Chapter 4

Jefferson Blooms at William & Mary

THOMAS JEFFERSON WAS THE MOST AESTHETICALLY MINDED OF the first four American presidents. He read widely, conducted scientific observations, played music, and created wonderful architecture, most notably his Roman-inspired home, Monticello. Looking at this record, Darren Staloff, an insightful historian of early American thinking, goes so far as to assert that Jefferson was "America's first great Romantic artist." This Romantic label indeed offers a useful frame for considering Jefferson, especially when trying to comprehend his howling contradictions. Romanticism, by privileging the heart above the head, excuses illogical thinking and exalts unreasonable passion. Jefferson captured this outlook when in writing flirtatiously to a stunning young married woman, he confessed that "I am but a son of nature, loving what I see and feel, without being able to give a reason, nor caring much whether there be one." Years later, he proudly told John Adams that "I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past." Among other things, this Romanticism gave Jefferson license to be self-indulgent in a manner that the stoical George Washington never would permit himself.

What one person sees in Jefferson as Romantic might be seen by another as the influence of the Greeks—who were also a major part of the inspiration for nineteenth-century Romanticism. Either way, the point to take away here in the context of neoclassicism is that Jefferson was the only one of the first four presidents to be arguably more Greek than Roman, more Epicurean than

Ciceronian. One of Jefferson's descendants told Henry Randall, a mid-nineteenth-century biographer of Jefferson, that generally speaking, Jefferson "was more partial to the Greek than the Roman literature; and among the Greeks, the Athenians were, in all respects, his chosen people." In his tastes and cast of mind, Jefferson was ahead of his time. Both these inclinations, toward ancient Greece and especially its Athenians, were a departure from the eighteenth-century norm, but would become fashionable in the nineteenth. This preference for the Greeks may have inoculated Jefferson against the stiff, Roman-like Federalism of Adams and Washington.

The Tutors

IN COLONIAL TIMES, THE CHILDREN OF THE WEALTHY SOUTH USUALLY began their educations at the feet of a young man who recently had graduated from college. One of the most complete records of colonial tutoring was left by Philip Fithian, a 1772 product of Princeton who, before becoming a Presbyterian minister, contracted for a year to teach the seven children of Robert Carter, one of Virginia's wealthiest planters. The girls were to be given the basics of reading, writing, and numbers. The boys got all that and then went on to practical skills of mathematics, surveying, and a smattering of law. In addition, the boys were given at least a veneer of socially desirable knowledge in Latin, philosophy, and history. An entry in Fithian's diary underscores the social aspect of learning. One Monday in March 1774, Bob Carter, then aged sixteen, "begg'd me to learn him lattin; his Reason he tells me is that yesterday Mrs Taylor told him he must not have either of her Daughters unless he learn'd Latin."

The plantation schoolhouse met five days a week for a few hours both in the morning and the afternoon, but the schedule was often interrupted by visits from itinerant dancing and music teachers, as well as by parties being thrown at nearby planta-

tions. The purpose of education among Virginian elites was not to produce intellectuals, or even doctors or lawyers, but to form young gentlemen, and dancing was treated as just as essential as reading books. The Carter family was not greatly academically inclined, nor was Fithian. The plantation had an impressive library, containing most of the ancient masters and many contemporary authors, but Fithian devotes more space in his diary to recording the family's multiple illnesses, languorous outings, and sumptuous meals of rockfish, crab, fruit, ham, and beef, accompanied by wine, grog, port, and porter.

Jefferson's study would have been more intense, given that he was not just another wealthy boy, but clearly a bright one who could go far in law or politics. He came to classicism early, if a bit uncertainly. At the age of five he was sent to a neighborhood school to begin learning his letters and numbers. Four years later he began to learn Latin from a "Mr Douglas a clergyman from Scotland [who] was but a superficial Latinist, less instructed in Greek, but with the rudiments of these languages he taught me French." In 1757, not long after his father died, the boy moved on to another tutor, James Maury, a man of French Huguenot background who had graduated from William & Mary around 1740. Jefferson wrote later that Maury, in contrast to his first teacher, was "a correct classical scholar, with whom I continued two years." But even Maury thought that the purpose of learning a bit of history, literature, and geography was essentially social, in that a smattering of such knowledge would enable "a Virginia gentleman" to converse with confidence and thus save him from the embarrassment of making "a ridiculous & awkward Figure in Life."

