Chapter 5

Madison Breaks Away to Princeton

OF THE FIRST FOUR PRESIDENTS, JAMES MADISON WAS THE ONE most influenced by Scottish thinking of the time, which led him to the Enlightenment and from there to Roman and Greek history and philosophy.

He was born into wealth, the great-great-grandson of an English ship's carpenter who in the mid-seventeenth century began accumulating land in Virginia. By the time of the birth of James Madison a century later, his family's plantation consisted of thousands of acres of beautiful, rich farmland and forest that looked west toward the Blue Ridge and Shenandoah Mountains. His first teachers probably were family members, who gave him the basics of reading and writing.

From the ages of eleven to sixteen, little "Jemmy" Madison, as his friends and parents called him, studied under Donald Robertson, about whom little is known except that he was born in Scotland in 1717, attended the University of Edinburgh, and emigrated to Virginia in the early 1750s. Madison thought him an excellent teacher, later describing him as "a man of great learning, and an eminent teacher." Not much more is known about this early instructor of the future president.

Madison and Montesquieu

LUCKILY, THERE ARE RECORDS OF THE CONTENTS OF ROBERTSON'S LIbrary. So we can conclude that, like John Adams, Madison probably

was educated partly by Dodsley's *Preceptor,* which stood on Robertson's shelves, alongside works by Horace, Justinian, Sallust, Montaigne, Locke, and Montesquieu.

The last of those authors bears pausing to consider, because the works of Montesquieu constituted a bridge between the Enlightenment and the classical world. In his study of the Enlightenment, Peter Gay finds that "Montesquieu was the most influential writer of the eighteenth century." The Frenchman's thinking had an impact from France to Russia to Italy, Gay adds, but most of all in Scotland. There, his *Spirit of Laws* became "the common coin of learned discussion," always in the background even when not explicitly acknowledged.

Montesquieu came from nobility. He was born in 1689 in a fourteenth-century castle with a moat about ten miles south of the southwestern French port of Bordeaux. He received the classical education then traditional in the aristocracy, and went on to study law. His first book, published in 1721, was *Persian Letters,* a wry look at French society through the eyes of two fictional Persian travelers. Next came his study of the Roman Republic, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline.*

His masterpiece, *The Spirit of Laws,* appeared in 1748. Though politically controversial in France for its skepticism of monarchy, it was enormously successful and soon was translated into English and other languages. Sir Isaiah Berlin, the twentieth-century British philosopher, concluded that Montesquieu's impact remains all around us, pervasive yet often unseen, in the form of modern liberal democracy. Three hundred years ago, Berlin wrote, the French philosophe

> *advocated constitutionalism, the preservation of civil liberties, the abolition of slavery; gradualism, moderation, peace, internationalism, social and economic progress with due respect to national and local tradition. He believed in justice and the rule of law; defended freedom of opinion and association; detested all forms of*

extremism and fanaticism; put his faith in the balance of power and the division of authority as a weapon against despotic rule by individuals or groups or majorities; and approved of social equality, but not to the point at which it threatened individual liberty; and of liberty, but not to the point where it threatened to disrupt orderly government.

It is probable that during his five years with Robertson, Madison read *The Spirit of Laws* and pondered its observations on law, justice, and governance. Here the young man would have been introduced to many of the questions that would occupy him for decades, particularly during the drafting of the Constitution and in his defense of it in the Federalist Papers. How can a republic be made sustainable? And can a large and expanding nation even be a genuine republic? How can smaller entities confederate into something larger? Is there a way for a nation to wield the power of a large state while retaining the flexibility of a smaller one?

In his writings, Montesquieu always looked first and foremost to Rome and Greece. "It is impossible," he sighs happily at one point, "to be tired of so agreeable a subject as ancient Rome." The beginning of *The Spirit of Laws* is essentially a meditation on how to inject ancient wisdom into modern governance. Of the twenty chapters in Montesquieu's Book XI, for example, twelve are about the Romans and Greeks. Hardly a page of its first volume goes by without some look into the classical world—an invocation of the details of the laws of Rome, Athens, and Sparta; or the observations of Plato, Tacitus, and Livy; or a denunciation of the licentiousness of ancient Syracuse.

Montesquieu concluded that large nations could not be republics, flatly stating that "it is natural for a republic to have only a small territory; otherwise it cannot long subsist." This observation would become a major issue when Americans two decades later turned to drafting a Constitution.

