

THE SELECTED
WRITINGS OF
THOMAS JEFFERSON



EDITED BY WAYNE FRANKLIN

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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THE SELECTED WRITINGS
OF THOMAS JEFFERS



AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS
CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Edited by

WAYNE FRANKLIN
UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT



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Preface

In several senses, Thomas Jefferson stands at the origin point of American society and culture. He was the first intellectual (some would say the only real one) to serve as U.S. president. Before he assumed that office in 1801, he had been by turns a lawyer, an architect, a bibliophile, an extraordinary rhetorician, and a political leader. In the process of following those various vocations and avocations, he had articulated the highest ideals of his country: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness."

To have written just *that* would have been enough for most of his contemporaries. What did Washington or Adams or Hamilton, after all, ever say or write that continues to so deeply define American (and indeed human) aspirations? And Jefferson was as familiar as those other leaders with the practical affairs of everyday life. He defended his homeland from foreign detractors, gathering detailed information and live or dead specimens to prove the Western Hemisphere the equal of the Eastern. Sensing an opportunity for the United States amid the chaos of the Napoleonic era, Jefferson purchased (through his hand-picked agents, James Madison and Robert R. Livingston) the French title to a piece of real estate that overnight doubled the territory of the new nation. Then he dispatched an expedition to cross the continent, thereby asserting the government's title to it. (Because Jefferson was an eminent multitasker, Lewis and Clark also brought back from the west more specimens to drive home Jefferson's point about America's equality with Europe.) Moreover, it was not just the grand sweep of geopolitics and scientific argumentation that intrigued Jefferson. Equally interested in practical improvements, he tinkered with clocks and plows and dumbwaiters. And he was a man of affairs, as people used to say. Jefferson owned and managed several plantations in his native state of Virginia, most notably the one surrounding his beloved mountain near Charlottesville, atop which he sited the extraordinary mansion he called Monticello.

Visitors who tour that building today will notice that Jefferson laid out his private quarters in such a way that his bed defined the boundary between his dressing room and his study, which connected with his "bookroom." This spatial diagram was another result of his tinkering, but it also provides a deeper key to his personality. If he turned one way as he arose in the morning, he could tend to his bodily needs. If he turned the other, he stood amid his papers and books. And what books those were! He had assembled the finest collection in America at the time and was so generous intellectually (and so land-rich and cash-poor) that in 1814 he sold his books to the government to provide the basis for the second collection of the Library of Congress, the first having been burned during the British attack on Washington that summer.

It is an oddity of Jefferson's life, nonetheless, that the man who so loved books left us, aside from the tangible items in that great public institution, so few from his own hand. The one genuine book he wrote, modestly titled *Notes on the State of Virginia*, was not even begun as a book. He had collected data about Virginia because of a deep attachment to his native country, as he called it. When the French became the allies of the fledgling nation during the Revolution, they wanted information about America's landscape and demography and institutions. For Virginia, of which Jefferson was then governor, the task fell to him. Following a British attack against the heart of the state, which sent Jefferson flying from Monticello, he managed to draw together, from the corners of his mind and the scattered documents he could lay his hands on, the longest response to the French queries that anyone from any state provided. At that point, in 1781, it was not to be a book but a document of state. Only later did Jefferson, wishing copies to send to a few friends, have it privately printed. And only when one of those private copies made its way to a translator in Paris did Jefferson reluctantly arrange for a public edition.

Earlier than *Notes on Virginia*, he had written a pamphlet on the crisis with Britain, which had been published by the colony of Virginia in 1774, and the Declaration he drafted for Congress two years later was, after being revised by that body, printed and reprinted across the country and abroad at its order—without, however, being known as primarily Jefferson's work. Jefferson would later issue other small items through the press, and of course during his service as governor and then president many of his words found their way into print. One other time, when he was vice president under Adams and therefore presided in the Senate, Jefferson was moved to intrude a book on the public—the rule book for that body, published in 1801 as *A Manual of Parliamentary Practice*, still in use today. Otherwise, the man known around the world for what he could do with language on paper (he rarely was comfortable speaking in public) left very few publications.

The best of them, including that 1774 *Summary View of the Rights of British America*, the Declaration of Independence (in the original and revised texts Jefferson provided in his draft memoirs in the 1820s), and *Notes on the State of Virginia*, are included in full in this fresh edition of his writings. So is a generous selection from the man's immense body of letters, numbering in the tens of thousands. The overall principle of selection has been a desire to represent both the historical spread of Jefferson's activities and the range and verbal acuity of his intellect. The letters in particular are chosen so as to give insight into Jefferson as father and friend, in addition to revealing his public activities in the United States and while abroad—and his masterly skill as a correspondent. Materials from other hands meant to show some of the sources of his thought and activities have been included in the "Contexts" section for each of the major items from Jefferson himself. Another section, "Early Responses to Jefferson and His Writings" is meant to show the often polarizing effect he had on his fellow Americans and his extraordinary influence as a thinker, especially on the question of political rights. This group of items is intended to round out a story that is of exceptional complexity.

Of recent years, we have been reminded of that complexity in arresting ways. Owing to the first serious investigation of charges dating from the

1790s and early 1800s, we now can conclude that Thomas Jefferson did not just own slaves when he penned the Declaration of Independence and inhabited the new presidential mansion, built by slave labor, in Washington. It is likely, many scholars have concluded, that Jefferson had a sexual liaison with one of his own slaves, Sally Hemings, that began after fifteen-year-old Sally accompanied Jefferson's younger daughter, Polly, to Paris in 1787. That liaison continued well into the new century. Furthermore, children born to Hemings between 1790 and 1808 have shown, through analysis of the DNA of some of their known descendants as well as of the DNA of descendants of some of Jefferson's kin, to have Jefferson as well as Hemings ancestry. Jefferson was in this regard, one may well conclude, the true father of his country.