Indeed, judging by Jefferson's literary commonplace book, into which he copied passages from authors who had caught his attention, Maury immersed the young man in the classics. There are few better ways to study a literary passage than to write it out in one's own hand, feeling each word and following the flow of thought. Not surprisingly for an intelligent fourteen-year-old who had just lost his father, Jefferson was especially inclined toward

commentaries on mortality. He began by copying several passages from Cicero's *Tusculum Disputations* about the inevitability of death. Jefferson liked Cicero's essays, considering him "the first master" of style, but in notable contrast to the taste of the time, held the Roman's speeches in low esteem. The best models of oratory, he wrote, were "Livy, Tacitus, Sallust, & most assuredly not in Cicero."

A School for Scandal

COLLEGES IN THE COLONIAL ERA COULD BE UNRULY, AND THE TINY one at which sixteen-year-old Thomas Jefferson arrived late in the winter of 1759–60 was in tumult. The year before Jefferson enrolled at William & Mary, Jacob Rowe, a twenty-eight-year-old Cornish graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, became professor of moral philosophy at the college, replacing a faculty member who had been dismissed. In the same year that he arrived, Rowe was arrested for making "scandalous and malicious" comments about the Virginia House of Burgesses at a private party, such as saying some members of that body should be hanged for passing a law that reduced the compensation of clergymen. He was forced to apologize and pay the court costs.

When Jefferson joined the student body, then numbering about sixty, Rowe was teaching ethics, and Jefferson became one of his students. But then another new faculty member arrived. Goronwy Owen, a young Welsh poet, was to be master of the college's grammar school. Owen, an Oxford dropout, was even rougher cut than Rowe. He was a "castoff, a misfit, a drunk and a brawler" who had arrived in the New World as "a last resort."

Rowe and Owen hit it off, smashingly. Just a few months later, in August 1760, the two clergymen were charged with leading students in a brawl with the townspeople. Rowe was ordered to "remove himself and his effects at once from the college." Later the same year, the school's president was hauled before the college's

governing body, the Board of Visitors, on the charge of being habitually drunk. He did not deny it and solved the problem by dying that December. Conditions at the college at this time were, writes one historian, "pathetically absurd."

Amidst this turmoil, Jefferson was taught almost exclusively by William Small, a 1755 graduate of Marischal College in Aberdeen, Scotland. "Fortunately the philosophical chair became vacant soon after my arrival at college, and he [Small] was appointed to fill it per interim," Jefferson wrote in his autobiography. Jefferson appears to draw a subtle distinction between Small and some of the other faculty members. The Scotsman, the only non-cleric on the faculty, was "a man profound in most of the useful branches of science, with a happy talent of communication, correct and gentlemanly manners, & an enlarged and liberal mind." In that last phrase, Jefferson hints at the Scottish empiricism he likely learned from Small.

Not surprisingly, given Jefferson's years of being taught by Douglas and Small, two Scots, his views would come to reflect Scottish thinkers of the time. The historian Ralph Ketcham detects in Jefferson's thinking "the basic influence . . . of Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, Adam Smith, and other Scottish Enlightenment philosophers." This Scottish influence would remain with him throughout his life, most notably in its emphasis on testing ideas against observation through one's own senses.

The Scots Come Alive

SCOTLAND'S INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN HISTORY WAS PROFOUND AND remains underappreciated. The story of this development is fascinating. In the early eighteenth century, Scotland was a poor country, isolated in the northwestern corner of Europe. Yet in the subsequent decades it achieved a high literacy rate and enjoyed an intellectual explosion, with, as noted above, Scots more or less inventing the fields of modern economics and geology, as well as

eventually setting off the Industrial Revolution with the steam engine.

The Scottish divergence from English thinking had its roots in changes that began two hundred years earlier, when the Scottish church, long independent of the English one, underwent a Calvinist reformation from which the Presbyterian Church emerged. This new church placed a strong emphasis on literacy, because it believed the people should be able to read their Bibles. In 1661, it became church policy that every Scottish town should have a schoolmaster educated in Latin, while rural parishes should have a minister capable of giving basic instruction to country youth.

