

THOMAS JEFFERSON (1743-1826): LIBERTARIAN WORDSMITH

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Introduction

A letter from you calls up recollections very dear to my mind. It carries me back to the times when, beset with difficulties and dangers, we were fellow-laborers in the same cause, struggling for what is most valuable to man, his right of self-government.¹

These words were written 200 years ago by Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to John Adams dated 21st January 1812.

Thomas Jefferson (like John Adams) was one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. His face is one of the four that look out from Mount Rushmore, carved out of granite rock on that famous South Dakota Memorial, reminding all Americans that he was a significant figure in their history. He was America's third President and the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. He was a lawyer and a Virginia planter, as well as a politician and statesman.

He was also a man of many talents as R.B. Bernstein points out:

He was a talented architect, a skilled violinist, a venturesome student of religion, a devoted amateur scientist and sponsor of scientific research, a connoisseur of food and wine, an enthusiastic tinkerer who loved to adapt and improve upon new inventions, and perhaps the finest writer of his age.²

The inscription on his grave, decided upon by Jefferson himself in the last year of his life, lists the achievements by which he most wanted to be remembered:

*Here was buried Thomas Jefferson
April 2, 1743 O.S. – July 4, 1826
Author of the Declaration of Independence
And of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom
And father of the University of Virginia³*

During his lifetime Jefferson held a number of positions of high office: he became the Governor of Virginia, the first US Secretary of State under George Washington, the Vice President of the United States under John Adams, and then the President for two consecutive terms of office from 1801 to 1809, but none of these accomplishments are mentioned on his tombstone at the family cemetery at Monticello.

What is also not mentioned is that when Thomas Jefferson was President he was responsible for doubling the size of the United States. He did this by arranging the

purchase of the whole of the Louisiana Territory from France at the bargain price of fifteen million dollars (that is less than 4 cents per acre).

It is clear that the achievements of which he was most proud had nothing to do with status or acquisition; they were all about his contributions to the furtherance of his treasured ideals: freedom and enlightenment.

In this essay I look at the life and work, and in particular the words of Thomas Jefferson, and conclude by suggesting that 'the Sage of Monticello' (as he was known), despite being a slaveholder, is worthy of the epithet 'Libertarian Wordsmith,' because of the libertarian principles he expressed and the mastery of words he demonstrated.

Jefferson the man

Jefferson has been described as 'Tall, lean, and freckled, with reddish hair and hazel eyes.'⁴

A contemporary of his, William Maclay, described Jefferson's demeanour:

He sits in a lounging manner, on one hip commonly, and with one of his shoulders elevated much above the other... (H)is whole figure has a loose, shacking air.⁵

However when he stood up his posture was erect, as Isaac his ex-slave pointed out: "Mr Jefferson was a tall, straight-bodied man as ever you see," he recalled. "Nary a man in this town walked so straight."⁶ Isaac also remembered Jefferson's fondness for singing, "hardly see him anywhar outdoors, but that he was a-singin'.⁷"

Another contemporary, Senator Daniel Webster, described the eighty-one year old Jefferson as follows: "His general appearance indicates an extraordinary degree of health, vivacity and spirit."⁸

These few contemporary descriptions of his physical appearance and general demeanour, help to provide an introduction to Thomas Jefferson the man.

Ancestry

Jefferson's mother, Jane, was born into the wealthy Randolph family, who were part of Virginia's planter elite and proudly claimed descent from British nobility. His father, Peter Jefferson, was a self-made man, who was a talented surveyor and mapmaker as well as a farmer, to-

tacco planter and slaveholder. He was descended from Welsh immigrants.

It is interesting to note that Thomas Jefferson's great-great grandfather, on his mother's side of the family, was William Lilburne, first cousin of the Leveller leader and English freedom fighter 'Free-born John' Lilburne. John had fought on the side of Parliament in the English Civil War, as did his brothers Robert and Harry. Robert was a Roundhead and regicide who, along with Oliver Cromwell and others, signed Charles I's death warrant. Henry was a turncoat, who joined the Parliamentary Army but later switched sides to become a Royalist.

Fred Donnelly, referring to Thomas Jefferson's ancestral link to the Lilburne bothers; Robert, John and Henry, noted:

...he was a fifth generation descendant of their uncle, one George Lilburne (1586-1676) a substantial businessman of Sunderland who was briefly John Lilburne's financial partner in a London brewery.⁹

The reason why this connection is so interesting is that John Lilburne and Thomas Jefferson shared much in common politically, as Donnelly points out:

The fundamental issues of political liberty raised by the English Leveller movement are echoed in the political discourse of late eighteenth century America. Moreover, there was a shared belief in 'natural law,' the fundamental principles on which society was thought to be based... This in turn connected with the notion of an 'ancient constitution' that predated the Norman Conquest and contained a heritage of basic freedoms, liberties and property rights. The Levellers, Thomas Jefferson and many others shared a litigious argumentative framework in which "ancient constitutionalism was the instrument that lawyers, constitutionalists, and parliamentarians used over several centuries to neutralise arbitrary power by placing a rein on discretionary decision making".¹⁰

When Jefferson travelled to England in 1786, he met with John Adams. Both men were very aware of the similarities between the causes of the English Civil War and the American War of Independence, (i.e. taxation without representation) and they made a point of visiting two sites of the English Civil War. At the time, John Adams remarked:

Edgehill and Worcester were curious and interesting to us, as scenes where freemen had fought for their rights. The people in the neighbourhood appeared so ignorant and careless at Worcester, that I was provoked and asked, 'And do Englishmen so soon forget the ground where liberty was fought for? Tell your neighbors and your children that this is holy

ground; much holier than that on which your churches stand. All England should come in pilgrimage to this hill once a year.' This animated them, and they seemed much pleased with it. Perhaps their awkwardness before might arise from their uncertainty of our sentiments concerning the civil wars.¹¹

Edgehill is the site of the first major battle of the first English Civil War; Worcester is where the last battle of the third and final English Civil War took place, and so they are significant places, representing between them the beginning and the end of the English Civil War(s).

It is worth noting here that the main difference between the Levellers and the American Patriots is that the Levellers failed to establish a new constitution based on their document, the *Agreement of the People*, whereas the Americans did succeed in establishing a new constitution, based on the ideals outlined in their *Declaration of Independence*. As Nicholas Elliott pointed out:

Americans founded a republic with a government limited by constitution; they enacted what the levellers had proposed.¹²

Early life

Thomas Jefferson was born at Shadwell, in Albemarle County, Virginia in April 1743. He was the third child in a large family. Thomas had two older sisters, Jane and Mary, and four younger sisters, Elizabeth, Martha, Lucy and Anna. He also had a brother, Randolph, twelve years his junior.

Jane, with whom he shared a love of music, became his favourite sister, but tragically she died at the age of 25.

Thomas's father, Peter Jefferson, died in 1757 at just forty-nine years old. One of Peter Jefferson's greatest achievements was to produce the first accurate map of Virginia, which Thomas proudly included in his book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published thirty years later in 1787. Thomas inherited several thousand acres of landed estate and dozens of slaves as well as livestock from his father.

Thomas Jefferson's formal education had been focussed on the study of Latin and Greek, and he had been guided and nurtured in these and other subjects at a local private school run by the Reverend William Douglas. After his father's death, Jefferson was sent to lodge and learn with a new tutor the Reverend James Maury, who Jefferson described as a "correct classical scholar." In March 1760, shortly before his seventeenth birthday, Jefferson enrolled at the College of William and Mary, in Williamsburg (Virginia's colonial capital), where he attended until 1762, and where today on campus stands a full-length statue of him as a memorial.

He went on to study law in Williamsburg for five years under George Wythe (pronounced *with*) before being admitted to the Virginia bar in 1767. As Jefferson records in his autobiography:

Mr Wythe continued to be my faithful and beloved mentor in youth, and my most affectionate friend through life. In 1767, he led me into the practice of law at the bar of the General court, at which I continued until the Revolution shut up the courts of justice.¹³

The building of Jefferson's mountaintop home, Monticello, began in 1768. As a boy, Jefferson had dreamed of having a mansion built on this ideal site in full view of Shadwell. Inspired by the Italian architect Andrea Palladio, Jefferson planned a neoclassical design for his property; he then oversaw its construction and spent many years altering and perfecting it, long after he had moved in.