In *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, Montesquieu dwelled even more on the peculiar

vulnerabilities of republics. "What makes free states last a shorter time than others is that both the misfortunes and the successes they encounter almost always cause them to lose their freedom," the French thinker warned. "A wise republic should hazard nothing that exposes it to either good or bad fortune. The only good to which it should aspire is the perpetuation of its condition." Such observations are of historical interest to us, but to the colonial generation they must have carried the urgency of news bulletins. Could they design a republic that avoided the pitfalls the Frenchman described? If so, how?

Jefferson was notably ambivalent about the French philosopher. "In the science of government Montesquieu's spirit of laws is generally recommended. It contains indeed a great number of political truths; but almost an equal number of political heresies: so that the reader must be constantly on his guard." Jefferson did not detail his objections, but he likely was irked by Montesquieu's conclusion that a major cause of Rome's decline was Epicurean thought.

Madison finished off his secondary education by studying two years with Thomas Martin, a 1762 graduate of the College of New Jersey at Princeton.

That brought a significant decision: Where to go to college? There had been no question that if John Adams went to college, it would be to Harvard, and the same was true for Jefferson with William & Mary. But Madison was living in a new era. By 1769, when it came time for him to make his pick, resistance floated in the air of the colonies. The Stamp Act, meant to assert British authority over the colonies and to raise revenue to pay for the French and Indian War, had been fought, successfully, leading to its repeal in 1766. But it soon was followed by other punitive moves by Parliament, collectively known as the Townshend Acts.

One American college caught Madison's eye. It had led the way in engaging with the times: the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton. It was to the America of the 1760s what the University of California at Berkeley would be two hundred years later, a hotbed of political activism, capturing public attention.

Madison's Choice

INFLUENCED BY MARTIN, MADISON DECIDED AGAINST ATTENDING William & Mary, which would have been the normal choice for a wealthy young Virginian. Irving Brant, Madison's most thorough biographer, calls Madison's decision to go to distant Princeton "an act of near-treason to Virginia." Madison said later that with his fragile health, he wanted to avoid the swampy, even pestilential climate of Williamsburg. He also may have been put off by the Virginia college's decaying reputation—it was, reports one historian, "in a dissolute and unenviable state." But Madison probably was being discreet. Times had changed from when one simply went to the nearest college.

Also, Madison was a son not of the old Virginia Tidewater, but of the newer settlements farther west in the foothills of the Blue Ridge. This area was home to several Presbyterian missionaries educated at Princeton, so he may have seen his choice of Princeton partly as an act of loyalty to the Piedmont.

At about the same time Madison was contemplating his future course, George Washington likewise decided against sending his dissolute stepson, Jacky Custis, to William & Mary. Having looked into the state of the college and its environment, Washington recorded that "from the best enquiries I could make whilst I was in, and about Williamsburg I cannot think William and Mary College a desirable place to send Jack Custis to—the Inattention of the Masters, added to the number of Hollidays, is the subject of general complaint; & affords no pleasing prospect to a youth who has a good deal to attain, & but a short while to do it in." Likewise, Robert Carter, an influential Virginia planter who had attended William & Mary before studying law in London, and who had hired Philip Fithian to tutor his children, decided that the college was "in such confusion at present, & so badly directed, that he cannot send his Children with propriety there for Improvement & useful Education—That he has known the Professors to play all

Night at Cards in publick houses in the City, and has often seen them drunken in the street!"

Washington's disinclination to send young Custis to William & Mary probably was not political in motivation, because he eventually decided to enroll him at King's College in New York, now Columbia University. King's was the most Tory of any college in the colonies, having been founded by Anglicans in conservative reaction to Princeton and Yale. After delivering the boy to New York, Washington managed to take in a performance of *Hamlet*—apparently the first time he ever saw Shakespeare staged. But his attention to his stepson's education proved otherwise fruitless, as the restless young man dropped out only a few months later.

James Madison was a far more diligent young man than Jacky Custis. Unlike much of Virginia's gentry, Madison was never seduced by the pastimes of gambling, boozing, and horseracing. In the summer of 1769, he set out northward for Princeton on horseback, accompanied by his tutor, his tutor's brother, and a favored enslaved person named Swaney. Young Madison was a good match for the young college, which led American higher education at the time in both educational progressivism and political activism. Its leaders expressly looked beyond educating ministers to preparing men to run their society. Samuel Davies, president of the college in 1761, proclaimed that it was "a Seminary of Loyalty, as well as Learning, and Piety; a Nursery for the State, as well as the Church."