Within a few generations, the effect of this policy could be seen across Scotland. By 1750, according to some estimates, 75 percent of Scots could read, compared to 53 percent in England. Scotland's literacy rate may have been the highest in Europe. One of the literary results of the Scottish Enlightenment is still with us: the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which began appearing in Edinburgh in 1768.

The Enlightenment unfolded far differently in Scotland than in England. Uniquely, Scotland's Enlightenment was university-based, giving its academic institutions a dynamism that English universities in particular lacked. J.E.G. De Montmorency, a historian of education, states that English universities were bypassed altogether by the Enlightenment as they experienced "a century of educational sleep" in the 1700s. "I spent fourteen months" at Oxford, Edward Gibbon disapprovingly recalled. "They proved the fourteen most idle and unprofitable of my whole life." Adam Smith, who won a scholarship to Oxford for graduate work after taking a degree at Glasgow, complained in *The Wealth of Nations* that "in the university of Oxford, the greater part of the public professors have, for these many years, given up altogether even the pretence of teaching."

While the two English universities slumbered, having "degenerated to a large extent into a preserve for the idle and the rich," the Scottish ones at Edinburgh and Glasgow rapidly modernized. The Scottish institutions led the English-speaking world in having

their faculty members specialize in one or two subjects, instead of making them responsible for teaching the university's entire curriculum. Edinburgh made this change in 1708; Glasgow followed in 1727. Both schools were open to new thinking. For example, the groundbreaking work by Isaac Newton of Cambridge in mathematics and physics was taught in the Scottish universities before it was in his own. "Edinburgh is a hot-bed of genius," confidently states a character in the 1771 novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, by the Scottish writer Tobias Smollett. "The university of Edinburgh is supplied with excellent professors in all the sciences; and the medical school, in particular, is famous all over Europe."

There also were major financial differences. Scottish universities were relatively inexpensive, charging tuition fees just a tenth that of the English ones. As one educational historian puts it, "Any boy who could do the work was welcome; the money necessary for the relatively small tuition fees and lodgings in town could usually be scraped together somehow." For example, early in the nineteenth century, the adolescent Thomas Carlyle, later a Scottish philosopher, mathematician, and historian, enrolled at Edinburgh just by walking eighty miles to the city and presenting himself.

Scottish universities were remarkably cosmopolitan for their time, far more integrated into the European intellectual world than were their English peers, which by law required oaths of religious allegiance. Their relative tolerance enabled the northern universities to attract visitors from as far as Russia and Portugal. One result of this multinationalism was that the Scottish approach to law was heavily influenced by the French. In fact, writes Arthur Herman, "many Scottish lawyers in the seventeenth century still went to France to complete their law training rather than to England." That's significant in the context of classicism because much more than English law, French jurisprudence had its roots in ancient Rome. The point of transmission from the ancient world to the modern one was the rediscovery of the *Codex* of Emperor Justinian I, a hefty summary of Roman civil law which that ruler had ordered compiled in the sixth century AD. In the Italian city of

Bologna in about 1115, a jurist named Irnerius began using the old book to teach Roman law. This revived knowledge soon spread to southern France and then to the law school at Orleans, where it was picked up by Scottish students and taken home by them.

As a consequence, Scottish legal thinking deferred less to precedent than the English did, and was more open to classical principles and judgments based on reason. Alexander Bayne, who taught Scots law at Edinburgh, stated in 1722 that "we consider the Roman laws which are not disconform to our own fixed Laws and Customs, to be our own law." Lord Kames went even further, stating that "our law is grafted on that of Old Rome." As a law student he kept on his desk a copy of Justinian's *Codex*. Jefferson would read extensively in Kames for his legal education, copying out some thirty thousand words of his.

Tobacco, the Chesapeake, and Scotland

A CHANCE OF COMMERCE CREATED THE PATHWAY FOR SCOTTISH SCHOLars to travel to America. In 1707, the Act of Union, which combined Scotland with England and Wales, opened the American trade—most notably, tobacco—to Scottish merchants, who until then had officially been excluded. "As the Union opened the Door to the Scots into our American colonies, the Glasgow Merchants presently embraced the Opportunity," Daniel Defoe wrote in his travelogue of Scotland, compiled in the 1720s. So many Scots were eager to work in America, he added, that "if it holds on for many years more, Virginia may rather be called a Scots than an English plantation."