Virginia House of Burgesses, 1769-1775

Jefferson's political career began when he was elected as burgess by the voters of Albemarle County and he joined the other members of the legislative Assembly at the Virginia House of Burgesses in May 1769. Jefferson was now twenty-six years old. This is when his opposition to the condition of slavery first became apparent:

I made one effort in that body for the permission of the emancipation of slaves, which was rejected: and indeed, during the regal government, nothing liberal could expect success.¹⁴

Marriage and inheritance

On 1st January 1772, Thomas Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton, a 23-year old widow. They moved into the partially completed mansion house, Monticello, and nine months later their first child was born.

On 23rd May 1773 Martha's father, John Wayles, died leaving Jefferson and his new wife 135 slaves and thousands of acres of land from the Wayles estate. Among the slaves were eleven members of the Hemings family. Jefferson also inherited Wayles's debts which were considerable.

From the Boston Tea Party to the First Continental Congress

It all began with the *Stamp Act* of 1765, a new tax imposed on colonists without their consent, causing tension between the thirteen colonies of British America and Great Britain. This was followed a few years later by the unpopular *Tea Act*.

The *Tea Act* passed by the British government in 1773, reduced the tax on imported British tea to the advantage of British merchants. This angered American colonists so

much that they boycotted the tea and when British ships entered Boston harbour, patriots dressed as Indians boarded the ships and dumped the cargo of East India Company tea overboard. This famous event has become known to history as the Boston Tea Party.

In response to the Boston Tea Party, the parliament of Great Britain passed the *Boston Port Act* of 1774, banning the city's trade by blockading the port of Boston. As a protest, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and other members of Virginia House of Burgesses decided to call for a day fasting in Virginia in sympathy with their sister colony, Massachusetts. To assist them with the wording of their proclamation they referred to John Rushworth's Historical Collections, a multi-volume reference work that included state papers dating back to the English Civil War.

Jefferson recalls what happened:

With the help, therefore, of Rushworth, whom we rummaged over the revolutionary precedents and forms of the Puritans of that day, preserved by him, we cooked up a resolution, somewhat modernizing their phrases...to implore Heaven to avert us from the evils of civil war, to inspire us with firmness in support of our rights, and to turn the hearts of the King and Parliament to moderation and justice.¹⁵

This is how the proclamation was finally worded:

This House being deeply impressed with Apprehension of the great Dangers to be derived to British America, from the hostile Invasion of the City of Boston, in our sister colony of Massachusetts Bay, whose Commerce and Harbour are on the 1st Day of June next to be stopped by an armed Force, deem it highly necessary that the said first Day of June be set apart by the Members of this House as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer, devoutly to implore the divine Interposition for averting the heavy Calamity, which threatens Destruction to our civil Rights, and the Evils of civil War; to give us one Heart and one Mind firmly to oppose, by all just and proper Means, every Injury to American Rights, and that the Minds of his Majesty and his Parliament may be inspired from above with Wisdom, Moderation, and Justice, to remove from the loyal People of America all Cause of Danger from a continued Pursuit of Measures pregnant with their Ruin.¹⁶

Lord Dunmore, Governor of Virginia, on receiving a copy of this proclamation immediately called a meeting of the burgesses at the council chamber and made the following statement:

I have in my hand a Paper," he told them," published by order of your House, conceived in such Terms as reflect highly upon his Majesty and the Parliament of Great Britain; which makes it nec-

*essary for me to dissolve you, and you are dissolved accordingly.*¹⁷

Undeterred, the burgesses called their own meeting in the Apollo room at the Raleigh Tavern to discuss their next move. The committee of correspondence agreed to contact the committees of the other colonies, with the proposal that they each appoint delegates, who would meet annually at a general Congress, in order to create a united colonial front; an attack on one colony would then be treated as an attack on all colonies.

It was also agreed that the day of fasting on 1st June should go ahead as planned and when that day came it was a solemn occasion, with fasting observed, sermons delivered and prayer meetings taking place throughout the state of Virginia.

As Kevin J. Hayes noted:

*The event profoundly affected Jefferson and reinforced his devotion to the cause of liberty. The behaviour of his fellow Virginians this day bolstered his decision to pen the harshest denunciation of the crown that he or, for that matter, any colonist had yet written, a work that appeared in pamphlet form as A Summary View of the Rights of British America.*¹⁸

In this pamphlet, Jefferson expresses his view that:

*America was conquered, and her settlement made, and firmly established, at the expense of individuals, and not of the British public. Their own blood was spilt in acquiring lands for their settlements, their own fortunes expended in making that settlement effectual; for themselves they fought, for themselves they conquered, and for themselves alone they have a right to hold. Not a shilling was ever issued from the public treasures of his Majesty, or his ancestors, for their assistance, till, of very late times, after the colonies had become established on a firm and permanent footing.*¹⁹

The first meeting of the Continental Congress was convened on 5th September, 1774, at Carpenter's Hall, Philadelphia. Virginia delegates brought copies of Jefferson's *Summary View* with them.

At this time colonists regarded themselves as Englishmen and therefore of deserving all the rights of 'free-born Englishmen'. However, there were differences of opinion: some delegates sought compromise with the British Government, whereas others demanded complete independence.

An agreement was reached to implement a total boycott of British goods, to be followed up by a meeting in May 1775 to review the situation. Before that date came, the first shots of the revolutionary war were fired.

Jefferson's role in the American War of Independence

The battles of Lexington and Concord, in April 1775, in which local American militia – known as Minutemen – exchanged fire with the British Redcoats, were the events that sparked the American War of Independence, otherwise known as the American Revolutionary War. It could also be called a civil war because many colonists remained loyal to the crown, fighting on the same side as British troops against the American rebels.

When the second Continental Congress met in May 1775, its members appointed George Washington as Commander-in-Chief of the new army.

But what was Jefferson's role in this war?

Jefferson was a gentleman and a scholar but no warrior; unlike George Washington he neither commanded troops in the American War of Independence nor fired a single shot against the enemy. When British troops approached Monticello in 1781, Jefferson escaped on horseback. His political enemies accused him of cowardice, although he was exonerated from any wrongdoing by the Virginia Assembly.

Jefferson was also no orator. Unlike Patrick Henry, he did not make stirring speeches. He did not attend the First Continental Congress in 1774. He was part of a delegation from Virginia to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia from 1775 to 1776, but he hardly said a word. As John Adams recalled, "during the whole Time I sat with him in Congress, I never heard him utter three sentences together."²⁰

His strength was in the written word. His revolutionary writings were inspirational to the cause. It all began with *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, a pamphlet he penned in 1774, which was subsequently printed and circulated throughout the colonies, marking Jefferson as a revolutionary radical even before his first attendance at Congress. He followed this by composing a document entitled *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms*, an address he drafted at the request of Congress.

The American Revolutionary War formally ended with the signing of the *Treaty Of Paris* in 1783, but this was long after the Americans had made their Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration of Independence

Jefferson's mother, Jane Randolph Jefferson, died in the spring of 1776 at the age of fifty-six. Perhaps this was the reason that Jefferson suffered from a severe migraine that lasted several weeks at this time, a condition he was afflicted by periodically throughout his life. It was later in that same year, Jefferson was to compose that most important of documents: the *United States Declaration of Independence*.

When the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in 1776 they appointed a Committee of Five – John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston and Roger Sherman – to draft a document declaring independence from Great Britain. The Committee assigned Thomas Jefferson the task of writing the first draft.

John Adams referred to Jefferson's 'happy talent for composition and singular felicity of expression'²¹ making him the obvious choice to prepare the draft of the *Declaration of Independence*.