Founded in 1746, the college was just five years older than young Madison. Like the Scottish universities, it was religiously tolerant. The college's founders had stated "that those of every religious Denomination may have free and equal Liberty and Advantage of Education in the said College any different Sentiments in Religion notwithstanding."

Just by choosing to go there, Madison may have been following an inclination toward political engagement. Here there is a contrast with his eventual mentor, the more sensual Thomas Jefferson, who loved many things—among them, books, ideas, music, wine, French cuisine, and married women. As the historian Mary

Sarah Bilder observes, the colder Madison, who did not marry until the age of forty-three, may have loved just one thing: politics. And also, perhaps, maps—in his library at Montpelier he had some two hundred maps and atlases. But not people. "Mr, Madison a gloomy, stiff creature, they say is clever in Congress, but out of it has nothing engaging or even bearable in his manners—the most unsociable creature in Existence," commented Martha Dangerfield Bland, wife of another Virginian politician.

Madison must have reveled in colonial Princeton. As one biographer phrases it, the college "smoked with rebellion." One visitor to the campus was perplexed to find that the young men, whom he had expected to be preparing for the ministry, plunged into "discussing . . . the most perplexing political topics." As another Madison biographer put it, "The College of New Jersey in Madison's day was the seedbed of sedition and nursery of rebels Tory critics charged it with being." The college could get away with such activism in part because it was not as financially dependent on a provincial legislature as were other colleges of the time. Early political and religious differences with New Jersey's government had forced it to become relatively self-sufficient. This environment must have been electrifying to a contemplative young man who had grown up somewhat isolated in rural Virginia.

Significantly for Madison's future thinking, Princeton was also the first national college, even before there was a nation. The college had been "conceived of as an integrative institution," "an intercolonial and cosmopolitan institution as Harvard, William and Mary, and Yale had never been," and it had quickly become so. At a time when 90 percent of Harvard's student body came from Massachusetts and 75 percent of Yale's from Connecticut, Princeton by design drew from the entire Eastern Seaboard. Of 301 young men who attended it in the two decades before Madison arrived, 59 percent were from New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey; 28 percent from New England; and 13 percent from Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. There also were students from Canada and the West Indies.

It was a good place for Madison to develop an understanding of both the commonalities and sectional interests of the colonies.

Another sign of Madison's politicization was that he had been there only a few weeks when he mailed to Martin, his old tutor, two copies of a pamphlet on the English republican radical John Wilkes. Later that year, Madison attended a commencement exercise at which honorary degrees were awarded to two leaders of colonial American resistance to the British: John Hancock (Harvard, 1754) and John Dickinson. Hancock had been arrested the previous year and his sloop, *Liberty*, had been seized, supposedly for not paying duties on a shipment of madeira wine, in a case that appeared to be trumped up. Dickinson later acquired a reputation as a conservative revolutionary, but at this point was known for his series of public letters that "more than any other individual articulated the radical position of the 1760s."

Madison Meets Witherspoon

IN ITS REACH, IN ITS ECUMENISM, AND IN ITS VERY STYLE, THIS LIVELY school was surprisingly Scottish. The College of New Jersey of 1769 was "a provincial carbon copy of Edinburgh," concludes Douglass Adair, a specialist in the intellectual history of the founders. The resemblance was in large part attributable to one dynamic man, John Witherspoon, the Scottish-born president of the college. Witherspoon in just a few years, states one of Madison's biographers, had "remade the college into a major outpost of the Scottish enlightenment." He also would develop into a significant political figure, ultimately becoming the only clergyman or college president to sign the Declaration of Independence or to serve in the Continental Congress.

President Witherspoon is a striking and unusual figure in early American history. He was the first person brought from overseas to lead an American college. A 1739 graduate of the University of Edinburgh, he had emigrated in 1768 to the colonies not as a

young man looking for a start in life, as so many tutors did, but as a married man with five surviving children. Yet even in his middle age he had a rebellious streak. A heavyset but vigorous and charming man of medium height, he brought great energy to the college, updating the syllabus, expanding the library, and generally making the college more competitive. Remarkably, he managed simultaneously to upgrade admission standards, expand the enrollment, and put the college on a sound financial footing. Partly because of Witherspoon's contributions, the college library grew to 1,500 volumes, considered impressive at the time. Here is how one intellectual historian summarizes his achievement: "Witherspoon put the College of New Jersey at the head of higher education in America, where it remained at least until the revitalization of Yale under Timothy Dwight at the end of the eighteenth century and the renaissance of Harvard early in the nineteenth."