When rumors of an illicit relationship between Jefferson and "Black Sal" (as the press called her) first circulated—the original story is included in the "Early Responses" section, along with several other relevant documents—they formed part of an effort by his Federalist political opponents to discredit Jefferson. But by the time of Jefferson's death in 1826, when his political reputation was secure, those rumors had been largely forgotten or silenced. As racial theories designed to shore up slavery and its associated social practices took root in the United States in the 1820s and 1830s, the white elite had a desire to keep such complicating tales out of circulation.

The story of their reemergence, and of the archival research and genetic tests they stimulated, forms part of the "Modern Analysis and Criticism" section herein. By its combination of early evidence and the latest argumentation on this subject, this book provides a rich and balanced array of material for consideration of what Jefferson did, not just what he said, in regard to race and race relations. The purpose is to redeem the truth from two centuries of obfuscation but also to reclaim Jefferson himself for truly modern consideration as an archetypal American—a man in whom we can witness both our own aspirations and the failings that have kept those aspirations from being fulfilled for so long. But the final section of the book is intended to reclaim Jefferson as a whole, not just on this one important subject. It includes an array of historical and literary perspectives that can help us see Jefferson the writer and public actor as a crucial figure—perhaps *the* crucial figure—of the founding era of the United States. It is a humbling experience to come into the acquaintance of such a mind and such a record. But it is something we all have to do.

A Note on the Texts

As there is no single reliable source of the texts reproduced here, the reader wishing detailed information on any single item is referred to the first note appended to each of them. However, some patterns can be usefully described. Jefferson himself, as a collector and reader of books, had fairly acute notions of how texts worked. When he advised others on the purchase of books, for instance, he often was careful to distinguish among editions. And when he was involved in the production of printed texts, his own or someone else's, he could be expected to pay close attention to the details. That said, he also exhibited some elements of the older, more fluid attitude toward texts that carried over from the age of manuscripts into the age of print, and that lingered long in the southern states. His own manuscript of what became *Notes on the State of Virginia*, now in the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society, is a complex of original entries, later revisions, and a dizzying assemblage of overlays. (On this question, see Douglas Wilson's description of the manuscript in his essay on p. 533 herein). Plans for a scholarly edition of that manuscript, announced some time ago, seem now to be on hold. Although it would be good for those plans to proceed, it is hard to imagine how a printed text reproducing the actual complexities of the manuscript could be at the same time, in the usual sense, "readable." In the absence of such a publication, the first public edition, carefully scrutinized, is the best alternative.

To give modern readers as lively a sense as possible of how books in Jefferson's period actually looked and worked, the selections from his writings are derived from the best edition of his own time in every instance, usually the first printed edition, when that has been reasonable and possible. Antiquated textual features such as the long S that might be confusing have been silently modernized, but some instructive misspellings that indicate Jefferson's habits (such as *peice* for *piece*) have been left standing as they give a flavor of the past without poisoning the reader.

Jefferson's first publication, the pamphlet called *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, is copied from the first edition, printed at the order of the Virginia legislature in Williamsburg in 1774. In the case of the Declaration of Independence, I have used Jefferson's complexly interlineated version inserted in his 1821 memoirs, which was first published by his grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, in Charlottesville in 1829, and freshly edited from the manuscript by Paul Leicester Ford for the first volume of his *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1892–99). For *Notes on the State of Virginia*, I have used the first public edition, that issued in London in 1787 by John Stockdale. The original map is omitted, but the three appendices and the extensive list of source materials on Virginia history (all of which are often left out of modern editions) are

included. So is the so-called fourth appendix, on the Indian leader Logan, which was first issued by Jefferson as a separate pamphlet in Philadelphia in 1800, the copy text for the reprint herein.

A prodigious correspondent, Jefferson kept copies of many of his letters; others survive in collections around the world. He has been the lucky recipient of meticulous editing on the part of a chain of scholars beginning with the work of Julian P. Boyd, commenced in 1950. The result is *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, now running to 36 volumes, published by Princeton University Press. For the years so far covered by this edition and its supplements, including the *Retirement Series* (1760–1802 and 1809–1813, respectively), all letters and other documents in the book as a whole derive from this magnificent resource. Some additional materials come from modern editions that have special focus, most notably Donald Jackson's *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783–1854*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, Ill., 1978). For periods or topics not yet covered by Boyd and his successors or by such topical collections, I have derived texts from H. A. Washington, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 9 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1853–54); Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 20 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1903–04); and Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 10 vols. (New York, 1892–99). In items taken from these various sources, a few obvious errors have been silently corrected or indicated with a bracketed “[sic].” Finally, materials contemporary with Jefferson are reproduced from the best early sources or reliable modern reprints, as indicated in the notes. More recent materials come from the original publication cited in each instance.

Abbreviations

- AJL *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959).
- PTJ *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd et al., 36 vols. to date (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950–2009).
- PTJ: RS *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, ed. J. Jefferson Looney et al., 6 vols. to date (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004–09).
- LLCE *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and Related Documents, 1783–1854*, ed. Donald Jackson, 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).
- Peden *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955).

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