The beginning of the second paragraph of the preamble to the *Declaration* in its finalised form reads as follows:

*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, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter and abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organising its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness...*²²

This is of course the most quoted and most widely known part of the declaration. Much of the rest of the declaration reads as a list of grievances against George III, the king of Great Britain at the time. Jefferson's criticism of the king's involvement in the slave trade, included in Jefferson's original draft but later struck out by Congress, reads as follows:

*He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation hither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of INFIDEL powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the LIBERTIES of one people, with crimes which urges them to commit against the LIVES of another.*²³

This clearly shows Jefferson's opposition to the slave trade and to whom he attributed blame for imposing slav-

ery upon America. Jefferson's original version of the Declaration and details of the changes made to it are recorded in his autobiography.

The ideals expressed in the *Declaration* were not totally original but then Jefferson did not make that claim:

*Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.*²⁴

The declaration was adopted in its final form by Congress on or around 4th July, the date which continues to be celebrated in America as Independence Day.

When the Declaration was signed it was a very solemn occasion because the signers knew that they were putting their lives on the line; if the American Revolution failed they would all be hanged for treason.

The House of Delegates in the General Assembly of Virginia, 1776-1779

Jefferson served in the House of Delegates in the General Assembly of Virginia from 1776 to 1779. Now that the United States had declared their independence from Britain, individual states were in a position to change their laws. Jefferson was determined to take this opportunity to introduce reforms to Virginia law and eradicate the last remnants of feudalism. He succeeded in the abolition of entail (that restriction of the inheritance of estates to designated heirs) and proposed also the abolition of primogeniture (the aristocratic tradition that the eldest son always succeeds to the ancestral estate to the exclusion of all others) a proposal which did eventually become law in Virginia in 1785.

Jefferson also wanted to separate the State Of Virginia from the established Church, thus creating what he called 'a wall of separation' between Church and State, and he believed this could be achieved by introducing a law of religious toleration. In 1777, he drafted a religious liberty bill for this purpose, which he proposed in 1779. This did eventually pass into law as the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* in 1786.

Jefferson strongly supported a bill banning the importation of slaves into Virginia and this was passed into law by the General Assembly in 1778.

Governor of Virginia, 1779-1781

Jefferson was appointed Governor of Virginia on 1st June, 1779, during the American War of Independence and during his tenure he transferred the capital from Williamsburg to Richmond, where it still is today; however when it was invaded by the British he was criticised for not providing adequate defence.

Notes on the State of Virginia

Jefferson began compiling his *Notes on the State of Virginia* in 1781, when he was staying at Poplar Forest with his family, after his retreat from Monticello to escape invading British troops. Poplar Forest, a property Jefferson had inherited from his father-in-law, John Wayles, was about seventy miles or so from Monticello, in county Bedford. A riding accident, in which Jefferson broke his arm, forced him to take time out to recuperate, thus allowing him the opportunity to work on this project. His book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, was published in London in 1787 and in the preface he noted:

The following *Notes* were written in Virginia in the year 1781, and somewhat corrected and enlarged in the winter of 1782, in answer to *Queries proposed to the Author, by a Foreigner of Distinction, then residing among us*.²⁵

The ‘Foreigner of Distinction’ was Francois Marbois, Secretary of the French Legation at Philadelphia, who had submitted questionnaires to delegates from all thirteen states. Jefferson was the ideal person to answer these queries on Virginia, as he already had much of the information to hand.

The *Notes* included details of the state boundaries, the state constitution and existing colonial charters. Rivers, mountains and waterfalls were listed and natural features described. Trees and plants were recorded in all their varieties and centres of human population such as cities, towns and villages were all noted.

Within its pages, Jefferson took the opportunity to express his criticism of slavery. Commenting on these passages John Adams said, “are worth Diamonds. They will have more effect than Volumes written by mere Philosophers.”²⁶

The death of his wife

Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson’s wife, died on 6th September 1782, aged thirty-four. A month earlier, she had given birth to Lucy, their sixth child, and then fallen ill. Jefferson stayed with his wife throughout her illness and was badly affected by her death as Bernstein describes:

For weeks thereafter he was delirious. After he left his sickbed, he roamed the grounds of Monticello, sometimes on horseback but more often on foot, with his nine-year old daughter Martha as his only companion. In these rambles, his daughter recalled, he often gave way to his grief. He burned all of his wife’s letters and papers – except one. On her deathbed, Martha had begun to copy a quotation about the death of a loved one from their favourite novel, Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, but she was too weak to complete it, and he finished it for her. Now he kept that lone scrap of Martha’s

*writing, folded around a lock of her hair, locked in a secret compartment of his desk.*²⁷

Money and the Ordinance of 1784

In 1784, at the Federal Congress in Philadelphia, Jefferson proposed the introduction of a new decimal currency for the United States based on the Spanish dollar, to replace the existing British pounds, shillings and pence; but this new American coinage system did not come into use until 1792.

Jefferson wrote the Ordinance of 1784 setting out the principles on which any newly created states to the West would be admitted to the Union of existing states. Jefferson’s proposal that slavery should be banned from all new states by 1800 was defeated by one vote. Jefferson later remarked:

*...the fate of millions unborn [was] hanging on the tongue of one man, and Heaven was silent in that awful moment!*²⁸

Jefferson in Paris, 1784-1789

Jefferson was sent to Paris in 1784 as a diplomat to negotiate commercial treaties with European nations on behalf of the United States. He joined his friends John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, who were already there, to carry out this important task for their fledgling nation.

When Benjamin Franklin retired in 1785, Jefferson succeeded him as American minister to France. Shortly afterwards John Adams left Paris to take up his appointment as American Minister to Great Britain.

While living in Paris, Jefferson learned to appreciate French culture and in particular Gallic architecture, music and fine wine. He liked beautiful things. He also liked beautiful women. In 1786, while still in Paris, he had a flirtatious dalliance with a married woman, Maria Cosway, to whom he famously wrote his ‘Head and Heart’ letter, but the relationship did not last and she eventually ran off with an Italian opera singer, Luigi Marchesi, in 1790, forsaking not only her husband but also her child.

Jefferson was in Paris in 1789 at the time of the storming of the Bastille and actually witnessed many of the events that occurred at the beginning of the French Revolution.

Jefferson was acquainted with several leading members of the French Revolution, with whom he corresponded and dined, including his good friend, the Marquis de Lafayette. His sympathy for the French Revolution remained strong during this period, despite the violence, because he saw it as a continuation of a process that had begun in America; France in his view was following the example set by America.

Shay's Rebellion

Daniel Shay led a rebellion in Massachusetts against excessive taxation and this popular but bloody uprising against the state authorities became known as Shay's rebellion. Jefferson, who was in Paris at the time, commented on the rebellion in a letter dated 13th November 1787 to John Adam's son-in-law, William Stephens Smith:

God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion. The people cannot be all, & always, well informed. The part which is wrong will be discontented in proportion to the importance of the facts they misconceive. If they remain quiet under such misconceptions it is a lethargy; the forerunner of death to the public liberty. We have had 13 states independent 11 years. There has been one rebellion. That comes to one rebellion in a century & a half for each state. What country before ever existed a century & half without rebellion? & what country can preserve it's liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms. The remedy is to set them right as to facts, pardon and pacify them. What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants. It is it's natural manure.²⁹

Secretary of State, 1789-1794

Jefferson returned to America from France in the autumn of 1789, and on his return he received a letter from George Washington, informing him that he had been nominated and confirmed as Secretary of State by Congress and urging him to accept the appointment. Although reluctant at first, Jefferson took up the post in March 1790, in the nation's temporary capital, the city of New York.

During Jefferson's absence from America, the United States Constitution had been drafted by James Madison, approved by the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia and ratified by individual states. Jefferson involvement had been to supply James Madison with many books from France to assist him in the framing of the Constitution and, after receiving a copy of the completed document in November 1787, to suggest, in a letter to Madison, that a *Bill of Rights* was needed:

Let me add that a bill of rights is what people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, & what no just government should refuse, or rest on inferences.³⁰

George Washington had been elected as the first president of the United States. Now Jefferson had become a member of George Washington's cabinet.

