

Thomas Jefferson and the Science of Republican Government

*A Political Biography of
Notes on the State of Virginia*

Dustin Gish and Daniel Klinghard



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Thomas Jefferson and the Science of Republican Government

This biography of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, his only published book, challenges conventional wisdom by demonstrating its core political thought as well as the political aspirations behind its composition, publication, and initial dissemination. Building upon a close reading of the book's contents, Jefferson's correspondence, and the first comprehensive examination of both its composition and publication history, the authors argue that Jefferson intended his *Notes* to be read by a wide audience, especially in America, in order to help shape constitutional debates in the critical period of the 1780s. Jefferson, through his determined publication and distribution of his *Notes* even while serving as American ambassador in Paris, thus brought his own constitutional and political thought into the public sphere – and at times into conflict with the writings of John Adams and James Madison, stimulating a debate over the proper form of republican constitutionalism that still reverberates in American political thought.

Dustin Gish is the contributing coeditor of *The Quest for Excellence: Liberal Arts, Sciences, and Core Texts* (2016), *Shakespeare and the Body Politic* (2013), and *Souls with Longing: Representations of Honor and Love in Shakespeare* (2011). He is Instructional Faculty in the Honors College at the University of Houston.

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Gish and Klinghard are also the contributing coeditors of *Resistance to Tyrants, Obedience to God: Reason, Religion, and Republicanism at the American Founding* (2013).

*For Caius and Sophia Gish, and Cheri, Amsden, Jocelyn,
and Amelia Klinghard.*

Acknowledgments

This book originated as an impromptu discussion and reading of Jefferson's book *Notes on the State of Virginia* in the summer of 2010. But it has been composed over the course of several years since then, as it gradually "swelled nearly to treble bulk" on the road to eventual publication – not unlike the work that inspired us to write it. We hope that the outcome justifies the support of those who thought the arguments assembled here worthy of being made known. Every author imposes on the generosity of friends and colleagues to read and comment on drafts, but a coauthored book must be doubly indebted in this respect.

We are most grateful to Peter Onuf, whose guidance and friendship have made writing this book so pleasant – it is considerably better thanks to his advice. Lew Bateman, our editor, has shown remarkable patience and encouragement, especially on the long path we traveled toward the completion of this project. Our mutual friend Jeremy Bailey offered insightful critiques early on and valuable support to us both along the way. Both authors owe a debt of thanks to Douglas Wilson and the Massachusetts Historical Society, as well as to the Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia.

One of us (Gish) had the special privilege to spend a month during the summer of 2013 doing archival research and writing as the recipient of a residential fellowship at the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies (ICJS), at Monticello. He would like to express thanks to members of the ICJS staff, with whom he had many engaging discussions: Jack Robertson, Gaye Wilson, Christa Dierksheide, and Anna Berkes. All roads inevitably lead to Monticello for scholars working on Jefferson-related projects, and this thriving intellectual community at work near his beloved home would duly impress Jefferson himself.

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Landy, Jan Lewis, Sarah Luria, Peter McNamara, Carla Mulford, Mary Nichols, John Ragosta, Eran Shalev, Colleen Sheehan, and Aristide Tessitore. Jeff Bernstein, an admired colleague who joined our original reading group on Jefferson, helped turn us toward a study and discussion of the Hebrew Bible and Francis Bacon, from which we both benefited greatly.

Parts of the arguments have been presented at academic conferences, where we received helpful comments from many discussants. Portions of Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 9 first appeared in a cursory form in “Republican Constitutionalism and Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*” (*Journal of Politics*, 2012). Materials in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 appeared in an earlier form in “Redeeming Adam’s Curse: The Bible and Enlightenment Science in Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*” (*Perspectives on Political Science*, April 2013) and in our edited volume *Resistance to Tyrants, Obedience to God: Reason, Religion, and Republicanism at the American Founding* (2013).

Finally, this book has been an intellectual collaboration from the start. As with any such project, different opinions and divergent interpretations have emerged. But overall what we have written reflects agreement about its innumerable details, many arguments, and scholarly purpose. A constant, at times exhausting, always exhilarating conversation can be heard within its pages. For this reason, among others, we owe each other a great debt of gratitude. Above all, we are deeply grateful for the love and indulgence of our wonderful families who have welcomed, or at least tolerated, the presence of Mr. Jefferson as an honored and frequent guest in our homes for a long time now. We thus dedicate our book to them: Caius and Sophia Gish, and Cheri, Amsden, Jocelyn, and Amelia Klinghard.