Like any good product of the Scottish Enlightenment, Witherspoon steered by classical reference points. When he built a country house outside Princeton in 1773, he named it Tusculum, for the town southeast of Rome where Cicero had his country villa. Not surprisingly, his favorite French writer was Montesquieu. For his journalism, he employed the pseudonym Epaminondas, a reference to the great Theban general who appears in Xenophon's *Hellenica*.

Preparing for a planned trip to promote the college and persuade the planters of Jamaica, Barbados, and other parts of the West Indies to send their sons to Princeton, Witherspoon wrote a speech describing the college's approach. The curriculum was the classical one of Greek and Latin languages, philosophy, history, and mathematics. But he also was making room for the teaching of science, as well as English and French literature, at the time considered daring moves. As it happened, he did not make the Caribbean voyage, but mailed to planters in the islands copies of the talk he had prepared.

He also was a progressive about discipline. He informed his audiences that he did not believe in flogging his students: "No correction by stripes is permitted." Rather, he said, the students are

governed by "the principles of honor and shame." All the teaching, he said, was done by himself and three tutors, but he planned to add a professor of mathematics. The school was independent of government, led by those averse to "a fawning, cringing spirit," and aimed to imbue a "spirit of liberty and independence," he stated.

"All persons, young and old, love liberty: and as far as it does them no harm, it will certainly do them good," he wrote in an essay. "Let them romp and jump about as soon as they are able."

Madison the Student

ARRIVING AT NASSAU HALL, WHICH HOUSED THE COLLEGE, MADISON would have seen the bust of Homer then overlooking its central doorway. Entering the college, he would find one drawback to his having studied with Scottish tutors. He learned, to his chagrin, that he spoke French with a Scottish brogue that made him quite incomprehensible to speakers of the language.

Aside from that embarrassment, he took to Princeton swimmingly, despite being pale, sickly, and small, standing a few inches above five feet and weighing less than 140 pounds. He was slight even by the standards of his own time. The writer Washington Irving, encountering him years later, would write, "Ah! poor Jemmy!—he is but a withered little apple-John." Madison was extremely discreet about his health, but many years later would allude to his seizures in autobiographical notes, stating that "causes preventing him from entering the Army, viz his feeble health, and a Constitutional liability, to sudden attacks, somewhat resembling Epilepsy, and suspending the intellectual functions."

It may be telling that the two students who became his closest friends at Princeton were not other sons of the Southern gentry, like him, but rather the offspring of successful urban merchants of the North. William Bradford was the son of a Philadelphia

printer, publisher, and bookseller, while Philip Freneau's father was a wine importer in New York. Neither of the fathers owned enslaved people. Madison's fellows noticed almost immediately his intense studiousness. Despite his physical fragility, Madison studied far into the night, even though the students were awakened at five o'clock for morning prayers. They and the tutors took their meals together, occasionally joined by President Witherspoon. "The general table-drink is small-beer or cyder. For supper, milk only is the standing allowance."

Madison found an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. Samuel Blair, in his overview of the college from the previous decade, emphasized that students were free to disagree with their teachers: "In the instruction of the youth, care is taken to cherish a spirit of liberty, and free enquiry; and not only to permit, but even encourage their right of private judgment, without presuming to dictate with an air of infallibility, or demanding an implicit assent to the decisions of the preceptor."

The freshman course focused on Greek and Latin authors—Horace, Cicero's *Orations*, Lucian's *Dialogues*, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. In the last of these, they would read about an ancient constitution that mandated equal rights and freedom of speech for its citizens. It was a sign of the thoroughness of Madison's preparation that just about a month after arriving, he took and passed the freshman-year examinations, and so was allowed to skip that first year of studies. Thus he began with the sophomore course, which plunged deeper into Greek and Latin, and began classes on "the sciences, geography, rhetoric, logic, and the mathematics."

Politics swirled through the corridors of Nassau Hall. In the summer of 1770, the merchants of New York bowed to Parliament and began importing British merchandise, ending their observance of a general colonial agreement to shun imports. Madison reported to his father that the students of Princeton responded with a funereal protest march in mid-July and that a message from the New Yorkers "to the Merchants in Philadelphia requesting their concurrence was lately burnt by the Students of this place

in the college Yard, all of them appearing in their black Gowns & the bell Tolling." That fall, at the end of Madison's first year, one of the commencement speakers was Witherspoon's son James, whose subject was the obligation to resist a king who acts cruelly or unlawfully.

