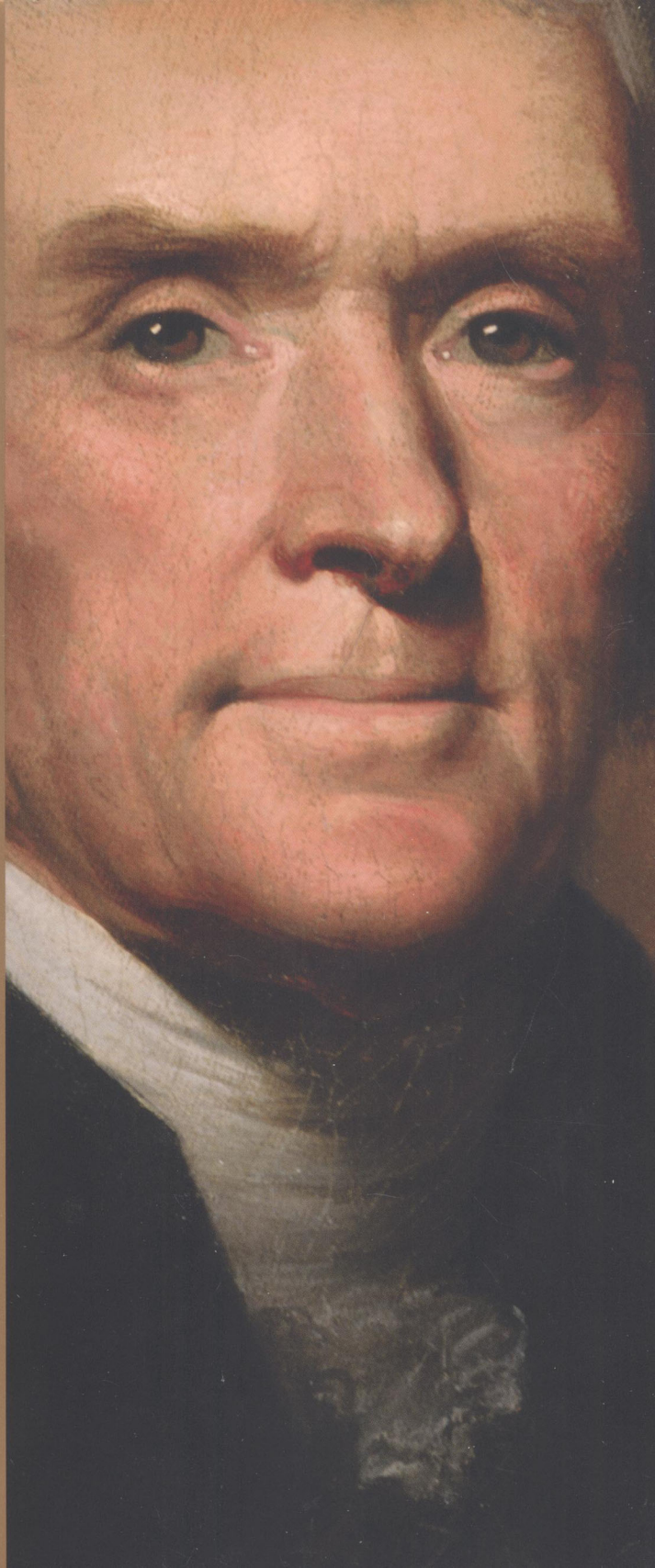


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Thomas
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THE ART
of POWER



THOMAS JEFFERSON THE ART OF POWER

Jon Meacham

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TITLE PAGE: *An 1825 watercolor of the West Front of Monticello by Jane Pitford Braddick Peticolas.*