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Introduction

On September 17, 1787, the same day that the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia were signing their names to the proposed new federal Constitution for the states, Thomas Jefferson, then in Paris serving as ambassador to France, was preparing a package to be shipped to his friend, James Madison. In it were nine copies of his book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and a letter requesting that Madison distribute copies to John Jay of New York, Charles Thompson and David Rittenhouse of Philadelphia, Francis Hopkinson of New Jersey, John Francis Mercer of Maryland, and Ralph Izard and Edward Rutledge of South Carolina. Jefferson prepared a second shipment destined for Alexander Donald in Richmond, Virginia, containing fifty-seven copies of the *Notes*; the accompanying letter requested him to make forty copies available for sales but to distribute personally the other sixteen copies to influential Virginians, including Governor Edmund Randolph, George Washington, James Monroe, George Mason, James McClurg, and Richard Henry Lee. Yet another box contained a personal copy for George Wythe in Williamsburg, along with another forty-six for distribution at his discretion. Taken all together, this impressive list of recipients for Jefferson's *Notes* in 1787 reveals the extensive network of political contacts and friends in America retained by the US minister to France – indeed, it is a roster of key American figures and statesmen active and prominent in national politics.¹

¹ Jefferson to Madison, September 17, 1787, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed., Julian Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), vol. 12: 136–138 (hereafter *PTJ*). Madison retained two copies for himself, one of which was the French translation. On Jefferson's relation with Donald, see Jefferson to Donald, February 7, 1788, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed., Merrill Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 919–920 (hereafter *WTJ*). Each of these men had influence in state and national politics. Jay was serving as secretary of foreign affairs, and – more famously – was a prominent nationalist who was recruited by Alexander Hamilton as a coauthor of *The Federalist*. Thompson had been a prominent revolutionary leader,

The timing of these momentous shipments is central to understanding what Jefferson had been doing in writing, publishing, republishing, and distributing *Notes on the State of Virginia* in the seven years previous.² Although he had first composed the book in 1780–1781 – in the midst of the Revolutionary War, before the security of the Confederacy was assured, and before calls for reforming the Articles of Confederation began to take prominence – the book was first published privately in 1785 in Paris. When he deployed it again in 1787, it was part of his effort to shape the political debate over the nature of constitutionalism unfolding in America between 1786 and 1788. The book was a considered statement of his ideas about republican constitutionalism, and although he would later admit to revising some of the opinions expressed therein (he would, however, never again substantially revise the book itself), he was convinced in 1787 that these ideas needed broader circulation in order to shape the minds of Americans likely to be engaged in debates over constitutional reform.

Jefferson's thoughts turned in earnest to a second English edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia* in January 1787, despite the fact that he had rebuffed overtures from both friends and printers to publish this work for some time. In fact, he initiated the process of republishing the *Notes* rather suddenly around the time he first heard of the meeting of the Constitutional Convention. Unfortunately, for reasons beyond his control – chiefly owing to an unresponsive Paris printer as well as a trip to southern France – the 1787 London edition took much longer than he had expected to be prepared for distribution. Yet he was determined to see some copies of it in America as soon as possible, and so his shipments to Madison, Donald, and Wythe reveal more than Jefferson's desire to communicate with his friends: they reveal his ambition to shape American political debate. With the publication of the London edition delayed, Jefferson distributed instead copies of the 1785 edition (which he took care to correct and supplement with addenda) that he had printed privately in Paris and retained for over two years – a fact that further

was currently serving as the secretary of the Continental Congress, and a prominent member of the influential American Philosophical Society (APS). Rittenhouse, more notable as a scientist, was also a member of the APS, and was serving as the treasurer of Pennsylvania in 1787. Hopkinson had been a member of the Continental Congress and served in New Jersey's ratification convention. Mercer, a transplant to Maryland from Virginia (where he served in the House of Delegates), was a member of the Maryland House of Delegates, and one of Maryland's representatives to the Constitutional Convention. Izard was not currently serving in national politics in 1787, but was prominent in national politics, having served as a Revolutionary diplomat and a member of the Continental Congress, and was elected to the Senate in 1789. Rutledge, whom Jefferson had come to know in the Continental Congress, was serving in the South Carolina state legislature. Wythe had been Jefferson's law school mentor, but was prominent in national politics as well, having served in the Continental Congress and the Virginia House of Delegates. Donald was another Jefferson intimate, who helped circulate Jefferson's views on the Constitution during Virginia's ratification convention.

² All references herein to Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* are by query and page numbers, according to the edition of the text printed in *WTJ*, 123–325.

emphasizes Jefferson's sense of urgency in the fall of 1787. But once again, misfortune plagued Jefferson's efforts to distribute the *Notes*. Unforeseeable negligence at the port at Le Havre delayed the arrival of the books in America – which should have taken no more than a few weeks – for more than six months, more than a year after his sudden decision to publish *Notes* and have the work reprinted and made available to the public on a wide scale.³ In this way, the vagaries of eighteenth-century printing and shipping obscured Jefferson's immediate ambitions for the *Notes*. They also are partly responsible for later interpretations of the *Notes* as being written primarily for scientific or European audiences. This book aims to correct such interpretations by telling more completely the story of Jefferson's goals through analysis of the text itself and of the events leading to its composition, publication, and dissemination.

