.

Lafayette proved to be an invaluable friend. He coached Jefferson in the intricacies of European royal politics; his friends and acquaintances were made accessible to the Ameri-

can Minister when he needed information or contacts. Jefferson, in his turn, advised the impetuous nobleman and patriot. His experience as a fighter for a free democratic republic was inestimably valued by Lafayette, who consulted Jefferson more and more as the forces of revolution began to make themselves felt throughout France. He brought his numerous political friends to listen to the talk of Jefferson and the men gathered at his table. Jefferson at this time believed that, through discussion of the people's needs and the King's privileges, compromise was possible. He thought that a limited monarchy, capable of solving the pressing national problems, could be achieved without bloodshed. He proposed that a charter of rights be offered by the King to the people, and went so far as to write a draft of the charter which he sent to Lafayette.

That Jefferson should speak his mind concerning matters of fundamental political principle was inevitable. Occasionally, disturbed at his violation of that neutrality which tends to make ciphers of visiting diplomats, he withdrew into the shell of his reserve, and maintained the proprieties, keeping silent even when he knew what was happening and knew what was needed to direct or avert it. One meeting, at Lafayette's request, took place at Jefferson's residence, where eight leading members of the "Patriot" (Reform) Party spent several hours projecting a constitution in behalf of the Assembly. Jefferson later justified his conduct by explaining that he had sat by in complete silence while their "chaste eloquence" reigned. The next morning he called on Count Montmorin, the Foreign Minister, to explain why his house had been pressed into such service, and to offer apologies. Montmorin, who already knew what had taken place, strongly urged Jefferson's assistance in all such future meetings, knowing, he said, that Jefferson would throw his weight only on the side of "wholesome and practicable reformation."

These were happy, as well as politically stirring and intellectually stimulating, years for Jefferson. Martha, his oldest daughter, had accompanied her father from the beginning; a

year and a half later, little Mary arrived in Paris to reside under the watchful eye of her adoring papa. And in the summer of 1786 he met Maria Cosway, one of the most beautiful and gifted women in the French or British capitals. The wife of a fashionable English painter, charming, talented, warmly feminine, Maria Cosway affected Jefferson as no other woman ever would again. When the Cosways left Paris in the fall of 1786, Jefferson was desolate and wrote her the longest letter of his life, the impassioned "Dialogue between the Head and the Heart," in which his restraint makes the head win, but so unconvincingly that both writer and lady must have been wretched with the logic of the argument. On his subsequent trips through Southern France and Italy, and later, Jefferson wrote to her again, more intimately than before. That Maria Cosway returned his affection is unquestionable. While Jefferson, in succeeding years, urges Maria to come to Paris without the great following of friends and admirers who manage to steal her from him, she reproaches him for not writing enough, for not coming to London to visit for a long time, for not, in truth, allowing his heart to triumph over his head.

Enjoying the fulness of his life in Paris, only the most urgent duties could have persuaded Jefferson to leave the Continent. He wished his daughters to grow up in the world in which they would have to marry and live; he believed it was necessary to renew personal contact, for a short time, with his own people and government. For these reasons, he thought it best to return to America. Just before leaving he wrote a brief farewell note to Maria Cosway in London, more affectionate than usual and full of references to a speedy return. It was late in October of 1789 when he sailed for America from Cowes. He never went back.

Almost unconsciously, little by little, his European experiences had increased the range and power of Jefferson's political understanding. Although he was the first to insist on loyalty to America and things American, his view of history and government was so broad that he had no respect for the cul-