Thomas Jefferson in Paris

The Ministry of a Virginian "Looker-on"

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Preface

Thomas Jefferson thus began his *Autobiography*. "At the age of 77, I begin to make some memoranda and state some recollections of dates & facts concerning myself, for my own more ready reference & for the information of my family." He immediately turned to a brief account of his ancestry—incomplete and relatively uninformative, perhaps because of modest roots, disinterest, or insufficient data—offered a brief account of his father, Peter; limned his own education; and then gave a lengthy description of the volatile political climate of Early America. He noted that on May 7, 1784—his wife of just over 10 years had recently passed—he was appointed by Congress to join Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to negotiate "treaties of commerce with foreign nations." A year later, he said, he accepted the position of minister plenipotentiary to France, as the former minister, Franklin, returned to America. Jefferson next covered in detail the French Revolution and the events leading to it. The last sentence of the manuscript read, "I arrived at New York on the 21st of Mar. where Congress was in session." Jefferson's *Autobiography*, thus, ended just after his five years of service in France.

Among the few scholars who have attempted to explain why Jefferson ended his autobiography after his stint in France, there is no scholarly consensus. Merrill Peterson stated that the task had been laborious and painful. "He derived little enjoyment from looking back over the ground he had traveled, the field strewn with the bodies of dead friends, himself standing 'like a solitary tree …, its trunk indeed erect but its branches fallen off and its neighboring plants eradicated from around it.'" Moreover, Jefferson's memory was faltering, thus the task likely involved sifting through documents and anecdota.[1]

Peterson's answer seems sensible but unavailing. If we follow Peterson's lead, then we wonder why Jefferson undertook the task in the first place and why he wrote as much as he did.

Moreover, Peterson was not out to answer the question I pose—that is, why Jefferson ended his journal after his stint in France—but essayed to answer merely the question concerning why Jefferson did not finish his autobiography.

The answer to my question, I suspect, is relatively simple. Excepting his first year, his time in France was relatively enjoyable and, to say the least, memorable. His time thereafter as secretary of state and in a cabinet with

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[1] Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson & the New Nation: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 948.

Alexander Hamilton was unenjoyable and to him not worth reliving. Much of that story was contained in his "Anas"— "official opinions given in writing by me to General Washington while I was Secretary of State." Those opinions Jefferson had given a "calm revisal" early in 1818, merely a few years prior to beginning the *Autobiography*.[2] Jefferson was probably loath to revisit those cantankerous years as secretary of state.

Jefferson's years in France were life-altering, though he did not suffer, as some have argued, a sea change of his cultural and especially political views. Instead, those years were a time of large political maturation—e.g., all things he saw in France and in Europe reinforced his view that the experiment of representative government was an experiment that must be continued—and of large aesthetic edification—e.g., beauty that could not be used to advance human needs was superfluous. Those years were more significantly a time of emotional healing.

France was a needed *panpharmacon*—a remedy.

There was a noteworthy event at the end of his two-year stint as governor of Virginia in June 1781. War with Britain raged and upon ending his term, Jefferson came under scrutiny for the possibility of misbehavior during his last year as governor. The "enquirey" concerned the possibility of Jefferson's gubernatorial incompetency when British troops entered Virginia toward the end of the war and caused panic and havoc. Jefferson was exonerated, however, in part because of Virginians' excitement over the British surrendering after the Battle of Yorktown late in 1781 and thus felt no need to pursue ugly politics.

In spite of exoneration, Jefferson was embittered by even the intimation that he did not do all that he could have done to keep Virginians safe during the war. The event left a hefty scar—many considered him to be craven—that could only be removed by the "all healing grave."[3] He vowed to retire permanently from politics even though political friends knew that Virginia and the confederation of states would suffer greatly from his retirement. In retirement, Jefferson sank into the society of his family at Monticello and friends nearby.

All too soon, there was another noteworthy event that made impossible any sort of domestic tranquility. His wife, Martha,[4] died on September 6, 1782, after she had birthed their daughter, Lucy Elizabeth Jefferson, on May 8, 1782. Jefferson seldom left his wife's bedside during her declining years.

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[2] Thomas Jefferson, "Anas," in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 661–62.

[3] TJ to James Monroe, 20 May 1782.

[4] For more on his wife, see Sarah N. Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson Compiled from Family Letters and Reminiscence* (New York: Harper, 1781), 40–41, and Henry S. Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 1, 63.

When she passed, Jefferson was inconsolably aggrieved. That story I tell fully in the introduction.