READING JEFFERSON, MISREADING THE NOTES

This story of Jefferson's efforts to distribute the *Notes*, and his understanding of its political purpose, has not been fully explained. This is partly due to the common assumption that because Jefferson was absorbed by his duties as minister to France during the time of the Constitutional Convention and its ratification, he was removed from domestic political debate surrounding the new Constitution. Although it is often pointed out that John Adams was following events in America from his diplomatic post in London and that he wrote his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* for the specific purpose of influencing constitutional debate, there is little sense in the scholarship of the period that Jefferson made any effort to insert himself in the drafting or ratification of the Constitution of 1787.⁴ Jefferson's absence and apparent lack of interest inform Joseph Ellis's

³ See Coolie Verner, "Mr. Jefferson Distributes His *Notes*: A Preliminary Checklist of the First Edition," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 56: 4 (April 1952): 3–31, 17 (following the pagination of the Thomas Jefferson Library reprint of the original article).

⁴ An authoritative history of this critical period says nothing of Jefferson's influence on debates over the Constitution, as opposed to John Adams, whose relevance despite also being absent was mediated by his publication of *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States*. Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 567–587. Volume I of the *Defence* was available in America by the time the Convention met, and delegates acknowledged its influence. See *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, ed., Lester Capon (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 167 (hereafter *AJL*). By June 6, 1787, Madison wrote to Jefferson that "Mr. Adams' Book which has been in your hands of course, has excited a good deal of attention ... It will probably be much read, particularly in the Eastern States, and contribute with other circumstances to revive the predilections of this Country for the British Constitution." James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, June 6, 1787, in *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 1776–1826*, ed., James Smith (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), I: 478–479 (hereafter *RL*).

assessment that Jefferson maintained a “detached perspective” on events back home and that he, unlike James Madison, was “never animated” by “elaborate reasoning about constitutional structure.”⁵ For many, the conclusion of Jefferson’s authoritative biographer, Dumas Malone, is the final word on the matter:

Jefferson, who had done such superb service as a legislative draftsman and was so deeply interested in the problem of formulating fundamental law, was denied the opportunity to share personally in the making of a constitution ... His most important actual contribution to the constitutional thinking of this period was made indirectly, through the books he sent Madison from Paris.⁶

Although it does not appear to be the case that the *Notes* made it to America in time to influence the Convention, we argue that Jefferson’s absence from the American scene should not be read as indicative of a lack of effort on his part to insert himself into the debate. We believe that the *Notes* should be read as an effort to shape American constitutional thinking.

More troubling than assuming that Jefferson’s absence meant a lack of involvement is the complicated reception with which the content of *Notes on the State of Virginia* has been met. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to understanding Jefferson’s political ambitions for the book is a common tendency to view the book as lacking any coherent literary structure or unifying political purpose. Convincing readers that Jefferson aimed to use the *Notes* for a political purpose therefore requires explaining how Jefferson intended the book to be read. There is a widespread sense among scholars that the evident idiosyncrasies and minutiae that comprise the textual surface of the book exhaust its substantive depth; which is to say, it is held by most to be merely a compilation of disconnected, if erudite, reflections, observations, and eccentric details, which together convey an attentive mind or perhaps a spirit, but not a coherent thesis.

Jefferson scholars in the twentieth century contributed most of all to this “Compilation View” of the *Notes*. Malone’s multivolume biography dismissed it as “an ad hoc work,” which “was tossed off in a few summer weeks and based on materials he had already collected and already understood,” and with which he was never “much concerned about its literary form.” Malone identified “a philosophical tone” in the work, but found nothing that illuminated Jefferson’s thought more generally.⁷ Later scholars have taken the book more seriously than Malone did, but his sense that the book gestured toward philosophical claims and yet failed to coalesce into a book that could be understood coherently has been shared widely. Henry Steele Commager described the

⁵ Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 120.

⁶ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and the Rights of Man* (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1951), 162.