Entering the tobacco trade on a large scale would be a culture-altering experience for the Scots. It was, writes the historian T. M. Devine, "Scotland's first global enterprise," its debut role "on the world commercial stage." They first officially imported tobacco in 1715, and Glasgow soon became a major trader in the American tobacco crop. By about 1760, its merchants had sup-

planted their competitors to the south, bringing in more than all English ports combined. The Scottish merchants reexported almost all this tobacco, mainly to France (whose smokers preferred the sweet Virginia leaf) and Holland (which favored the more pungent Maryland product), with most of the remainder going to Scandinavia.

The Scots thrived in the tobacco business for several reasons. Partly because of North Atlantic winds and currents, shipping was faster to America by the route around northern Ireland to Scotland than it was going around the south of England, sometimes by as much as two weeks. Operating costs were lower in Glasgow than in London, partly because customs collectors may have been more pliable. The Scots also modernized the business itself, buying whole shiploads in Virginia, rather than using the slow and unwieldy English system of consignment. Finally, the Scots streamlined their banking system, offering innovations such as branch offices and new forms of credit. More than others, Scottish bankers seemed to grasp that time is money, both to producers and to buyers.

A Vast New Sense of Time

NEW WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT TIME WERE IN FACT AN ESSENTIAL ELEment of the Scottish Enlightenment, which also took off during the eighteenth century. The most striking example of this came from the Scottish scientist James Hutton, who played a crucial role in creating the field of geology. His key concept was a geological scale of time—that is, the vast, non-human amount of time it takes for rock to break down into sediment on the seafloor and then to metamorphose through heat and pressure into new forms of rock. In 1788, he concluded that in examining our planet, "we find no vestige of a beginning,—no prospect of an end."

Hutton took this new approach at a time when the conventional wisdom was that the Earth was just six thousand years

old. The notion that the Earth was older than the biblical account allowed had been floating around among Enlightenment thinkers, notes one historian of geology, but Hutton was the first "to perceive that the age of the Earth was so great as to be almost beyond human comprehension." Hutton proposed to think in huge ranges of years—millions upon hundreds of millions—to conceive of the great processes of rock formation, disintegration, and re-formation.

There was a parallel here to the neoclassicism that was at the core of the Enlightenment. Its thinkers understood that their politics and philosophies were built on the rubble of the ancient world. Hutton captured the inquisitive spirit of his time when he commented to a friend that given sufficient attention, "a bag of gravel is a history to me, and . . . will tell wondrous tales."

One measure of the significance of a new idea is the degree to which it spurs new thinking in other areas. Truly big ideas provoke paradigm shifts. Hutton's thinking about the age of the world appears to be related to Adam Smith's on economics and even more to James Watt's work on steam engines. The span of geological time—the current thinking is that the Earth is about 4.6 billion years old—also suggested that the Earth may not have been created only for the use of humans, who according to Hutton's scale are relative newcomers. Charles Darwin in turn may have arrived at his theory of natural selection in part by combining Hutton's conception of vast time with his friend Adam Smith's theories of the free market, applying both to the natural world. Darwin himself had attended the University of Edinburgh but dropped out after deciding he did not want to be a doctor. About five years later, at the end of 1831, he began his years-long voyage aboard the HMS *Beagle* by reading a copy of a geology textbook based on Hutton's theories.

There probably is a good book to be written about how the sense of time changed first in the Enlightenment and then in the Industrial Revolution. Clocks abounded in the houses of the founders, placed in corners, on mantelpieces, and atop entryways. "Probably more than any other of the notable American

statesman, Jefferson had a special interest in timepieces," notes a curator at the Smithsonian Institution. On the ground floor of Monticello, every room but one has a clock. The control of time had moved from the church tower to inside the house, and in doing so had become more precise.

The Scots Tutor America

THE SCOTTISH PRESENCE BECAME AN ESSENTIAL ASPECT OF THE COLONIAL American economy.

During his handful of years of practicing law, Jefferson frequently represented Glasgow merchants seeking to recover loans on which Virginia planters reneged. Tobacco of course was also one of his major crops.