The death of his wife was preceded by other significant losses: the deaths of his best friend, Dabney Carr, on May 16, 1773 (Jefferson would take in his family); of his beloved sister, Jane Jefferson, on October 1, 1775; of his daughter, Jane Randolph Jefferson, on September 2, 1775; of his mother, Jane Randolph Jefferson, on March 31, 1776; and of an unnamed son on June 14, 1777.

The inquiry into his conduct after his governorship and the death of his beloved wife made welcome the acceptance of a post as minister in France with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to negotiate on behalf of the Congress treaties of "amity and commerce" with European nations. The favorable relations with France—its aid in the Revolutionary War had been critical—made it the most reasonable nation in which to reside while pursuing treaties. Upon Franklin's retirement as minister to France, Jefferson accepted his post, keeping him in France till 1789.

This book, *Thomas Jefferson in Paris: The Ministry of a Virginian "Looker-on,"* is about Jefferson's tenure in France—the years 1784 to 1789—and the events leading to its inevitability. It has six parts and 24 relatively short chapters.

The introduction details the two significant antecedents that lead jointly to eager acceptance of the post in France and willingness to accept Franklin's position upon the latter's retirement: Jefferson's hectic years as a wartime governor of Virginia from June 1779 to June 1781, the inquiry into his competency thereafter, and the death of wife, Martha, shortly afterward.

Part I examines key events appertaining to his trip to France in 1784. I begin with some discussion of Jefferson's most significant book, *Notes on the State of Virginia,* which he took to Paris for publication and distribution among friends. Chapter 2 covers his trip to France on *Ceres*. The third chapter concerns settling in Paris, and the fourth gives readers some account of his, Franklin's, and Adams's roles as ministers plenipotentiary.

In the second part, I look at important events of the year 1785. Chapter 5 is an analysis of four significant friends that made life easier in Paris: Marquis de Lafayette, Marquis de Chastellux, Madame Helvétius, and Comtesse d'Houdetot. Chapter 6 covers the considerable difficulties Jefferson encountered in essaying to find a suitable publisher for *Notes on Virginia.* In the next chapter, I discuss Jefferson having settled into his new and more expensive residence, Hôtel de Langeac, at the western end of Paris. The eighth chapter concerns a fatherly letter to his nephew, Peter Carr, then living at Monticello, and the exchange of letters concerning the illness and eventual death of his young daughter, Lucy Elizabeth Jefferson, residing with Jefferson's

sister-in-law at Eppington. Chapter 9 then examines Jefferson's efforts to find the right sculptor, Houdon, to craft a statue of General George Washington.

Part III looks at critical events in the year 1786. It has five chapters and covers the publication of Jefferson's bill for religious freedom, Jefferson's architectural design of Virginia's new capitol in Richmond, his trip to London and his visit to England's pleasure gardens, his chance meeting with Italian artist and musician, Maria Cosway, and his friendship with and patronage of the young American painter, John Trumbull.

Part IV covers the year 1787. In chapter 15, I analyze Jefferson's somewhat strange reaction to an event that shook numerous persons in the newly formed confederation of states: Shays's Rebellion. Chapter 16 is about Jefferson's response in numerous letters to friends to the newly crafted Constitution for the United States. Chapter 17 concerns Jefferson's trip through France and Northern Italy and his critical impressions of the numerous things he observed. The final chapter is about the arrival of his daughter, Mary (soon to be Maria) Jefferson, and about her having settled into the convent/school with his older daughter, Martha.

Part V has only two chapters. Chapter 19 is an analysis of another trip that Jefferson took—this one through the Netherlands and the Rhineland as well as Eastern France. Chapter 20 closes the story, as it were, on his failed love affair with Maria Cosway.

The last part, Part VI, examines Jefferson's final year in France, 1789. In chapter 21, I cover a singular dinner party, hosted by Jefferson and at the behest of Lafayette to discuss an amicable constitution for a proposed new government of France. The next chapter is about Jefferson's take on the French Revolution. I begin with his account in his *Autobiography* decades after the event and then contrast that account with those given in certain letters during and shortly after the revolution. In chapter 23, I discuss Jefferson's return to America, his reception at Monticello, and then the reunion of Jefferson and Lafayette at Monticello in 1824. I end with some thoughts on Jefferson's impressions of France during his tenure.