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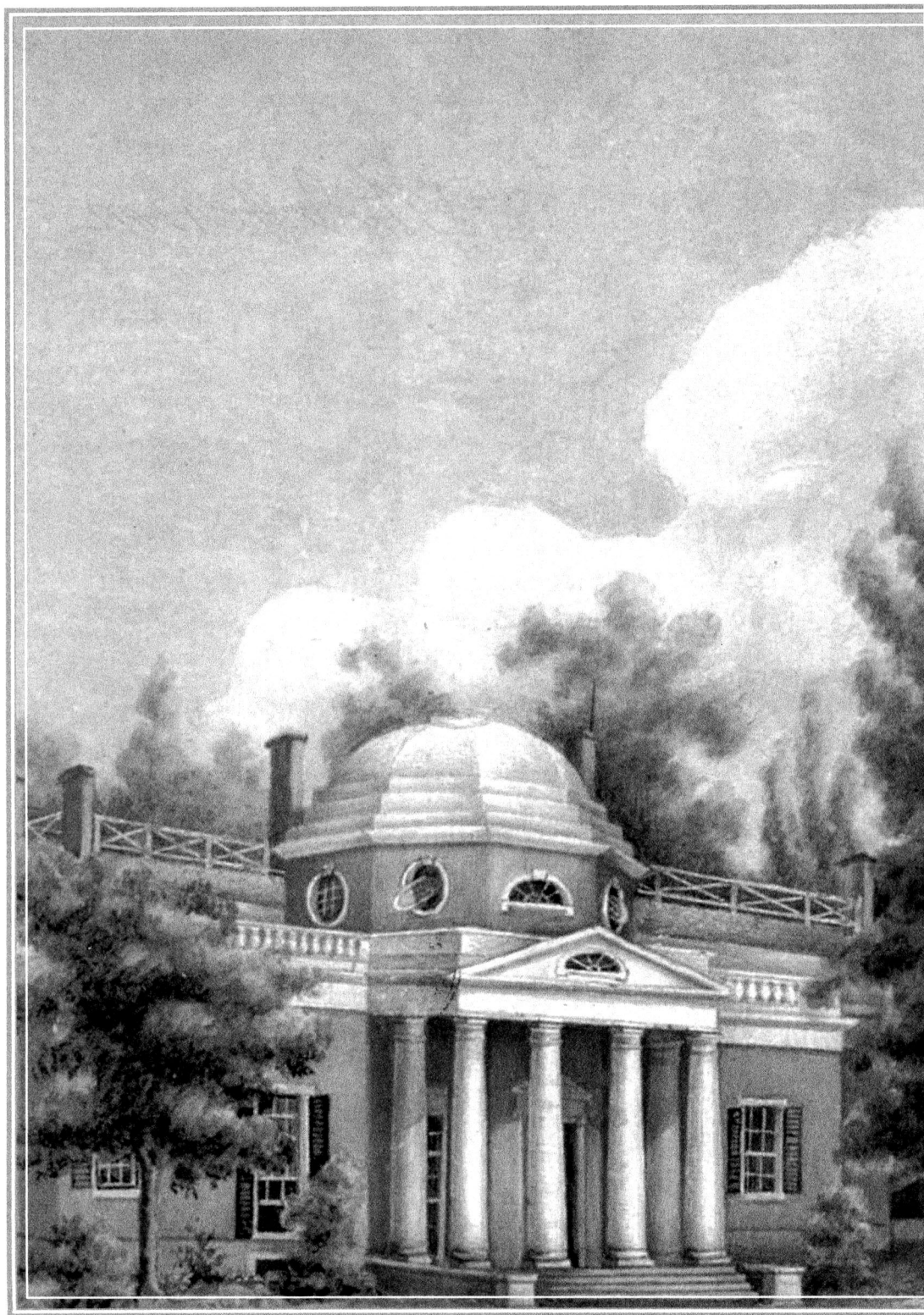
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Th Jefferson



TO HERBERT WENTZ

And, as ever, for Mary, Maggie, Sam, and Keith

A few broad strokes of the brush would paint the portraits of all the early Presidents with this exception. . . . Jefferson could be painted only touch by touch, with a fine pencil, and the perfection of the likeness depended upon the shifting and uncertain flicker of its semi-transparent shadows.

—HENRY ADAMS, *History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*

I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.

—PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, at a dinner in honor of all living recipients of the Nobel Prize, 1962

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

THOMAS JEFFERSON LEFT POSTERITY an immense correspondence, and I am particularly indebted to *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, published by Princeton University Press and first edited by Julian P. Boyd. I am, moreover, grateful to the incumbent editors of the *Papers*, especially general editor Barbara B. Oberg, for sharing unpublished transcripts of letters gathered for future volumes. The goal of the Princeton edition was, and continues to be, “to present as accurate a text as possible and to preserve as many of Jefferson’s distinctive mannerisms of writing as can be done.” To provide clarity and readability for a modern audience, however, I have taken the liberty of regularizing much of the quoted language from Jefferson and from his contemporaries. I have, for instance, silently corrected Jefferson’s frequent use of “it’s” for “its” and “recieve” for “receive,” and have, in most cases, expanded contractions and abbreviations and followed generally accepted practices of capitalization.

PROLOGUE

THE WORLD'S BEST HOPE

Washington, D.C., Winter 1801

HE WOKE AT FIRST LIGHT. Lean and loose-limbed, Thomas Jefferson tossed back the sheets in his rooms at Conrad and McMunn's boardinghouse on Capitol Hill, swung his long legs out of bed, and plunged his feet into a basin of cold water—a life-long habit he believed good for his health. At Monticello, his plantation in the Southwest Mountains near the Blue Ridge of Virginia, the metal bucket brought to Jefferson every morning wore a groove on the floor next to the alcove where he slept.