The two burning political issues of the day, 'Assumption' and 'Residence' had reached stalemate. 'Assumption' was

the proposal that the federal government should assume all the states' debts, including war debts, and this idea, which was championed by Alexander Hamilton, received much opposition in Congress. The 'Residence' issue was about the location of the permanent capital of the United States and this again was a contentious issue. Jefferson's idea was to have a dinner party and invite Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, the two adversaries and see if the matters could be resolved in a congenial setting. This is Jefferson's account of what happened:

They came. I opened the subject to them, acknowledged that my situation had not permitted me to understand it sufficiently but encouraged them to consider the thing together. They did so. It ended in Mr. Madison's acquiescence in a proposition that the question [i.e. assumption of state debts] should be again brought before the house by way of amendment from the Senate, that he would not vote for it, nor entirely withdraw his opposition, yet he would not be strenuous, but leave it to its fate. It was observed, I forget by which of them, that as the pill would be a bitter one to the Southern states, something should be done to soothe them; and the removal of the seat of government to the Potomac was a just measure, and would probably be a popular one with them, and would be a proper one to follow the assumption.³¹

The dinner party had taken place in late June 1790 and a bargain had been struck. The *Residence Bill* was passed by the House on 9th July and the *Assumption Bill* was passed on 26th July. The permanent capital would be built on the Potomac River, where it is today known as Washington DC, and this transfer would take place after a ten-year residence at Philadelphia. Alexander Hamilton had got a key part of fiscal policy approved and Jefferson had facilitated the compromise.

Jefferson finally resigned from his post in December 1793, but not before the evolution of two political factions, one of which was led by Jefferson himself.

Republicans versus Federalists

In the early years of post revolutionary American politics, in the early 1790s, two parties emerged with different views on how the country should be run: they were known as the Republicans and the Federalists. Jefferson became the leading spokesperson for the Republicans and his views have been summarized as follows:

Only a republic could preserve liberty, Jefferson insisted, and only virtue among the people could preserve a republic. And agriculture, he contended was the true basis of republican virtue. As he wrote in Notes on the State of Virginia, "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." To preserve liberty, Jefferson argued

*government had to be as close to the people as possible. To him, that meant decentralised government, giving power over domestic issues to the states, the level of government closest to the people, and not to a distant federal government.*³²

Alexander Hamilton, the most prominent Federalist, took a completely different view:

*In contrast, Hamilton saw himself as free from local interests and prejudices, a true advocate of the national interest. Rejecting the claim that he was biased against agriculture, he argued for a balanced economy resting on agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing, with each supporting the other two. Doubting the state government's ability to respond to national problems, he maintained that the only a strong general government could defend American interests effectively. Finally he did not share Jefferson's faith in the people's wisdom, nor did he believe that allying the rich with the government would create a corrupt aristocracy and destroy liberty.*³³

The Federalists' vision included a central bank, direct federal taxes, import tariffs and a standing army. The Republicans (or Democratic-Republicans as they were alternatively known) were much more libertarian, wanting instead virtually no government at all.

Vice President, 1796-1800

In 1796, Jefferson was elected to the Vice Presidency to serve the Administration of the second US President, John Adams. His main role was to preside over the Senate and he decided that what he needed was a Senate procedures manual; so he proceeded to write one. This was later published in 1800 under the title, *A Manual of Parliamentary Practice* and has been a useful reference for members of the US Congress ever since.

In 1797 Jefferson was chosen as President of the American Philosophical Society, an organisation founded by Benjamin Franklin, and whose basic purpose, according to one of its councillors, Charles Thompson was, "the improvement of useful knowledge more particularly what relates to this new world. It comprehends the whole circle of arts, science and discoveries especially in the natural world."³⁴

The *Alien and Seditions Acts* were introduced by John Adams' administration in order to strengthen national security at a time when war with France was a real possibility. The *Alien Act* made provision for foreigners, deemed dangerous by the authorities, to be expelled from the country and the *Sedition Act* ensured that open criticism of the government, either in speech or print, was punishable by the law. Jefferson was opposed to both the *Alien and Seditions Acts*, as he regarded them as attacks on individual liberty.

On 4th July 1798, just after the enactment of the *Sedition Act*, he wrote to the Virginia pamphleteer and planter John Taylor of Carolina:

*A little patience, and we shall see the reign of witches pass over, their spells dissolve, and the people, recovering their true sight, restore their government to it's true principles. It is true that in the mean time we are suffering deeply in spirit, and incurring the horrors of a war & long oppressions of enormous public debt... If the game runs sometimes against us at home we must have patience till luck turns & then we shall have an opportunity of winning back the principles we have lost, for this is a game where principles are the stake.*³⁵

Jefferson found an ally in James Madison, who also opposed the *Alien and Seditions Acts*. Bernstein describes how their concerns prompted Jefferson to draft the *Kentucky Resolutions* and Madison, the *Virginia Resolutions*:

*Angered by what they saw as a Federalist bid to establish tyranny, Jefferson and Madison tried to spur the states to resist the Alien and Seditions Acts. Jefferson drafted two sets of resolutions that Kentucky's legislature adopted in 1798 and 1799. His Kentucky Resolutions declared that a state could strike down, or nullify, unconstitutional federal laws, preventing them from having effect within its own borders. Jefferson's arguments carried him dangerously close to embracing secession – the idea that a state could leave the Union. Meanwhile, Madison penned resolutions that the Virginia legislature adopted in 1798. Stopping short of nullification, the Virginia Resolutions argued that a state could thrust itself between its own citizens and federal authority and ask the other states to consider whether the federal government was overstepping its legitimate powers – a doctrine known as interposition.*³⁶

President Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was elected President of the United States in 1800 and took office in 1801. A few months before the election, in a letter to Benjamin Rush, Jefferson made the following statement:

*I have sworn upon the altar of god eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.*³⁷

Jefferson's first term is remembered for the positive actions he took; he cut government expenditure, reduced national debt, abolished an unpopular tax on whiskey and doubled foreign trade. He was responsible for the Louisiana Purchase and the commissioning of the Lewis and Clark expedition. He also took on the Barbary pirates.

The Barbary Pirates

The Muslim states of North Africa that included Algiers, Morocco, Tripoli and Tunis, were known collectively as the Barbary powers, and these had been engaged in piracy, kidnapping and slavery since the 16th century. They often took European captives to extract ransoms from European powers. Jefferson was well aware of this.

When Jefferson was the United States minister to Paris and John Adams the equivalent minister to London, they had met the ambassador of Tripoli and asked by what right were they were being expected to pay tariffs for the return of American hostages. In a letter to Jay and to Congress on 28th March 1786 Jefferson recorded the answer they were given:

*The Ambassador answered us that it was founded on the Laws of the Prophet, that it was written in their Koran, that all nations who should not have answered their authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon them wherever they could be found, and to make slaves of all they could take as prisoners.*³⁸

Jefferson found this explanation totally unacceptable and yet despite his objections the United States continued to pay 'tributes' to the Barbary powers.

This came to an end when Jefferson became President because he refused to pay protection money against piracy to the Pasha of Tripoli, who consequently declared war against the United States. Jefferson sent a fleet of naval vessels to the Mediterranean to fight the Barbary pirates. Because of this action, Tunis and Algiers were forced to abandon their alliance with Tripoli. However in 1803, the US frigate *Philadelphia* was captured and its captain and crew taken hostage. Despite this setback, a new American expedition forced Morocco to make peace with America and Tripoli was subjected to five separate naval bombardments. In 1804, a daring raid led by Captain Stephen Decatur was successful in rescuing the captain and crew of the *Philadelphia* from imprisonment. The same man, a few months earlier, had sailed into Tripoli harbour and torched the captured *Philadelphia* to prevent it from being used by the enemy. Jefferson's policy of standing up to the pirates paid off and protection for American shipping was maintained until finally in 1815 the Barbary States gave up their demands for tribute.