The junior year added logic and moral philosophy, the latter a core subject for Witherspoon. In the first sentence of his 1748 *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume had defined "moral philosophy" as "the science of human nature." Witherspoon, for his part, divided the subject into "Ethics" and "Politics." The former might be taken as being about governing the individual, while the latter is about governing society. Today such a course might be considered something like an overview of political and social science. Back then it would have been seen as instruction on how to be a virtuous person and how to cultivate a society of virtuous individuals—with all the import that virtue carried in the eighteenth century.

Half of Witherspoon's lectures in the subject, records one educational historian, were on issues such as the "problems of rights and obligations, government and society property and contracts, and civil and international law." He placed a special emphasis on the need for civil liberty, and so on the consequent obligation of free men to resist tyranny. In one lecture he listed the legitimate reasons for rebellion. "There was a high value in this to Madison," wrote one of his biographers, "for it introduced him to public law as something alive and growing, and it helped him to see America as a field for its growth."

Attending Witherspoon's fourth lecture on moral philosophy, Madison first would have heard the professor examine various definitions of "virtue," and then consider how it operates in the world. "True virtue certainly promotes the general good," Witherspoon stated. "Private and public interest . . . are distinct views; they should be made to assist, and not destroy each other."

In the next lecture, Witherspoon discussed how conflicts between the interests of different people or groups might be addressed in government:

Hence it appears that every good form of government must be complex, so that the one principle may check the other. It is of consequence to have as much virtue among the particular members of a community as possible; but it is folly to expect that a state should be upheld by integrity in all who have a share in managing it. They must be so balanced, that when one draws to his own interest or inclination, there may be an over poise upon the whole.

In this discussion of checks and balances, Witherspoon may have planted the seeds of the all-important tenth of Madison's Federalist Papers, written nearly two decades later, in which Madison explains how interests can balance each other in a government expressly designed to curb excessive power in any one person or branch. At the same time, Madison appears to have disregarded or discarded Witherspoon's view that "the Roman Empire fell of its own weight," a warning against nations growing too large.

In the senior year, all previous subjects were reviewed, with a new emphasis on writing and debating, or "disputation." These older students learned to speak before audiences, delivering both sermons and orations. The evidence is that the weak-voiced Madison was not very good at either form of public speaking and was excused from giving a speech at his graduation. He officially graduated in September 1771, but stayed on studying until the following spring, mainly, he said, because he felt too weak to travel home. But he also simply may not have wanted to leave Princeton.

Washington Aroused, Jefferson Not So Much

BY APRIL 1769, EVEN STOLID GEORGE WASHINGTON WAS BEGINNING TO sound a bit revolutionary. It was typical of him that when he was pondering a problem, he tackled the issue as directly as possible. So, for example, he opened a letter to his neighbor, the pensive George Mason, with the thought that

At a time when our lordly Masters in Great Britain will be satisfied with nothing less than the deprivation of American freedom, it seems highly necessary that something shou'd be done to avert the stroke and maintain the liberty which we have derived from our Ancestors.

But the question, he continued, was just how to keep hold of that "liberty"? Taking up arms ultimately may prove necessary, he ventured, but only as a last resort. Interim steps would be required. Hence, he was mulling the "non-importation agreement" being circulated among leaders of the colonies.

Mason responded the very same day. "Our All is at Stake," he agreed.

Thomas Jefferson was a bit distant from this talk of taking up arms. In 1769 he began work on his great architectural endeavor, the home atop a rural Virginia hill he dubbed Monticello. For materials, he shunned English wood in favor of the more Latinate brick. For design, he was inspired by Palladio, the great sixteenth-century Italian architect, who himself borrowed heavily from the buildings of ancient Rome. One can only wonder if Jefferson was influenced by Socrates' admonition, reported by Xenophon, that a dwelling should be designed so that "each room invited just what was suited to it." A dome, unknown to the Greeks but the characteristic form of Roman architecture, eventually would top the home he designed.

