

Tom Jefferson and the Dandelion

by *Mason Gaffney*

Thomas Jefferson is said to have introduced the dandelion in this country. No one's perfect. It's a shame, though, how some people seize on TJ's other lapses when his name is invoked, especially the rumor that he, an early widower, retained a slave-mistress. This originated as a Federalist whispering campaign, and now it seems is probably true, but true or false, it is too prurient to die. To the racist, miscegenation compounds the fault. The salacious must be titillated, and if one upholds popular rights one will be slandered. Whether he treated her honorably, as apparently he did, is beside the point. Whether his enemies and critics engaged in similar behavior over the years is irrelevant. Egalitarians are held to a purer standard. Privileges are won by playing dirty, and that's how they are kept.

It is said that T.J. should have freed his slaves. Apparently he considered it, but realized that a free black person in 18th Century Virginia would not remain free, or perhaps even alive, for long. Social wrongs are hard to cure by individual rights. What T.J. did do was to exhaust his individual fortune in politics, giving him the power to enact the Northwest Ordinance creating our national land system, extend cheap credit to homesteaders there, bring French reformers to America, found the University of Virginia and design its campus, put the Bill of Rights in our Constitution, enact the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, outlaw primogeniture and entail, write the Declaration of Independence, help Tom Paine, edit the Jefferson Bible, and in many other ways help establish a fair and respectable American culture.

Politics makes strange bedfellows. In binding the national union together T.J. allied with Robert Livingston, major landowner of the Hudson Valley. Livingston promoted income taxation to replace property taxation. A union-binder cannot demand perfection from all his friends — but the Livingston alliance troubles me. For a charming novel in the background of Livingston's age and place, try *Dragonwyck* by Anya Seton, or see the film with Vincent Price and Gene Tierney. It's a great one in a populist genre that would never make it today.

Then there are Gary Hart, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker and the rest of those Elmer Gantrys who stumbled on the 7th Commandment. Hardly of the same class, but it is sad how justice became ethics, ethics became morality, and morality became monogamy. The Seventh Commandment became the single test of virtue, private and

public, necessary and sufficient. On this and allied points, Kevin Phillips' recent book, *American Theocracy*, is a good read.

Violating The Ninth Commandment (slander) is the way of life in administration and the media. Violating The Sixth (murder) and Eighth (stealing) are the bases of land tenure, the royal road to riches, and through riches to respectability in church, academia, and society. Violating The Tenth (coveting) is confused with the instinct of workmanship and identified with the legitimate incentive to produce. Ostentatious charity, condemned by Jesus, is used to screen the rich from the working poor, select community leaders from the former, and shame and silence the latter.

Gore Vidal, who is no prude, has devoted an entire book to debunking T.J. One must take Vidal seriously here, since he is a serious scholar, yet you would expect him to sympathize with T.J.'s liberal spirit and broader aims. You might explain Vidal's hostility as a reaction to the military and imperialistic side of T.J.: writing the Second Amendment; founding West Point; sending the Marines to Tripoli; acquiring Louisiana; sending Lewis and Clark to promote expanding our empire to the Pacific; squelching Aaron Burr's scheme for an independent Mississippi Valley nation; and what not. This is not the place to review Vidal, but my impression is that the faults he cherry-picks are too petty to offset Jefferson's grander virtues and achievements.

So maybe Jefferson imported the dandelion. God forgives mortal sins; we can forget little ones. If all are God's children, and Earth is God's gift to His forgiven children, let's start over again with a Year of Jubilee. That means divide the land every fifty years, dandelions and all, as Moses said in Leviticus 25. (Billy Graham, Robert Schuler, Norman Vincent Peale, Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson take note.) Or twenty-five, as Jefferson said. Either way we give each child of God a fresh start, "Ally Ally Oxen-free."

For the secular humanitarian Jefferson imported another prolific European specimen, Pierre Samuel Du Pont (the first). Du Pont and his associates, the French school of *économistes*, founded classical economics. They also showed how to redistribute land rents daily, by taxing them. As they said, that makes us all "co-proprietors," and makes our children, and those of former slaves, continue as such, generation unto generation. Pierre Samuel IV, recently questing for Jefferson's former post, would have done well to reincarnate the practical egalitarianism of his namesake and progenitor, and of that man's friend and student, The Third President of the United States.