Louisiana Purchase

The Louisiana Purchase came about because Napoleon wanted money to fund his war with Britain and the Americans wanted more land. Jefferson's successful deal doubled the size of the United States and obtained some of the most fertile land in the world at a rock bottom price. Despite being criticised as unconstitutional, this purchase fitted with Jefferson's vision of an expanding 'Empire of Liberty'.

Lewis and Clark Expedition

In 1804 Jefferson commissioned his former private secretary Captain Meriwether Lewis (who then invited William Clark to join him) to embark on a three year expedition with a team of 40 or more others, to travel west as far as the Pacific Ocean, a journey covering some 8000 miles, in order to create maps and follow the waterways to seek a Northwest Passage (which did not in fact exist); gather as much scientific data (and specimens) as possible of plant and animal life; record the availability of natural resources; and establish trade relations with the American Indians in the newly acquired territory and beyond.

The Lewis and Clark expedition, as it became known, was declared a triumph when it returned in 1806 with a multitude of botanical and zoological specimens, extensive maps and detailed reports.

Second term

The attack and capture of American ships by both Britain and France, each of which were trying to disrupt the trade of the other, and Britain's practice of impressing American sailors into the British navy, triggered a response from the United States against these warring European nations. In 1807, during the President's second term in office, the *Embargo Act* was enacted by Congress; this prevented American vessels from trading with the French, the British or any other European power. The measure was a disaster; it did more harm to American trade than it ever did to the commercial interests of either France or Britain. Congress repealed the act at the end of Jefferson's presidency.

Also in 1807, with Jefferson's support, Congress passed the *Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves*.

Monticello

After two terms as president, Jefferson was ready to retire to Monticello. He had a number of projects he wished to complete including: his compilation of the life of Jesus, the writing of his autobiography and the establishment of the University of Virginia.

The Jefferson Bible

Jefferson compiled what has now become known as the *Jefferson Bible*, by collecting the moral teachings of Jesus and eliminating all the supernatural references in the Gospels. In a letter to Mr Charles Thompson, Jefferson explained how he did this:

I, too, have made a wee-little book from the same materials (The Gospels) which I call the Philosophy of Jesus. It is pareadigma of his doctrines, made by cutting the texts out of the book and arranging them on the pages of a blank book, in a certain order of time or subject. A more beautiful or precious morsel of ethics I have never seen. It is a document in proof

that I am a REAL CHRISTIAN, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus, very different from the Platonists, who call ME infidel and THEMSELVES Christians and preachers of the Gospel, while they draw all their characteristic dogmas from what its author never said or saw. They have compounded from the heathen mysteries a system beyond the comprehension of man, of which the greater reformer of the vicious ethics and deism of the Jews, were he to return on earth, would not recognise one feature.³⁹

The full title of Jefferson's composition is *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels In Greek, Latin, French and English*. In Jefferson's Bible there is no virgin birth; there is no resurrection; there are no angels or miracles, no superstitions or supernatural events, only the life and teachings of Jesus, who according to Jefferson was "one of the best men that ever lived."⁴⁰

In the strictest sense, Jefferson did not write this book. Using scissors and paste, and destroying eight bibles in the process, he assembled the parts into a unique version of the Bible, the *Jefferson Bible*.

The Autobiography

Jefferson was 77 years old when he began writing his autobiography; on page one he stated that it was intended 'for my own ready reference, and for the information of my family.' It is a short book of just 101 pages, but what is significant is that Jefferson included, for posterity, his original draft of the *Declaration of Independence*, complete with its condemnation of the slave trade.

The University of Virginia

Jefferson's dream of creating a University of Virginia became a reality when it was officially opened on 7th March 1825. Jefferson had been involved in every aspect of the University's creation: from the concept of an 'academical village' to the design of the Rotunda, and even the idea that professors should be recruited from as far a field as Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh, as well more locally from New York and Virginia was his; everything about the University bore his influence. Today a statue of Jefferson stands on campus to honour the father of the University of Virginia.

Death

Thomas Jefferson died on 4th July 1826, exactly 50 years after the signing of the *Declaration of Independence* was adopted. A fellow Founding Father, John Adams, died on the same day; his last words were, "Thomas Jefferson survives". In fact, unknown to Adams, Jefferson had died a few hours earlier that day but he was right in the sense that Jefferson's words live on.

Jefferson was 83 years old when he died, leaving a mountain of debts settled only by the sale of all his worldly

goods including his slaves and his beloved Monticello estate at auction in January 1831.

Having sketched Jefferson's life story, I will now focus on a number of themes which feature throughout much of his adult life. These are his Anglophobia, his attitude towards the French Revolution, his love of books, his writings, his connection with and attitude towards slavery, with particular reference to the case of Sally Hemings, his religious and philosophical views and finally his libertarian views.

I will state why I think he was right on some things and wrong on others. I will reflect on his legacy and conclude why I think he can justly be labelled a 'Libertarian Wordsmith.'

Anglophobia

There is no doubt that Jefferson was an Anglophobe and his reasons were personal as well as political and philosophical as Ron Chernow notes:

The Revolution left Jefferson with an implacable aversion to the British, whom he regarded as a race of "rich, proud, hectoring, swearing, squabbling, carnivorous animals." He had a long list of personal grievances beyond his distaste for Britain as a corrupt, monarchical society. Cornwallis had ravaged one of Jefferson's farms, butchering animals, torching crops and snatching thirty slaves. Like many Virginia plantation owners, Jefferson was land rich but cash poor and chronically indebted to British creditors.⁴²

Another incident reinforced his anti-British sentiments. Joseph J. Ellis records:

When Jefferson visited Adams in England in the spring of 1786, the two former revolutionaries were presented at court and George III ostentatiously turned his back on them both. Neither man ever forgot the insult or the friend next to him when it happened.⁴³

Yet despite his understandable post-war Anglophobia, Jefferson was linked to and much influenced by the English. He had English ancestors, and was related to the celebrated freedom-fighter and Leveller John Lilburne. He had studied English Common Law under George Wythe in Williamsburg. He was impressed by the writings of the English pamphleteer Thomas Paine and he regarded three Englishmen: Francis Bacon, John Locke and Isaac Newton as the greatest men who had ever lived.

Jefferson and the French Revolution

Jefferson was an ardent supporter of the French Revolution both before it had begun and during its violent beginnings. It was only much later that he denounced the atrocities that occurred under Robespierre. When you

consider that from Jefferson's point of view, the French Revolution appeared to be a continuation of what had begun in America, it is understandable that he should support it.

A Lover of Books

Jefferson loved books, as is clear from this extract from a letter to a friend, John Page, in which Jefferson described the damage caused by a fire at his mother's mansion house at Shadwell in 1770:

*My late loss may perhaps have reached you by this time, I mean the loss of my mother's house by fire, and in it, of every paper I had in the world, and almost every book. On a reasonable estimate I calculate the cost of the books burned to have been £200 sterling. Would to god it had been the money; then had it never cost me a sigh!*⁴⁴

As Kevin J. Hayes comments in his biography of Jefferson, "Jefferson's preference for books over money places him among the cadre of true book lovers."⁴⁴

A self-confessed bibliophile, Jefferson amassed a library of 6,487 books, the largest private collection in the United States at that time, which he offered to sell to Congress in 1814 to replace the Library of Congress, which had been torched by the British when they had occupied Washington DC during the War of 1812. After the sale, he immediately started on a new collection, admitting to John Adams, "I cannot live without books..."⁴⁵

A man of letters

Jefferson was a prolific writer and the author of more than 18,000 private letters. However, he had only one book published during his lifetime: *Notes on the State of Virginia*; his autobiography was originally written just for himself and his family. He is famous for being the author of a pamphlet under the title of *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* and a formal document entitled *A Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*, as well as public papers such *The Kentucky Resolutions*, *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, and of course the *Declaration of Independence*. Jefferson was a master wordsmith whose noble expressions were both inspiring and optimistic. His correspondence with John Adams, which he famously resumed in later life, continued into old age.