The Rise of Revolutionary Classicism

OTHERS WERE MORE ENGAGED, ESPECIALLY IN BOSTON. AS COLONIAL politics became more unstable, American political activists would rely heavily on classicism, in part to signal their virtue, but also their intent. Beginning in 1768, Samuel Adams penned a series of articles attacking the British, using the pseudonym Vindex, a reference to the Gaulish leader of what is now central France who

rebelled against the emperor Nero. Vindex was described by the Roman historian Cassius Deo as "powerful in body and of shrewd intelligence . . . skilled in warfare and full of daring for any great enterprise; and he had a passionate love of freedom and a vast ambition." Vindex died in the process, but set off a series of events that would topple Nero in 68 AD.

In March 1770, British soldiers shot and killed several people in the central part of Boston. On the second anniversary of that Boston Massacre, Joseph Warren (Harvard, 1759) delivered a speech to an overflow audience at the Old South Meeting House. By some accounts, he wore a toga while speaking. It was an attachment to freedom, he began,

> *which raised ancient Rome from the smallest beginnings, to that bright summit of happiness and glory to which she arrived; and it was the loss of this which plunged her from that summit, into the black gulf of infamy and slavery. It was this attachment which inspired her senators with wisdom; it was this which glowed in the breasts of her heroes; it was this which guarded her liberties, and extended her dominions, gave peace at home, and commanded, respect abroad. . . .*

But, he warned, when Rome's leaders forgot their dignity and were seduced by corruption, then its soldiers, "urged only by hopes of plunder and rapine, unfeelingly committed the most flagrant enormities; and hired to the trade of death, with relentless fury they perpetrated the most cruel murders, whereby the streets of imperial Rome were drenched with her noblest blood." The same, he implied, was happening on the cobblestoned streets of Boston.

Heed the Roman example, he urged his listeners: Oppose oppression, disdain luxury, and remain united and patriotic. Do so, he promised, and "you may have the fullest assurance that tyranny, with her accursed train, will hide their hideous heads in confusion, shame and despair." Then America may be "a land of liberty" and "the seat of virtue."

Even the more conservative older colleges began to heed the changing political climate. At William & Mary, the confusingly named James Madison, a cousin of the future president, would one day be president of the college. But in 1772, when he delivered a commemorative oration, he was still a student. In it, he offered the basic political recipe of colonial classicist politics, albeit a bit awkwardly: "The active Soul, kindling with public Virtue, communicated its searching Flame, refined natural Liberty into civil Society, Uncertainty into the secure Enjoyment of Property, and Danger into an Asylum against all Invasion. Thus from mutual Consent arose the Body politic." Nor was Harvard immune to the growing republicanism of the times. In 1773, it ceased the practice of listing members of a given class by their family's standing, and began to do so alphabetically.

Madison Meets Jefferson

LIKE MANY NEW GRADUATES OUT IN THE WORLD, MADISON SOON longed for his bright college years and pals. "I want again to breathe your free Air," he wrote to his college friend William Bradford (Princeton, 1772), a future attorney general. He was particularly upset by the persecution of Baptists in his part of the state for preaching without a license from the government. In Culpepper, not far from his home in Virginia, there were "5 or 6 well meaning men in close Goal [jail] for publishing their religious Sentiments which in the main are very orthodox." This punishment, he wrote, "vexes me the most of any thing whatever." There also was a bit of a class aspect to this: The Baptists were critical of the luxurious indulgences—notably, dancing, drinking, horseracing, and gambling—around which many in the Virginia gentry built their lives.

Two years later, Madison first met Thomas Jefferson. Eventually Madison, eight years younger and at least eight inches shorter, would become the white son Jefferson never had. The older man

gushed about him. In his abortive attempt at an autobiography, Jefferson saluted "the rich resources of his luminous and discriminating mind. . . . Never wandering from his subject into vain declamation, but pursuing it closely in language pure, classical, and copious." With those powers, he added, "were united a pure and spotless virtue."

There are several different Thomas Jeffersons—the Latinate lawyer, the flowery wooer of other men's wives, the slave owner looking to increase his profits, the direct and powerful stylist of the Declaration. He is often a bit pompous, maintaining his distance both socially and emotionally. With Abigail Adams and some other married women he found attractively intelligent, he is tenderly seductive. But with Madison, he is conversational and lucid. It is in his letters to Madison that we probably come as close as we ever can to glimpsing the real Jefferson, or at least the least guarded one. Those communications would become especially noteworthy in the late 1780s, when Jefferson was overseas while Madison was working on the Constitution, and then a decade later, when the two were plotting against the Federalists and building the first American opposition party to contend for power.