Young university graduates in Scotland looking for work—and there were more of them around, because the country's infant mortality rates dropped during the eighteenth century—found inexpensive passage to America aboard the tobacco ships, in a kind of reverse intellectual Gulf Stream. At the peak of the tobacco trade, in the 1760s, about twenty-six ships sailed every year from Glasgow to the Chesapeake—that is, about one every two weeks. Among the early Scotsmen to arrive was James Blair (Edinburgh, 1673), who helped found William & Mary in 1693 and then presided over it for some fifty years. All in all, it has been calculated that some 211 men who had college or university degrees from Scotland emigrated to America between 1680 and 1780, with many of them landing in tobacco country on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. That region received more graduates from Scottish institutions than from Oxford and Cambridge. Likewise, more Americans enrolled at the University of Glasgow during the colonial period than went to either Oxford or Cambridge.

So it was hardly unusual that Jefferson had a young Scot as his first tutor. "It has been the custom heretofore to have all their Tutors, and Schoolmasters from Scotland," noted Philip Fithian

(Princeton, 1772), the Carter family tutor, who was an anomaly in that he was from New Jersey—albeit one dispatched from there to Virginia by the president of Princeton, who was himself a Scotsman. As a historian of early American education put it, "It is not much of an exaggeration to say that, outside of New England, the Scots were the educators of eighteenth-century America."

Intensifying the impact of the Scottish Enlightenment, the tobacco ships also transported boxloads of books. The Foulis brothers, at the time the leading publishers of classical literature in the English-speaking world, were located in Glasgow, making it convenient to get their books aboard America-bound vessels. The Foulises were known for taking great pains to make their books both beautiful and accurate. Their so-called immaculate 1744 edition of the works of the Roman poet Horace—a particular favorite of Enlightenment thinkers—was widely believed not to contain a single mistake. In fact, there actually were six errors eventually found in the entire work, but this was still exceptional, coming in an era when many books contained one or more mistranslations or typographical errors per page. Jefferson preferred Foulis editions all his life, praising "the perfection of accuracy . . . found in the folio edn of Homer by the Foulis of Glasgow. I have understood they offered 1000–Guineas for the discovery of any error in it, even of an accent, & that the reward was never claimed."

Because of the tobacco connection, the Caledonian influence was strongest in the mid-Atlantic colonies and the South. Far more than the French, German, or English versions of the Enlightenment, the Scottish approach influenced late colonial America. New England was the region least affected by the Scottish intellectual revolution, but even in Massachusetts, some Scottish influence seeped in, through divines who received their higher degrees in Scotland, and by the odd émigré, such as John Campbell, founder of the first colonial American newspaper, the weekly *Boston News-Letter*. Harvard's early commencements featured debates by graduating students. This was "a practice unknown at contemporary Cambridge and Oxford," notes one academic, but

"duplicates contemporary commencement sheets from the University of Edinburgh."

In sum, as one historian puts it, "the Scottish Enlightenment, above all other versions of that western world intellectual phenomenon, took on a heightened significance in the fashioning of the early republic. The story of the rise of the Scottish Enlightenment and the transmission of its ideas to America is fundamental to the history of American thought."

Notably, the empiricism of the Scottish philosophers appears to have stuck with Jefferson all his life. He relied on the evidence of his senses, taking them to convey the basic facts of the world. As an old man he wrote a letter to John Adams summarizing his view of reality:

> *Rejecting all organs of information therefore but my senses, I rid myself of the Pyrrhonisms* [the ancient Greek philosopher Pyrrho's doctrine of complete uncertainty] *with which an indulgence in speculations hyperphysical and antiphysical so uselessly occupy and disquiet the mind. A single sense may indeed be sometimes decieved, but rarely; and never all our senses together, with their faculty of reasoning. They evidence realities; and there are enough of these for all the purposes of life, without plunging into the fathomless abyss of dreams & phantasms. I am satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting or troubling myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence.*

Jefferson Studies with Yet Another Cato

MEANWHILE, MATTERS DIDN'T IMPROVE AT THE SMALL, TROUBLED College of William & Mary. In 1762, Jefferson moved from there a few blocks to the east to study law in the offices of George Wythe, a man of what Jefferson called "exalted virtue." Becoming Wythe's

student, he later wrote, was "one of the most fortunate events" of his life.