Jefferson and slavery

Jefferson condemned slavery, whilst at the same time being a slave owner. For most of his adult life, he owned approximately 200 slaves. He formally arranged for the emancipation of two of his slaves and allowed two more to go free unofficially during his lifetime; five others were freed after his death, as specified in his will. Jefferson was the champion of freedom in word but not deed. This contradiction needs to be examined in more depth fully to understand Jefferson the man. Jefferson's whole life,

from beginning to end, was closely linked to slavery; as one of his biographers explains:

*According to family tradition, Thomas Jefferson's earliest memory was of a trusted slave carrying him, at the age of two, on a pillow when his family moved from his birthplace, the Shadwell plantation, to Tuckahoe plantation, along the James River above Richmond. Eighty- one years later, as Jefferson lay on his deathbed, passing in and out of delirium, another trusted slave was the only one present who understood and honoured his dying request to have his pillows adjusted so that he could lie more comfortably. From cradle to grave, Jefferson was surrounded and supported by the institution of slavery, a core element of the life of Virginia's gentlemen farmers. No matter how modern, even forward-looking, he seems to us, he was a product of his time and place.*⁴⁶

In a letter to Jean Pierre Brissot de Warville, dated 11th February 1788, Jefferson expressed his opposition to the slave trade:

*You know that nobody wishes more ardently to see the abolition not only of the trade but of the condition of slavery: and certainly nobody will be more willing to encounter every sacrifice for that object.*⁴⁷

Yet he thought it prudent not to join the society for the abolition of the slave trade. However when Jefferson was a delegate to the Continental Congress at the time of the Revolution, he drafted a Northwest Ordinance in which he proposed banning slavery from the American territories to the west.

In his book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), Query XIV, he noted:

*I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.*⁴⁸

This view is shocking from a 21st century perspective, but it should be born in mind that this opinion was not uncommon among intellectuals in the 18th century. Take for example this statement by the distinguished philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776), who is now regarded as a major figure in the history of Western Philosophy:

*I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites.*⁴⁹

To criticise Jefferson for his racial bias is therefore anachronistic

Later, in a letter to Henri Gregoire, dated 25th February 1809, Jefferson expresses uncertainty about his earlier opinion:

Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts (in Notes on Virginia) were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favourable, and those of exercising it still less so. I expressed them therefore with great hesitation; but whatever their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding; he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others. On this subject they are gaining daily in the opinions of nations, and hopeful advances are making towards re-establishment on an equal footing with the other colors of the human family.⁵⁰

There is no doubt that Jefferson was uncomfortable about the practice of slavery as he made clear in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.⁵¹

However, he did try to mitigate the treatment of slaves by making comparisons with the English labouring classes in a letter to Dr Thomas Cooper, dated 10th September 1814:

Nor in the class of laborers do I mean to withhold from the comparison that portion whose color has condemned them, in certain parts of our Union, to the subjection to the will of others. Even these are better fed in these States, warmer clothed, and labour less than the journeymen or day-laborers of England. They have comfort, too, of numerous families, in the midst of whom they live without want, or fear of it; a solace which few of the laborers of England possess. They are subject, it is true, to bodily coercion; but are not the hundreds of thousands of British soldiers and seamen subject to the same, without seeing, at the end of their career, when age and accident shall have rendered them unequal to labour, the certainty, which the other has, that he will never want? And has not the British seaman, as much as the African, been reduced to this bondage by force, in flagrant violation of his own consent, and of his natural right in his own person? And with the laborers of England generally, does not the moral coercion of want subject their will as despotically to that of their employer, as the physical constraint does the soldier, the seaman or the slave? But do not mistake me. I am not advocating slavery. I am not justifying the wrongs we have committed on a foreign people, by the example of another nation committing equal wrongs on their own subjects. On the contrary, there is nothing I would not

sacrifice to a practicable plan of abolishing every vestige of this moral and political depravity. But I am at present comparing the condition and degree of suffering to which oppression has reduced the man of one color, with the condition and degree of suffering of another color; equally condemning both.⁵²

Jefferson's writings make it clear that he was in favour of the abolition of slavery in theory but his lack of action regarding abolition suggests he was fearful of the likelihood of racial strife and bloody conflict that could follow:

Jefferson's views about race grew stronger with the passage of time, eroding his early antislavery sentiment and convincing him that white Americans faced an insoluble dilemma. He expressed that dilemma in memorable terms: "We have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other."⁵³

There was also the issue of debt as Ron Chernow points out:

Jefferson was land rich but cash poor and chronically indebted to British creditors... The steep payments he owed British bankers forced Jefferson to retain his enormous workforce of slaves despite his professed hatred for the institution.⁵⁴

It should also be remembered that Jefferson was not the only Founding Father to have owned slaves: George Washington, Patrick Henry, and James Madison were all slaveholders.

Professor Thomas Sowell counters those who criticise the Founding Fathers for owning slaves:

Of all the tragic facts about the history of slavery, the most astonishing to an American today is that, although slavery was a worldwide institution for thousands of years, nowhere in the world was slavery a controversial issue prior to the 18th century.

People of every race and color were enslaved – and enslaved others. White people were still being bought and sold as slaves in the Ottoman Empire, decades after American blacks were freed.

Everyone hated the idea of being a slave but few had any qualms about enslaving others. Slavery was just not an issue, not even among intellectuals, much less among political leaders, until the 18th century – and then only in Western civilisation.

Among those who turned against slavery in the 18th century were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and other American leaders. You could research all of the 18th century Africa or Asia or the Middle East without finding any comparable rejection of slavery there.

But who is singled out for scathing criticism today? American leaders of the 18th century.

Deciding slavery was wrong was much easier than deciding what to do with millions of people from another continent, of another race, and without any historical preparation for living as free citizens in a society like that of the United States, where they were 20 percent of the total population.

It is clear from the private correspondence of Washington, Jefferson, and many others that their moral objection to slavery was unambiguous, but the practical question of what to do now had them baffled. That would remain so for more than half a century.⁵⁵

Sally Hemings

The biggest controversy surrounding Jefferson both during his own lifetime and ever since has been the allegation that he had sexual relations with one of his black female slaves. Her name was Sally Hemings. Jefferson had inherited her from his wife's father. Sally was the daughter of Betty Hemings (a mulatto slave) and her white slave owner John Wayles (Jefferson's father-in-law). This means that Sally Hemings was Jefferson's wife's half sister.

Sexual impropriety between slave-owners and their female slaves was not uncommon at this time. Jefferson was not only contaminated by that contagion, but also not above suspicion because "there was not a planter in Virginia," Adams observed, "who could not reckon among his slaves a number of his children."⁵⁶ This made the allegation a probability.

The scandal became public when James T. Callender (a sensation-seeking, grudge-harboring hack, who had once worked for Jefferson but was now out to get him), wrote a piece for the *Richmond Recorder* in 1802, during Jefferson's presidency. "It is well known," the article began "that the man whom it delighteth the people to honor, keeps, and many years past has kept, as his concubine, one of his own slaves... By this wench, Sally, our president has had several children. The African Venus is said to officiate as housekeeper at Monticello."⁵⁷

To understand the full story we need to go back to when Jefferson's wife Martha died in 1782 after a difficult childbirth; before she passed away, she made Jefferson promise her that he would never remarry. Sally Hemings, who had been nursing Martha at the time, would certainly have been aware of that promise. In 1784 Jefferson went to Paris taking his daughter Martha (named after her mother but nicknamed 'Patsy') with him. Among the slaves that accompanied him was James Hemings (Sally's nineteen year old brother), who was to be trained as a French chef. When Jefferson's youngest daughter Lucy died at Monticello, Sally Hemings, one of his privileged house slaves, was entrusted to bring his other daughter Maria (known as

Polly) to Paris. Sally went to Paris to serve the Jefferson household. The illicit relationship between Sally and Jefferson allegedly began in Paris. According to Sally's memoirs, as told to her son Madison Hemings and published in an Ohio newspaper in 1873, Sally said that if she stayed in Paris she could be free (according to French law) but if she returned to America she would still be a slave and so she made Jefferson promise that if she came back to America he would free any children he fathered with her, when they reached the age of twenty one. This was in 1789 when Sally was about 16 years old and less than two years after she had arrived in Paris. Clearly, if her son Madison's testimony is to be believed, the relationship had already begun by this time.