Six foot two and a half, Jefferson was nearly fifty-eight years old in the Washington winter of 1800–1801. His sandy hair, reddish in his youth, was graying; his freckled skin—always susceptible to the sun—was wrinkling a bit. His eyes were penetrating but elusive, alternately described as blue, hazel, or brown. He had great teeth.

It was early February 1801. The capital, with its muddy avenues and scattered buildings, was in chaos, and had been for weeks. The future of the presidency was uncertain, the stability of the Constitution in question, and, secluded inside Conrad and McMunn's on New Jersey Avenue—a new establishment with stables for sixty horses just two hundred paces away from the unfinished Capitol building—Jefferson was in a quiet agony.

He soaked his feet and gathered his thoughts. After a vicious election in which he had challenged the incumbent president, John Adams, it turned out that while Jefferson had defeated Adams in the popular vote, the tall Virginian had received the same number of electoral votes for president as the dashing, charismatic, and unpredictable Aaron

Burr of New York, who had been running as Jefferson's vice president. Under the rules in effect in 1800, there was no way to distinguish between a vote for president and one for vice president. What was supposed to have been a peaceful transfer of power from one rival to another—from Adams to Jefferson—had instead produced a constitutional crisis.

Anxious and unhappy, Jefferson was, he wrote to his eldest daughter, “worn down here with pursuits in which I take no delight, surrounded by enemies and spies catching and perverting every word which falls from my lips or flows from my pen, and inventing where facts fail them.” His fate was in the hands of other men, the last place he wanted it to be. He hated the waiting, the whispers, the *not knowing*. But there was nothing he could do. And so Thomas Jefferson waited.

The election, Jefferson said, was “the theme of all conversation.” The electoral tie between Jefferson and Burr, with Adams not so far behind, threw the contest to the House of Representatives—and no one knew what would happen. It was suddenly a whole new election, taking place in the House where each of the sixteen state delegations had one vote to cast. Whoever won nine of those votes would become president. “THE CRISIS is momentous . . . !” the *Washington Federalist* newspaper declared in the second week of February. Could Burr, who admitted that he thought of politics as “fun and honor and profit,” be made president by mischievous Federalists, taking the election from Jefferson, a fellow Republican? Or could Jefferson's foes elect an interim president, denying Jefferson and his Republicans ultimate power?

In the claustrophobic atmosphere of Washington, anything seemed possible—and Jefferson, who liked to cultivate the air of a philosopher who was above the merely political, found himself in a struggle to secure his own election and, in his mind, rescue the nation from the allegedly monarchical tendencies of the Federalist Party. As a young man in 1776 he had hazarded all for the American experiment in liberty. Now, a quarter of a century later, Jefferson believed that the United States as he knew it and loved it might not long endure. During the 1800 campaign, the patriot-physician Benjamin Rush told Jefferson

that he had “heard a member of Congress lament our separation from Great Britain and express his sincere wishes that we were again dependent on her.”

Such thoughts terrified Jefferson, who confessed that he felt bound to protect the principles of ’76 he had articulated in the Declaration of Independence. If he—the choice of the majority of the electorate—lost the presidency, then what had Americans been fighting for all these years? So much was at stake. An old Revolutionary ally from Massachusetts, Elbridge Gerry, said Jefferson’s foes were acting from “a desire to promote . . . division among the people, which they have excited and nourished as the germ of a civil war.”

There had been a rumor that John Marshall, the secretary of state who had just been named chief justice, might be appointed president, blocking Jefferson from the office. “If the union could be broken, that would do it,” said Virginia governor James Monroe, who was told that twenty-two thousand men in Pennsylvania were “prepared to take up arms in the event of extremities.”

Disorder, which Jefferson hated, threatened harmony, which he loved.

In the end, after a snowstorm struck Washington, Jefferson narrowly prevailed on the thirty-sixth ballot in the House to become the third president of the United States. And so began the Age of Jefferson, a political achievement without parallel in American life. George Washington, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton are sometimes depicted as wiser, more practical men than the philosophical master of Monticello. Judged by the raw standard of the winning and the keeping of power, however, Thomas Jefferson was the most successful political figure of the first half century of the American republic. For thirty-six of the forty years between 1800 and 1840, either Jefferson or a self-described adherent of his served as president of the United States: James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, and Martin Van Buren. (John Quincy Adams, a one-term president, was the single exception.) This unofficial and little-noted Jeffersonian dynasty is unmatched in American history.