⁷ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the Virginian* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948), 376–377.

book as “on one level, a guide book, even an encyclopedia; on a different and higher level it was a philosophical inquiry, an interpretation, and a platform.”⁸ Even scholars who praised the book’s literary qualities sometimes concluded, as did Alf Mapp, that “though the largely statistical portions of the book have no more style than an almanac, many of its constituent essays have an Addisonian polish and clarity.”⁹ Perhaps the most representative treatment of the *Notes* can be identified in the work of Merrill Peterson, the most prominent Jefferson biographer of the late twentieth century, who argued that “the *Notes on Virginia* was simply a glorified guidebook, descriptive, crammed with facts, informative on a broad range of subjects,” although it was “touched with philosophy.” Although he would later describe it as “uniquely interesting as a guide to Jefferson’s mind as well as to his native country,” Peterson characterized its literary structure as “a mélange of information and opinion on many subjects.”¹⁰ Later, he concluded that as “a work of observation, it lays no claim to artistry or to philosophy, yet possesses both,” but that it broadly articulated “a series of Enlightenment directives for the intelligence of the new American republic.”¹¹ This notice of a vague philosophical tone, coupled with its apparent disorder, is perhaps the most common trope in interpretations of the book.

It will not do to suggest that these dismissals are merely the product of a phase of Jefferson historiography that has since been improved, as a number of misperceptions about the work continue to pervade contemporary scholarship. Most notably, the notion that the work lacks coherence remains a prominent line of thinking. The fine Jefferson scholar Peter Onuf described the *Notes* as an “omnium gatherum, never completed bag of a book,” possessing little in the way of thematic coherence, certainly none with a meaningful political message.¹² Charles A. Miller’s excellent book on *Jefferson and Nature* explains that the book “is not a systematic and unified treatise, nor is it written with a sense of literary proportion.”¹³ Jay Fliegelman offers the

⁸ Henry Steele Commager, “Jefferson and the Enlightenment,” in Lally Weymouth, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: The Man, His World, His Influence* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1973), 40.

⁹ Alf Mapp, Jr., *Thomas Jefferson: A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity* (New York: Madison Books, 1987), 160. Mapp continues comparing elements of Jefferson’s literary style: “some of the pleas for liberty have the sinewy terseness of Jonathan Swift and a few passages of natural description anticipate by several decades the most effective prose of the English Romantics.”

¹⁰ Merrill Peterson, “Thomas Jefferson: A Brief Life,” in *Thomas Jefferson*, Weymouth, ed., 22.

¹¹ Merrill Peterson, “Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*,” in Roseann Runte, ed., *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, Vol. 7 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 50.

¹² Peter Onuf, *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), 26.

¹³ Charles Miller, *Jefferson and Nature: An Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 17.

explanation that Jefferson resigned himself to “the core futility of his descriptive project” when he “tired from correcting the manuscript of *Notes*.”¹⁴ Modern editors of the *Notes* have consciously or unconsciously perpetuated this common view of the book as an incoherent work, even as an unfinished and, most likely, unfinishable one. David Waldstreicher asserts that “Jefferson regarded the *Notes* as somewhat fragmentary and, at best, a work in progress,” while Thomas Perkins Abernethy says that he “could not possibly consider any intellectual production as ‘definitive.’”¹⁵ One editor, William Peden, seems to be the exception to the rule in at least contending that, while replete with “philosophical speculation” and “curiosity concerning the wonders of nature,” still the printed edition of the *Notes* as we have it exhibits the kind of care that belies the author’s “often-repeated assertions that he held it of little value.”¹⁶

To be sure, Jefferson’s own words have encouraged scholars to read him this way. Marie Kimball’s biography (which Malone credited as having shaped his interpretation) has a substantive chapter on the *Notes*, and relies largely on Jefferson’s unpublished “Autobiography,” in which Jefferson seems to dismiss the work saying that it was a compilation of materials he had been collecting for some time; “these memoranda were on loose papers, bundled up without order, and difficult of recourse.”¹⁷ Many scholars follow her lead in using his “Autobiography” to understand the *Notes*, but there are a number of reasons to wonder about the historical veracity of the comments in Jefferson’s autobiographical essay. To begin, the “Autobiography” was composed almost four decades after Jefferson had begun working on the *Notes* and long after the work had gained notoriety in the election of 1800. Peden, in his introduction to the first critical edition of the *Notes* in 1954, astutely notes that Jefferson, then seventy-seven years old, made at least two factual errors in his “Autobiography” regarding the book and its beginnings.¹⁸ The history of the book’s composition and publication that we provide here aims to provide a more complete view than that provided in the “Autobiography.”

In the pages that follow, we also trace literary structures within the *Notes* that we believe belie these claims. We do not make large claims for the merits of

¹⁴ Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 152.

¹⁵ See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed., Thomas Abernathy (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1964); and *Notes on the State of Virginia by Thomas Jefferson, with Related Documents*, ed., David Waldstreicher (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002), 19.

¹⁶ See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed., William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), xv, xvii.

¹⁷ Marie Kimball, *Jefferson: War and Peace, 1776–1784* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1947), 263.

¹⁸ Peden, *Notes*, xii, n2.