This is Madison's version of events:

Maria was left out here (United States) but was afterwards ordered to accompany him to France. She was three years or so younger than Martha. My mother accompanied her as her body servant. When Mr. Jefferson went to France, Martha was a young woman grown, my mother was about her age and Maria was just budding into womanhood. Their stay (my mother and Maria's) was about eighteen months. But during that time my mother became Mr Jefferson's concubine and when he was called home she was 'enceinte' by him. Soon after their arrival she gave birth to a child of whom Thomas Jefferson was the father. It lived but for a short time. She gave birth to four others, and Jefferson was the father of all of them. Their names were Beverley, Harriet, Madison (myself) and Ester.⁵⁸

Apart from Madison's testimony, there is evidence to suggest that there is truth behind these allegations: circumstantial evidence, DNA test results and the children's resemblance to Thomas Jefferson. Information drawn from Dumas Malone's six-volume biography of Jefferson reveals that:

Despite his own forcefully argued conclusion that the Sally story was a fictional creation of Callender and nothing more, Malone's own research revealed that Jefferson was present at Monticello nine months prior to the birth of each of Sally's children. Since he was often away at Philadelphia or Washington, and since Sally never conceived in his absence, the timing of her pregnancies was compatible with his paternity.⁵⁹

In addition, the DNA evidence is compelling:

On the 5th November 1998 issue of Nature, the results of a DNA comparison between Jefferson's Y chromosome and the Y chromosome of several Hemings descendants demonstrated a match between Jefferson and Eston Hemings.⁶⁰

Moreover, as Joseph J. Ellis noted:

*...Sally Hemings did have several children who were obviously fathered by a white man and some of whom had features that resembled those of Jefferson.*⁶¹

All this suggests to me that there is a strong case in favour of Thomas Jefferson being the father of Sally Heming's children and I am inclined to believe that this is likely to be true based on the evidence currently available. In the light of this, how should we interpret the relationship? With regard to this, Joseph J. Ellis recalls:

*...the most dramatic episode occurred in 1974, with the publication of Fawn Brodie's Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History, a national best-seller that argued in favour of the liaison and even claimed that Jefferson and Sally Hemings loved each other...*⁶²

This may or may not be true but at the very least I think that the arrangement was consensual and mutually beneficial. Any more sordid interpretation doesn't fit with Jefferson's known character.

Also as Christopher Hitchens noted:

*In her brilliant, dispositive study of the subject, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy, Professor Annette Gordon-Reed points out with well-controlled scorn that most analysts have refused even to consider whether Sally might have had a mind of her own, or might even more shockingly have made that mind up – in favour of an affair with a rich, famous, powerful, and fascinating man.*⁶³

Jefferson and religion

History books usually describe Jefferson as a Deist, by which they mean that he believed in a Creator God who does not intervene in the natural world but just allows events to take their course. Jefferson admired Jesus as a man, but disliked organised religion and in particular the Established Church. What he certainly did believe in was religious freedom.

I think Jefferson's views on religion are best understood by reading his own words on the subject.

The *Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*, which was drafted by Jefferson in 1777 but not passed by the Virginia legislature until 1786, included the following passage:

We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry, whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods; or shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that

*all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or effect their civil capacities.*⁶⁴

If this is compared to the religious toleration clause in the *Agreement of the People*, a document compiled by the English Levellers, more than 100 years earlier, it can be seen that they both express similar objectives:

*That we do not impower or entrust our said representatives to continue in force, or to make any Lawes, Oaths, Covenants, whereby to compell by penalties or otherwise any person to anything in or about matters of faith, Religion or Gods worship or to restrain any person from the profession of his faith, or exercise of Religion according to his Conscience, nothing having caused more distractions, and heart burnings in all ages, then persecution and molestation for matters of Conscience in and about Religion.*⁶⁵

Once again, we see a similarity between Jefferson's views and those of the English Levellers that came before him.

The following two statements on religion appeared in Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*:

*But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.*⁶⁶

*Millions of innocent men women and children since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned: yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity.*⁶⁷

Jefferson, on the theme of religious liberty, wrote these words in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in the State of Connecticut on January 1, 1802:

*Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between church and State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.*⁶⁸

In a letter to Mathew Carey on 11th November 1816, Jefferson expressed his contempt for religious dogma:

*On the dogmas of religion as distinguished from moral principles, all mankind, from the beginning of the world to this day, have been quarrelling, fighting, burning and torturing one another, for abstractions unintelligible to themselves and to all others, and absolutely beyond the comprehension of the human mind.*⁶⁹

What is revealed by these extracts is Jefferson's religious scepticism. This scepticism provoked his political enemies to describe him as an atheist. It is also clear that he was passionately in favour of religious freedom and deeply distrustful of organised religion.

Jefferson the Epicurean

When it came to the philosophers of ancient Greece, Jefferson was clear about whom he regarded as being far above the rest.

In a letter to William Short, on 31st October 1819 Jefferson admits:

*I too am an Epicurian. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us.*⁷⁰

I think it is interesting at this point to look at some of the sayings of Epicurus to provide us with an insight into his beliefs, in order to speculate whether or not these views would have been shared by Jefferson.

This is Epicurus on happiness:

*We must, therefore, pursue the things that make for happiness, seeing that when happiness is present, we have everything; but when it is absent, we do everything to possess it.*⁷¹

Could this have been the inspiration for the phrase 'the pursuit of happiness' used by Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence*?

This is Epicurus on death:

*Death, therefore – the most dreadful of evils – is nothing to us, since while we exist, death is not present, and whenever death is present, we do not exist. It is nothing either to the living or the dead, since it does not exist for the living, and the dead no longer are.*⁷²

This chimes with Jefferson's religious scepticism.

Epicurus on friendship:

*Of all the things that wisdom provides for living one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship.*⁷³

Jefferson's genial hospitality at Monticello confirms that Jefferson made his friends very welcome.

On self-sufficiency:

*The greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom.*⁷⁴

There is no doubt that self-sufficiency and freedom, both national and personal, were amongst Jefferson's most treasured values.

Jefferson's actions and stated beliefs suggest that he was indeed an Epicurean.

Jefferson's libertarian views

There are numerous Jefferson quotes expressing views which can be described as libertarian. Here are just a few:

In a letter to James Madison in 1787, he declared:

*I own I am not a friend to a very energetic government. It is always oppressive.*⁷⁵

In his first inaugural address on 4th March 1801 in Washington DC, he states that:

*... a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, which shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government, and this is necessary to close the circle of our felicities.*⁷⁶

In his first annual message to Congress on 8th December 1801, Jefferson stated that:

*Agriculture, manufacture, commerce and navigation, the four pillars of our prosperity, are the most thriving when left most free to individual enterprise.*⁷⁷

In a letter to Isaac H. Tiffany in 1819, he noted:

*But rightful liberty is unobstructed action according to our will, within the limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others.*⁷⁸

All of these statements indicate Jefferson's libertarian outlook but what was the source of his political philosophy? In Jefferson's view, three English men: Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Isaac Newton were, "the three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception."⁷⁹

The second of these, John Locke, was the man who provided the foundation for Jefferson's political views. John Locke (1632 - 1704) was an English philosopher and political theorist, and is regarded as the 'Father of Liberalism' and a major influence on modern-day Libertarianism. John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* became a primary influence on Jefferson's wording of the *Declaration of Independence*.

Some of the words are identical. Look at these two phrases:

The first is taken from the *Declaration of Independence*:

*But when a long train of abuses & usurpations...*⁸⁰

The second is from Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*:

*But if a long train of abuses, prevarications and artifices...*⁸¹

Some of the wording is similar. Compare these two extracts:

...that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions.