He had a defining vision, a compelling goal—the survival and suc-

cess of popular government in America. Jefferson believed the will of an educated, enlightened majority should prevail. His opponents had less faith in the people, worrying that the broad American public might be unequal to self-government. Jefferson thought that same public was the salvation of liberty, the soul of the nation, and the hope of the republic.

In pursuit of his ends, Jefferson sought, acquired, and wielded power, which is the bending of the world to one's will, the remaking of reality in one's own image. Our greatest leaders are neither dreamers nor dictators: They are, like Jefferson, those who articulate national aspirations yet master the mechanics of influence and know when to depart from dogma. Jefferson had a remarkable capacity to marshal ideas and to move men, to balance the inspirational and the pragmatic. To realize his vision, he compromised and improvised. The willingness to do what he needed to do in a given moment makes him an elusive historical figure. Yet in the real world, in real time, when he was charged with the safety of the country, his creative flexibility made him a transformative leader.

America has always been torn between the ideal and the real, between noble goals and inevitable compromises. So was Jefferson. In his head and in his heart, as in the nation itself, the perfect warred with the good, the intellectual with the visceral. In him as in America, that conflict was, and is, a war without end. Jefferson's story resonates not least because he embodies an eternal drama: the struggle of the leadership of the nation to achieve greatness in a difficult and confounding world.

More than any of the other early presidents—more than Washington, more than Adams—Jefferson believed in the possibilities of humanity. He dreamed big but understood that dreams become reality only when their champions are strong enough and wily enough to bend history to their purposes. Broadly put, philosophers think; politicians maneuver. Jefferson's genius was that he was both and could do both, often simultaneously. Such is the art of power.

He loved his wife, his books, his farms, good wine, architecture, Homer, horseback riding, history, France, the Commonwealth

of Virginia, spending money, and the very latest in ideas and insights. He believed in America, and in Americans. The nation, he said in his first inaugural address in 1801, was “the world’s best hope.” He thought Americans themselves capable of virtually anything they put their minds to. “Whatever they can, they will,” Jefferson said of his countrymen in 1814.

A formidable man, “Mr. Jefferson was as tall, straight-bodied [a] man as ever you see, right square-shouldered,” said Isaac Granger Jefferson, a Monticello slave. “Neat a built man as ever was seen . . . a straight-up man, long face, high nose.” Edmund Bacon, a Monticello overseer, said that Jefferson “was like a fine horse; he had no surplus flesh. . . . His countenance was always mild and pleasant.”

To be tall and forbidding might command respect for a time, but not affection. To be overly familiar might command affection for a time, but not respect. Jefferson was the rare leader who stood out from the crowd without intimidating it. His bearing gave him unusual opportunities to make the thoughts in his head the work of his hands, transforming the world around him from what it was to what he thought it ought to be.

A philosopher and a scientist, a naturalist and a historian, Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment, always looking forward, consumed by the quest for knowledge. He adored detail, noting the temperature each day and carrying a tiny, ivory-leaved notebook in his pocket to track his daily expenditures. He drove his horses hard and fast and considered the sun his “almighty physician.” Jefferson, an inveterate walker, was fit and virile. He drank no hard liquor but loved wine, taking perhaps three glasses a day. He did not smoke. When he received gifts of Havana cigars from well-wishers, he passed them along to friends.

Jefferson never tired of invention and inquiry, designing dumbwaiters and hidden mechanisms to open doors at Monticello. He delighted in archaeology, paleontology, astronomy, botany, and meteorology, and once created his own version of the Gospels by excising the New Testament passages he found supernatural or implausible and arranging the remaining verses in the order he believed they should be read. He drew sustenance from music and found joy in gardening. He bought and

built beautiful things, creating Palladian plans for Monticello and designing the Roman-inspired capitol of Virginia, which he conceived after seeing an ancient temple in Nîmes, in the south of France. He was an enthusiastic patron of pasta, took the trouble to copy down a French recipe for ice cream, and enjoyed the search for the perfect dressing for his salads. He kept shepherd dogs (two favorites were named Bergere and Grizzle). He knew Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and Spanish.