Though it will attract the attention of scholars, this book is not meant to be scholarly. It is instead for general consumption. The chapters, in the main, are short and I hope, enjoyable. This book is not politically heavy. Though I do discuss many political events, like the French Revolution during Jefferson's final year in France and Jefferson's dinner party at the behest of Lafayette in 1789, the aim instead is to give readers a portal into the mind of Jefferson by a look at the fullness and variety of many of his experiences while in France as well as his tendency to study those events from a certain distance as, to use his own term, a "looker-on." Finally, this book is not meant to be exhaustive.

Though I proceed chronologically, I merely cover experiences that I believe give readers the best sense of Jefferson the person while in France, for he was, as I have always argued, first a moralist and only then a politician—*viz.*, his political views were answerable to his moral principles; felt, not reasoned. In that regard, chapters of a certain part covering a particular year might be grasped as vignettes instead of parts of a tightly threaded narrative. Attempts at exhaustion are almost always exhausting and abortive.

A theme loosely threaded throughout the book is that Jefferson, while in France, was ever a "looker-on." By that, I mean that he was always first a Virginian; second, an American; and last, a citizen of the world. In each of those roles, he critically examined events inasmuch as they were germane to improving his native state (e.g., working to have a statue of Washington created and sent to Richmond and the construction and passing of his Bill for Religious Freedom in Virginia), to other states of the newly-formed union (e.g., bringing Piedmont rice to South Carolina and encouraging John Trumbull to be a chronicler of key events in the American Revolution through his paintbrush), and to other nations of the world (e.g., his work with Franklin and Adams concerning treaties with other nations and offering help to Lafayette to frame a suitable constitution for France). Moreover, the notion of "looker-on" implies that Jefferson, while in France—though I suspect that this was often or generally the case wherever he found himself—always kept a critical distance from events so that he could measure and critically examine them from the perspective of a taciturn natural philosopher. Being taciturn, Jefferson was pulled into events only insofar as circumstances required him to do so: e.g., the dinner party at his residence at the behest of Lafayette in 1789 (though even there he kept a critical distance) and his wholesale emotional involvement in 1786 with Maria Cosway. To add to the enjoyment of this book, I include numerous pictures.

There are other books, three of consequence, on Jefferson's years in Paris.

Howard C. Rice published *Thomas Jefferson's Paris* in 1976. As the title suggests, the book is not so much about what Jefferson did while in Paris, but how he likely viewed the city—*viz.*, what the city was like to him while he was there. "I think of it, not as a formal biographical account of the American Minister's mission, but rather as a series of explorations—of 'perlustrations,' to borrow one of his words—in Paris with Jefferson." It is, thus, a tour of the Paris of Jefferson's day, as it were, by "following in his footsteps."[5] Unlike my

[5] Howard C. Rice, Jr., *Thomas Jefferson's Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), vii.

work, Rice's focus is on the city, not the man. It is a highly readable book that delivers on its promise.

In 1995, George Green Shackelford published *Thomas Jefferson's Travels in Europe, 1784–1789*. "This is the first book," vaunted Shackelford, "to make a full, detailed examination of Jefferson's residence and travels in Europe" during his stay of five years. While focusing on "Jefferson the cultural tourist," it is clear that the motivation is political. He wishes to challenge what he takes to be two false, entrenched views: "that Jefferson's interests, outlook, and goals were primarily American and that with regard to cultural matters he adopted a rigid standard of formal, classicist beauty before he went to Europe and never deviated from it."[6] It is a fine book about Jefferson the traveler while in Europe, but Shackelford's thesis, I aim to show in my final chapter, cannot be defended.

Finally, in 1997, William Howard Adams published *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*. While Adams offers no preface to give readers an account of the motivation of the book—and thus there is no explicit thesis—the book is an attempt, and a successful one, to give accounts of Jefferson's years in France; of the climate of Paris during his tenure; of his work as minister plenipotentiary; of the influence of Paris on his aesthetic, literary, and scientific inclinations; of the women whom he befriended while in France; and of the political climate during his final year in Paris of the newly birthed French Revolution.[7] It is the best book on Jefferson's years in Paris—Adams is an excellent scholar and a fine writer—and an entertaining read.

Before ending, I have three notes of procedural significance.

There are several major compilations of Jefferson's writings, several of which I list below.

1. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Being his Autobiography, Correspondence, Reports, Messages, Addresses, and Other Writings, Official and Private: Published by the Order of the Joint Committee of Congress on the Library, from the Original Manuscripts, Deposited in the Department of State,* 9 Vols., ed. Henry Augustine Washington (Washington: Taylor & Maury, 1853–4),
2. *The Works of Thomas Jefferson,* ed. Paul Leicester Ford, 12 Vols. (New York: Putnam, 1902),

[6] George Green Shackelford, *Thomas Jefferson's Travels in Europe, 1784–1789* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 2.
[7] William Howard Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

3. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Definitive Edition,* 20 Vols., ed. Andrew Adgate Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), and
4. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson,* 42 Vols. (to date), ed. Julian Boyd et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950–).

There are also several one-volume compilations of Jefferson's writings—the best of which are Merrill D. Peterson's *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1984) and my *The Scholar's Thomas Jefferson: Vital Writings of a Vital American* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2021). Moreover, many of Jefferson's writings are readily available online—e.g., Hathi Trust Digital Library, The Online Library of Liberty, and Founders Online.

Thus, I have adopted the convention here, as in other publications, of labeling Jefferson's epistolary writings by reference only to his correspondent and the date of the letter, thereby giving readers the opportunity to refer to the edition most readily available to them. Letters from other Founding Fathers to Jefferson I list merely by date, as they can be found readily on the website, Founders Online. Non-epistolary writings, in contrast, I fully reference throughout this book.

Second, I have in the main chosen not to add *sic* to misspellings (e.g., "Kaims" and "vertue"), grammatical errors or personal writing habits (e.g., failure to begin the first word of a sentence with a capital letter and placing a period after a number that occurs in the middle of a sentence), or linguistic conventions that differed in Jefferson's day (e.g., "it's," "can not," and "traveller"). I merely trust that they will be readily recognizable to readers, given this cautionary remark.

Last, I sometimes unapologetically include lengthy quotes from Jefferson, though current historical conventions show a preference for paraphrasing to aid fluidity of presentation. My reasons are two.

Cherry picking, quoting out of context, and deconstruction of Jefferson's words are commonplace in today's Jeffersonian scholarship—especially in revisionist, postmodernist, or Marxist interpretations—and so there are widely divergent interpretations of Jefferson's writings and widely divergent depictions of Jefferson the man. Those things are the case today because there are unfortunately widely divergent approaches to historiography: veridical narrative is often willfully sacrificed for political motives, hence, today's *wokeism*. Inclusion of direct quotes at times instead of paraphrasing is a way to guard against scholarly bedlam.

Moreover, as a linguaphile, Jefferson had a certain felicity of expression with his pen. He was a masterful writer. He had full command of the grammatical conventions of the English of his day and studied ways to improve his concinnity of expression through the perusal of works like Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres* and through critical reading of the prose and poetry of his day and of days prior. He studied many other languages—some, like Latin and Ancient Greek, he mastered—and studied ancient stylists like Homer, Demosthenes, Cicero, Livy, and Tacitus. He even critically examined philology through well-thought-out essays like "Thoughts on English Prosody" (1786) and philological letters (e.g., TJ to John Waldo, 16 Aug. 1813). With that in mind, I believe that, to some extent, readers should be exposed to his masterfulness of pen.

With that noted, readers should pardon my disregard for certain scholarly conventions and my strict adherence to others in my own prose.

Concerning my disregard for certain scholarly conventions, I frequently use one-sentence paragraphs to underscore a point (prior paragraph); vary the length and structure of sentences for readability and effect; sometimes playfully embed one sentence within another through the use of m-dashes (the penultimate paragraph, above); tend to keep my paragraphs of a digestible length; try to avoid metaphors, but when I do use them, strictly avoid mixing them; and weave the present tense into sentences in historical prose (though here I have purged my prose of the present tense at the behest of a reviewer).

Concerning my regard for other scholarly conventions and like most writers in Jefferson's time, I always try to place participial phrases where they belong (before or after what they modify), strictly aim to never split infinitives (oops!), and tend not to begin sentences with adverbs (they belong next to verbs), though I infrequently violate that rule if such a violation proves effective.

I, like Jefferson, am also a linguaphile. I have studied several (seven) languages, have perused the great ancient stylists of Greek and Latin (in Greek and Latin as well as in translation), and have long and running interests in philology, philosophy of language, logic, and English composition (formal and creative), all of which I continue to study today. Thus, I hope that readers will enjoy throughout not only Jefferson's concinnity of expression, but also my attempt at concinnity of expression, and forgive me if they find at times inconsistencies and inconcinnity.