*Second Treatise of Government, 1689.*⁸²

...that all men are created equal: that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights: that among those are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

*Declaration of Independence, 1776.*⁸³

Libertarians today talk about the right to life, liberty and property. The *Declaration of Independence* can be interpreted as a statement of these libertarian principles. Therefore, we can justifiably claim that Jefferson, as the *Declaration's* primary author, was, from a political perspective, a libertarian. In fact, the American Revolution itself can be seen as libertarian in origin as Murray N. Rothbard put it:

*Thus, America, above all countries, was born in an explicitly libertarian revolution, a revolution against empire, against taxation, trade monopoly, and regulation; and against militarism and executive power. The revolution resulted in governments unprecedented in restrictions placed on their power.*⁸⁴

My suspicion is that Jefferson avoided the word 'property' in the *Declaration* because its use could and probably would have been seen as a justification of slavery (as slaves were considered to be property) and Jefferson didn't want the *Declaration* to condone slavery; in fact his original draft contained a condemnation of slavery.

The libertarian economist Murray N. Rothbard tells us what he calls the 'Great Jeffersonian Lesson':

Jefferson's political philosophy is summed up in the phrase: "That government is best which governs least." It received its finest expression in our own declaration of independence: man is endowed by God with certain natural rights; 'to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,' and when government becomes destructive of that end, the people have the right to change the form of government accordingly. Thus Jefferson, as John Locke had done a century before, drastically shifted the emphasis from the State to the individual. In the absolutist and feudal era from which the world was beginning to emerge, divine right settled only on the kings, the nobility, the State and its rulers. To Jefferson, the divine rights were conferred on each and every individual, not on rulers of government.

*What were these natural rights? The fundamental right, from which all others are deduced, is the right to life. Each individual has the moral right to live without coercive interference by others. To live, he must be free to work and acquire property, to 'pursue happiness.' In political terms, the one important natural right is self-defense; defense of one's life, liberty and property from invasive attack. Government's function, then, is to use its power of force to prevent and combat attempts to use force in the society. If the government extends its power beyond this 'cop-on-the-corner' function, it in itself becomes the greatest tyrant and plunderer of them all. Since the Government has virtual monopoly of force, its potentialities for evil are far greater than that of any other institution. The people must constantly keep their Government small and local, and even then must watch it with great vigilance lest it run amok. That is the great Jeffersonian lesson, and it is one that all Americans must begin to learn again.*⁸⁵

Rothbard recognised a kindred spirit.

Jefferson: right and wrong

Jefferson was in my view right about some things and wrong about others; take this sentence for example:

*Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate, than that these people are to be free; nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government.*⁸⁶

He is referring to African Americans and is right when he says that they will eventually be free; he is wrong however when he says that the two races cannot live together in harmony as free people. Nevertheless, this does help us to understand how difficult the problem of slavery appeared to him.

In the final year of his life, Jefferson expressed, in a letter to James Heaton, his settled view on this issue:

The subject of your letter of April 20, is one which I do not permit myself to express an opinion, but when time, place, and occasion may give it some favourable effect. A good cause is often injured more by ill-timed efforts of its friends than by the arguments of its enemies. Persuasion, perseverance, and patience are the best advocates on questions depending on the will of others. The revolution in public opinion which this cause requires, is not to be expected in a day, or perhaps in an age; but time, which outlives all things, will outlive this evil also. My sentiments have been forty years before the public.

Had I repeated them forty times, they would only have become more stale and threadbare. Although I shall not live to see them consummated, they will not die with me; but living or dying, they will ever be in my most fervent prayer.⁸⁷

Jefferson was also right to place his confidence in the success of the American Revolution, because it was justified (in part at least) in terms of the restoration of 'ancient liberties' and therefore historically based, whereas he was wrong about the rationalistic French Revolution, in the sense that he was over optimistic about the end result. He failed to see that by scrapping the old order and replacing it with an entirely new one, the revolutionaries were producing an outcome that was very unpredictable, and that dangerous unintended consequences were likely to follow. One man who understood this was Edmund Burke (1729-1797). He is considered the father of modern conservatism, and yet he did justify the need for change in order to conserve when he famously stated:

A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.⁸⁸

Burke was not in fact a Tory but a Whig. He regarded himself as an 'Old Whig', distinguishing himself from 'New Whigs' by his opposition to the French Revolution. By contrast he supported the cause of the American colonists. The distinction he made between American Revolution and the French Revolution was that the former was based on rights already established in English law whereas the latter was built on a foundation of rights not previously known to exist in France. He trusted historical evolution rather than rationalistic revolution. Burke's opposition to the French Revolution is spelled out in his classic work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which was written in the early part of the Revolution; here he predicted many of the atrocities of the Reign of Terror before they happened. With the hindsight of history, it is easier to see the merits of Burke's argument. Despite his reservations about the French Revolution, Burke did support the American Colonies in their struggle for freedom as he was passionate about liberty:

The Liberty I mean is social freedom. It is that state of things in which Liberty is secured by the equality of Restraint; a Constitution of things in which the liberty of no one Man and no body of Men and no Number of men can find means to trespass on the liberty of any Person or any description of Persons in the Society.⁸⁹

Jefferson on the other hand thought that the French Revolution was merely following in the footsteps of the American Revolution and he lacked the insight of Burke.

Jefferson's legacy

Jefferson's greatest legacy consists of his written words because they continue to influence and inspire people, as these examples show.

On the 24th June 1826, less than two weeks before he died, Thomas Jefferson wrote his final letter: a response to an invitation to come to Washington to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the *Declaration of Independence*. After declining the offer due to ill health, he expressed his regret at not being able to attend:

I should, indeed, with peculiar delight, have met and exchanged there congratulations personally with the small band, the remnant of that host of worthies who joined with us on that day, in the bold and doubtful election we were to make for our country, between submission or the sword, and to have enjoyed with them the consolatory fact, that our fellow citizens, after half a century of experience and prosperity, continue to approve the choice we made. May it be to the world, what we believe it will be (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favoured few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.⁹⁰

These words, 'the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favoured few booted and spurred ready to ride them, by the Grace of God.' were not of Jefferson's own creation but those of Colonel Richard Rumbold, a Leveller, who famously uttered them before his execution 1685. Once again, we see a connection between Jefferson and the 17th century English Levellers.

The *Seneca Falls Declaration* of 19th July 1848 (sometimes known as the *Declaration of Sentiments*) is clearly based on the *Declaration of Independence* and it was an influential document of its time, demanding equal rights for women. It was written for an early 'Women's Rights' Convention in New York and contains the following extract:

*We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*⁹¹

In 1859, 33 years after Jefferson's death, Abraham Lincoln remembers his significance:

*All honor to Jefferson: to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that today, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.*⁹²

The Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC on the shore of the Tidal Basin of the Potomac River was completed in 1943 during World War II and this is when Jefferson once again became a symbol for freedom.

The moment of Jefferson's ascent into the American version of political heaven can be dated precisely: 13th April 1943, the day that Franklin Roosevelt dedicated the Jefferson Memorial on the Tidal Basin. "Today in the midst of a great war for freedom," Roosevelt declared, "we dedicate a shrine to freedom." Jefferson was now an American saint, our "Apostle of Freedom," as Roosevelt put it; he concluded by quoting the words inscribed around the inside of the Jefferson Memorial's dome: "For I have sworn on the altar of god eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."⁹³

Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted Jefferson's words in his famous 'I have a dream' speech made in Washington D.C. on 28th August 1963:

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal."*⁹⁴

As we have seen, Jefferson was described by Franklin D. Roosevelt as the "Apostle of Freedom" and his legacy is that his words continue to inspire the struggle for liberty in America and around the world.

Conclusion

After studying Thomas Jefferson the man, I have come to the conclusion that he was a complex individual, who was

intellectually brilliant despite sometimes holding contradictory views; he was ambiguous, enigmatic, and above all human. What shines through is his passion for liberty, learning and limited government, ideals highly valued by libertarians and his written words are so powerful and inspiring; they are like secular scripture. He succeeded in helping to build a nation on a foundation of freedom but failed to solve the problem of slavery. When it came to the subject of liberty, he found the right words to express the principles of libertarianism, which is why I feel justified in calling him a 'Libertarian Wordsmith'.

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