He was also a student of human nature, a keen observer of what drove other men, and he loved knowing the details of other lives. He admired the letters of Madame de Sévigné, whose correspondence offered a panoramic view of the France of Louis XIV, and Madame de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy*, a romantic picaresque novel. In his library at Monticello was a collection of what a guest called "regal scandal" that Jefferson had put together under the title *The Book of Kings*. It included the *Mémoires de la Princesse de Bareith* (by the princess royal of Prussia, sister of Frederick the Great); *Les Mémoires de la Comtesse de la Motte* (by a key figure in a scandal involving a diamond necklace and Marie-Antoinette); and an account of the trial of the Duke of York, the commander in chief of the British army who had been forced to resign amid charges that he had allowed his mistress to sell officer commissions. Jefferson spoke of these tales, his guest recalled, "with a satisfaction somewhat inconsistent with the measured gravity he claims in relation to such subjects generally."

A guest at a country inn was said to have once struck up a conversation with a "plainly-dressed and unassuming traveler" whom the stranger did not recognize. The two covered subject after subject, and the unremarkable traveler was "perfectly acquainted with each." Afterward, "filled with wonder," the guest asked the landlord who this extraordinary man was. When the topic was the law, the traveler said, "he thought he was a lawyer"; when it was medicine, he "felt sure he was a physician"; when it was theology, "he became convinced that he was a clergyman."

The landlord's reply was brief. "Oh, why I thought you knew the Squire."

To his friends, who were numerous and devoted, Jefferson was among the greatest men who had ever lived, a Renaissance figure who was formidable without seeming overbearing, sparkling without being showy, winning without appearing cloying.

Yet to his foes, who were numerous and prolific, Jefferson was an atheist and a fanatic, a demagogue and a dreamer, a womanly Francophile who could not be trusted with the government of a great nation. His task was to change those views as best he could. He longed for affection and for approval.

A master of emotional and political manipulation, sensitive to criticism, obsessed with his reputation, and devoted to America, he was drawn to the world beyond Monticello, endlessly at work, as he put it, “to see the standard of reason at length erected after so many ages during which the human mind has been held in vassalage by kings, priests, and nobles.” As a planter, lawyer, legislator, governor, diplomat, secretary of state, vice president, and president, Jefferson spent much of his life seeking control over himself and power over the lives and destinies of others. For Jefferson, politics was not a dispiriting distraction but an undertaking that made everything else possible.

Inspired by his own father’s example, he long sought to play the part of a patriarch, accepting—even embracing—the accompanying burdens of responsibility. He was the father of the ideal of individual liberty, of the Louisiana Purchase, of the Lewis and Clark expedition, of the American West. He led the first democratic movement in the new republic to check the power and influence of established forces. And perhaps most important, he gave the nation the idea of American progress—the animating spirit that the future could be better than the present or the past. The greatest American politicians since have prospered by projecting a Jeffersonian vision that the country’s finest hours lay ahead.

The story of Jefferson’s life fascinates still in part because he found the means to endure and, in many cases, to prevail in the face of extreme partisanship, economic uncertainty, and external threat. Jefferson’s political leadership is instructive, offering us the example of a president who can operate at two levels, cultivating the hope of a brighter future while preserving the political flexibility and skill to bring the ideal as close as possible to reality.

He has most commonly been thought of as the author or designer of America: a figure who articulated a vision of what the country could be but was otherwise a kind of detached dreamer. Yet Jefferson did not rest once his words were written or his ideas entered circulation. He was a builder and a fighter. “What is practicable must often control what is pure theory,” he said during his presidency; moreover, “the habits of the governed determine in a great degree what is practicable.”

Jefferson fought for the greatest of causes yet fell short of delivering justice to the persecuted and the enslaved. In the end, for all the debate and the division and the scholarship and the symposia, there may be only one thing about Thomas Jefferson that is indisputable: that the man who lived and worked from 1743 to 1826 was a breathing human being who was subject to the passion and prejudice and pride and love and ambition and hope and fear that drive most other breathing human beings. Recovering a sense of that mortal Jefferson—the Jefferson who sought office, defined human rights for a new age, explored expanding frontiers in science and philosophy, loved women, owned slaves, and helped forge a nation—is my object in the following pages.

He is not a man of our time but of his own, formed by the historical realities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He must be seen in context. It is also true, however, that many of his concerns were universal. His was a particular life of perennial significance.

And the world—or at least much of it—found him charming, brilliant, and gracious. Engaged in a constant campaign to win the affection of whoever happened to be in front of him at a given moment, Jefferson flirted with women and men alike. “It is a charming thing to be loved by everybody,” he told his grandchildren, “and the way to obtain it is, never to quarrel or be angry with anybody.” He hated arguing face-to-face, preferring to smooth out the rough edges of conversation, leading some people to believe Jefferson agreed with them when, in fact, he was seeking to avoid conflict. He paid a price for this obsession with congeniality among those who mistook his reticence for duplicity.

Yet women in particular loved him. Calling on Samuel Harrison