George Wythe, then about thirty-five years old, would become a lifelong friend and inspiration to Jefferson. Among his other legal work, he advised George Washington on land acquisitions. Perhaps even more than Jefferson, Wythe saw the new world through a classical lens. Unusually, he had studied the ancient texts with his widowed mother, who somehow had managed to learn Latin and Greek. Little is known about her background, but she must have been an excellent teacher, for Wythe became known, Jefferson wrote, as "the best Greek and Latin scholar in the state." Wythe, he added, "might truly be called the Cato of his country."

In keeping with the Scottish approach, Wythe as a judge tended to cite classical precedents far more than was usual in the English legal system. As chief of the Virginia Chancery Court in the 1790s, he reviewed twenty-one cases and cited classical literature some eighty-five times. "Classical allusions were exceedingly rare in English courts, since Roman precedents were irrelevant to the common law," observes one historian.

Wythe's knowledge of ancient literature "has been rarely equaled in this country," concurred William Wirt, a near-contemporary who would go on to be the United States' longest-serving attorney general. "He was perfectly familiar with the authors of Rome and Greece; read them with the same ease, and quoted them with the same promptitude that he could the authors in his native tongue." Indeed, Wirt found Wythe excessive in his classicism, which is saying something for an era in which elites were saturated in Greco-Roman allusions: "He carried his love of antiquity rather too far; for he frequently subjected himself to the charge of pedantry."

Indeed, Wythe was so prone to cite classical literature that his contemporaries seemed to treat it a bit sardonically. "He could hardly refrain from giving a line of Horace the force of an act of Assembly, not could forbear from quoting the authority of Aulus Gellius [a minor Latin grammarian]," sighed one Virginia chronicler.

Jefferson's Readings

IT WAS UNDER WYTHE THAT JEFFERSON RECEIVED WHAT ONE SCHOLAR calls "his real education." He studied two subjects with Wythe—the law and ancient literature, especially Greek. Under his new teacher, he seems to have begun by diving into Euripides, followed by Herodotus and Homer.

Jefferson's literary commonplace book, a kind of diary of his reading with excerpts, shows what books held his attention at this time. The entries are undated, but experts on his handwriting say that it was probably in the early 1760s that he copied in Greek a quotation from Euripides, the fifth-century Athenian tragedian, that in translation reads: "The words of truth are simple, and justice needs no subtle interpretations, for it has a fitness in itself; but the words of injustice, being rotten in themselves, require clever treatment." Jefferson did not always follow this counsel to be simple in his writing, but he certainly seemed to remember it when he drafted the Declaration of Independence more than a decade later. There are some seventy quotations from Euripides in his commonplace book, more than from any other author.

The longest single set of extracts in the commonplace book is from *The Philosophical Works of the late Right Honorable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke,* constituting some 40 percent of the entire collection. Jefferson wrote those down a year or two later, in about 1765. Now largely forgotten, Bolingbroke, a British politician and writer, was seen in the eighteenth century as a major figure in political and ethical philosophy. Jefferson copied into his book Bolingbroke's irreligious observation that while Christ did not offer a complete system of ethics, the ancient world did: "A system thus collected from the writings of ancient heathen moralists, of Tully [Cicero], of Seneca, of Epictetus, and others, would be more full, more entire, more coherent, and more clearly deduced from unquestionable principles of knowledge." Jefferson would come to own some thirteen volumes by Bolingbroke and

hail Bolingbroke's style as of "the highest order." This may have been because the Englishman's prose style was strongly classical.

It wasn't just Virginians who were taken with Bolingbroke. John Adams also read him assiduously as a young man, and mentions the Englishman several times in his diaries. Typical is this entry from December 1, 1760: "I arose by the dawning of the day, and by sunrise had made my fire and read a number of pages in Bolingbroke." Adams agreed with Jefferson on Bolingbroke's high style but not on his attack on Christianity:

> *His Ideas of the English Constitution are correct and his Political Writings are worth something: but in a great part of them there is more of Faction than of Truth: His Religion is a pompous Folly: and his Abuse of the Christian Religion is as superficial as it is impious. His Style is original and inimitable: it resembles more the oratory of the Ancients, than any Writings or Speeches I ever read in English.*

At that point in American life, to say that someone matched the style of "the Ancients" was the highest possible praise.

Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, one of that poet's most famous works, is addressed to Bolingbroke, and in fact was deeply influenced by him. (Pope also was a friend of Joseph Addison, author of the play *Cato*, and wrote a poetic prologue for it, invoking "virtue" three times in its first seventeen lines.) In his *Essay*, Pope famously instructed the reader to

> *Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;*
> *The proper study of Mankind is Man.*

Jefferson seems to have read *Essay on Man* as an adolescent, and copied some of its lines into his commonplace book, as he did similar sentiments from Bolingbroke: "I say that the law of nature is the law of god. . . . [Of] this I have as certain, as intuitive, knowledge, as I have that two and two are equal to four, or that the whole is bigger than the part."

Jefferson's early religious skepticism is reflected in another passage from Bolingbroke that questions the notion that Christ died for man's sins:

> *Let us suppose a great prince governing a wicked and rebellious people. He has it in his power to punish, he thinks fit to pardon them. But he orders his only and beloved son to be put to death to expiate their sins.*

Even Jefferson's reading of Shakespeare had a classical aspect. Of the sixteen passages of Shakespeare that he copied into his commonplace book, more than half are from two of the plays set in ancient Rome—*Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. He also wrote out four lines from Ben Jonson's play *The Cataline Conspiracy*.

At some point—it isn't clear when—Jefferson also delved into the works of Xenophon. Today we remember that Greek soldier and philosopher primarily for his *Anabasis*, an account of the retreat of Greek mercenaries from what is now central Iraq to the Black Sea, after being hired to fight on the losing side in a Persian civil war in 401 BC. But the founders read quite widely in other works by Xenophon, especially the *Memorabilia*, his memoir of Socrates. Jefferson greatly preferred Xenophon's account of Socrates to Plato's. "Of Socrates we have nothing genuine but in the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon," he asserted. "For Plato makes him one of his Collocutors merely to cover his own whimsies under the mantle of his name."

The two accounts of Socrates indeed differ sharply. Plato's Socrates, writes the classical scholar Jeffrey Henderson, is "unworldly, aloof, and hyper-intellectual," while Xenophon's is "down-to-earth, handy, and practical as well as philosophical and comfortable in any society." In particular, Henderson adds, Plato's Socrates shows no interest in running a large farm, while Xenophon's goes on at some length about it and displays expertise in the subject. In his agrarian disposition, Xenophon's Socrates certainly seems closer to Jefferson's views. At one point, for example, the Greek philosopher persuades one of his interlocutors that "farming is the fairest,

noblest, and most pleasant way to earn a living," a sentiment Jefferson held throughout his life.

Jefferson and Montesquieu

IN 1767, JEFFERSON, WITHOUT ANY FANFARE, TRANSITIONED INTO PRACticing law. Two years later he was elected to the House of Burgesses. Perhaps as a consequence of his new political position, his reading turned from philosophy to governance. He ordered a stack of books from T. Cadell, a London bookshop, among them John Locke's *On Government* and the works of Montesquieu.

He also began a legal commonplace book, to record passages that struck him in his studies of law. Most of it is just a basic study of English law of the day—definitions of property, marriage, and so on. "In cases of burglary, an actual breaking is necessary," he copied. "If the window of a house be open, and a thief with a hook draw out some good of the owner, it is not burglary."

He also wrote out twenty-seven excerpts from the writings of Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu. This seems to have been his first encounter with the French philosophe. Decades later he would cool to Montesquieu, but at this point, he seemed quite taken with him. Locke, by comparison, receives just one passage in the legal commonplace collection.

Jefferson also copied out a section of Temple Stanyan's *Grecian History*, the standard text of the eighteenth century, which may have helped shape his future views of American independence. The Sicilian city of Syracuse began as a colony of Corinth, notes Stanyan, but it grew "large and beautiful," and as it "increased in power," it came to renounce its "obedience" to Corinth. So, too, would come a time when it would become necessary for the American colonies to renounce the political bands that had connected them with their mother country, and to assume among the powers of the earth a separate and equal station.