I hope also that readers will pardon my largest peccancy, sesquipedality, which at the urging of the two fine reviewers of this book, to whom my final draft owes much, I have tried to eschew as much as my DNA will allow.

I would like to thank the excellent editorial team at Vernon Press for their fine work in readying this book for completion.

Introduction

Thomas Jefferson on June 1, 1779, was elected as the second governor of Virginia—Patrick Henry has served three one-year terms before him—after having beaten out his close friend John Page on the second ballot.[1] Jefferson was ambivalent about the appointment. "In a virtuous government, and more especially in times like these," said Jefferson to Richard Henry Lee (17 June, 1779), "public offices are, what they should be, burthens to those appointed to them, which it would be wrong to decline, though foreseen to bring with them intense labour, and great private loss." The times were parlous. America was in the midst of their Revolutionary War with Britain. Jefferson, nonetheless, accepted the office and would be governor for two one-year terms.

At 36 years of age, at the time of his appointment as governor, Jefferson's political experience, both parochially and catholically, was considerable. In Virginia, Jefferson had been a member of Virginia's House of Burgesses from May 1769 till June 1775. There was also his considerable work on revisal of the Virginian laws and his draft of a constitution for Virginia. In 1775, Jefferson became a Virginian delegate to the Continental Congress and worked on numerous committees, several of which he headed. Jefferson's Summary View of the Rights of British America in 1774 had earned him a large reputation as a patriot and revolutionist, and paved the way for the appointment to the Congress.

Yet despite large political experience for a young man, Jefferson neither had military experience nor was of stouthearted physical disposition. That would limit his role as wartime governor. He would instead garner what intelligence he could about the movement of British troops, do what he could to encourage citizens to enlist in the militia, and try to gather supplies for them to defend Virginia. He would be a planner or strategist, not a military general.

Of those Virginians who volunteered to defend their colony, many were unfit for combat, and those soldiers who were fit for combat could nowise match the soldierly discipline of the British soldiers. The militia had no formal training and disease too was crippling.[2]

For those reasons and these others, desertion was a constant problem. First, there was a lack of military resources. Volunteers often had to supply their

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[1] For more, see Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time,* Vol. 1, *Jefferson the Virginian* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1948), 302.

[2] Michael Kranish, *Flight from Monticello: Thomas Jefferson at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 236.

own arms. Second, promised pay usually came in the form of worthless currency and even that was often not forthcoming. Third, volunteers who owned farms or plantations or who were subsistence farmers gambled with fiscal ruination. Fourth, the militia worried about their family and property in the event that the British should raid Virginia.[3]

Thus, from the beginning of the Revolutionary War, there was a faction in Virginia as well as in other new-formed states. Almost everyone groused. Members of Washington's Continental Army groused that those who refused to join were unpatriotic. The wealthy groused that they were overburdened through excessive taxation for the war. The impecunious groused that they were expected to bear the brunt of the fighting, though they could not vote, and that they would be leaving their livelihood to fight for the promise of remuneration of questionable worth. Married men groused that they, having left their homes, would be exposing their families to the ravages of the British forces. The Virginian Assembly groused that having had Virginians join the fighting of the Continental Army to the north of Virginia, put the state in an especially vulnerable position in the event of a British invasion.

The British came to Virginia on May 8, 1779—just prior to Jefferson's governorship. Under the leadership of Admiral George Collier, twenty-eight ships entered Chesapeake Bay and anchored at Portsmouth, whose naval yard they destroyed. The move was diversionary. The plan was to strike quickly and hard, do much damage, strike fear into non-Loyalists, and then rapidly head back to New York and surprise Washington. They assailed Fort Nelson, which protected Portsmouth, took over the shipyards of Portsmouth and Gosport, and razed Suffolk, which had become a major supply center.[4] After much devastation, Collier's ships were loaded with as many Loyalists and supplies as they could carry and left for New York on May 24.

It was in that state of chaos that Thomas Jefferson was elected as governor of Virginia. His immediate concern was to protect the borders of Virginia. Virginia, considering claimed lands, at the time comprised what was now present-day Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and part of Minnesota (Figure 1-1)—it had not yet ceded lands to the United States (1784)—and protecting its borders was a task that greatly exceeded the governor's resources. The settlements to the west and north of the Ohio River were vast and vulnerable. From the south, there was the persistent threat from Natives, encouraged by the British to fight the Colonists. The eastern coast was

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[3] Michael Kranish, *Flight from Monticello,* 126–30.

[4] John E. Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775–1783* (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2007), 210.

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