Jefferson the Epicurean

EPICURUS DOES NOT SEEM TO APPEAR IN EITHER OF THE COMMONPLACE books, literary or legal, which raises the question of when Jefferson first encountered the philosopher who would influence him so deeply. The available evidence indicates that it happened in March 1767. His "Memorandum Books" show that he then was reading Diogenes Laertius, a third-century AD biographer of Greek philosophers. Laertius' work concludes with a long and enthusiastic discussion of Epicurus that quotes this philosopher extensively. "Pleasure is the beginning and end of living happily," Epicurus states in a letter that Laertius quotes. But, he continues, "we are not speaking of the pleasures of a debauched man, . . . but we mean the freedom of the body from pain, and of the soul from confusion."

Oddly, for all his influence and extensive writings, few of Epicurus' actual words have survived, mainly in the form of a handful of letters and a short collection of his sayings. Most of what we know of his teaching comes from the commentaries of others—mainly Diogenes Laertius, the Roman poet Lucretius, and Cicero. Even the known facts of his life are few. Epicurus was born in 341 BC on Samos, an island just off the coast of today's western Turkey. His father probably was a schoolteacher, and he seems to have helped his father and then gone on to teach himself. While an adolescent, he began to think about philosophy, probably beginning with the nature of chaos. He developed a regional following. In 306 he moved to Athens and established "the Garden," a community where he taught his view that the best use of life was to seek tranquility and pleasure. His school achieved some notoriety for admitting women, who were perhaps prostitutes, as students, and also because he was suspected of disregarding the gods. He died in about 270 of a painful blockage caused by kidney stones.

Jefferson would remain devoted to Epicurean thought for the remainder of his life. He summarized that belief system thusly:

Happiness the aim of life.
Virtue the foundation of happiness
Utility the test of virtue . . .
Virtue consists in

1. *Prudence*
2. *Temperance*
3. *Fortitude*
4. *Justice*

A few years later he bought a six-volume set about Epicurus by the French astronomer, priest, and philosopher Pierre Gassendi.

Later in life, in a letter to William Short (William & Mary, 1779), his former private secretary, he would declare that "I too am an Epicurean." He considered the ancient Greek to have given us the "most rational system remaining of the philosophy of the ancients, as frugal of vicious indulgence, and fruitful of virtue as the hyperbolical extravagancies of his rival sects." When one seeks to understand Jefferson, it is almost always helpful to look to Epicurus.

What Jefferson Did Not Know or Do

JEFFERSON IS IN MANY WAYS THE MOST COMPLEX OF THE FOUNDERS, someone with, as the historian Carl Becker puts it, a "sensitized mind [that] picked up and transmitted every novel vibration in the intellectual air." But it is also vital to remember what Jefferson did not know or do. He would not bear arms in the War for Independence. He criticized slavery repeatedly in his life but never did much to end it.

Nor did he ever personally experience the American frontier, which is odd. Washington had traveled deeply into it, and Jefferson's own father rode all over Virginia's frontier, but Jefferson would never go beyond Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, just a day's

ride west of his home. This fact bears some contemplation. The frontier, and the huge, rich expanse beyond it, was a major factor in American life at the time of the Revolution, and would remain so for another 120 years—but Jefferson never ventured into it, although he would send others to explore it. It was an odd omission for such an inquisitive man. One can only wonder if Monticello's position facing eastward is symbolic of his perspective.

He would prove far more mobile in his travels in Europe. Peter Gay, the historian of the Enlightenment, may have been correct when he asserted that, "Thomas Jefferson was European to the bone." Or perhaps Jefferson was just too much of an Epicurean to want to endure the discomforts of frontier life. As he once wrote in a parting letter to a lover, the beautiful Italian-English artist Maria Cosway: "The art of life is the art of avoiding pain." That is a recipe for Epicureanism, but it also provides a pathway for emotional withdrawal. Indeed, that letter continued, "The most effectual means of being secure against pain is to retire within ourselves, and to suffice for our own happiness."

This approach might also have enabled him to justify his failure to examine his own contradictions, if by doing so he would suffer pain or confusion. It might have been too discomfiting for him to recognize that as a man, he was forward thinking but not forward acting. This tension may have been one reason he would be so ambivalent and uneven in his exercise of power.