Book Review

Robert M. S. McDonald, ed. *Light and Liberty: Thomas Jefferson and the Power of Knowledge*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. 256 pp. Cloth $40.00.

This anthology began as a scholarly conference to celebrate the inauguration of West Point's new library, Thomas Jefferson Hall, in 2008. The conference theme was "Jefferson's multitudinous efforts to enlighten America's citizens, and encourage them ... to embrace and advance his expansive vision for a free society." If such a goal written without qualification or an enormous asterisk raises your eyebrows, you are, in fact, onto something. *Light and Liberty* is a broad, engaging exploration of Jefferson's ideas that suffers from a tendency to celebrate or take at face value Jefferson's ideas about knowledge in a republic, while downplaying (or simply omitting) a serious discussion of two issues Jefferson took very seriously: race and slavery. A surprisingly critical afterword by veteran Jefferson scholar Joyce Appleby reviews the book's chapters along these lines, placing race, slavery, and other important issues front and center. Appleby notes, and I agree, that *Light and Liberty* is a worthwhile and significant, but sadly cramped scholarly endeavor.

Three themes run through this book that are worthy of comment. The first, a strength, is the ingenuity of the editor and authors in conceiving of the connection between knowledge and republicanism in a variety of ways. These include, but go well beyond, Jefferson's famous plans for public educational institutions. In the first chapter, Brian Steele argues that for all his universalism, Jefferson was a nationalist at heart who believed that Americans were "sociologically" better suited than Europeans to a republican form government, having lived free of the Medieval rot of Catholicism and Aristocracy. Thus, Jefferson viewed Shay's Rebellion with mild approval, as an affirmation of Americans' sturdy republican morality. (Steele does not note that Jefferson also lamented, famously, the special rot that resulted from plantation slavery, and viewed rebellions by slaves with a special abhorrence.) In the next chapter, Johann Neem uses the theories of modern sociologist Pierre Bordieu, as well as economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, to analyze Jefferson's plans to diffuse knowledge as a way of preparing American citizens to properly exercise and enjoy their republican rights. Richard Samuelson, in a related essay, explores Jefferson's ideas of a natural aristocracy, drawing a strong and fruitful comparison with John Adams.

Other chapters range further afield. Cameron Addis describes with delightful detail how Jefferson's secular vision for education slowly

drowned in the wave of religious enthusiasm caused by the Second Great Awakening—an irony indeed for a man who placed so much emphasis on the innate capacity of Americans to govern themselves. Christine Coalwell McDonald joins Robert M. S. McDonald in a groundbreaking history of Jefferson's vision for West Point, which orients the institution westward, as the training ground for the vanguard of warrior scientists needed to realize Jefferson's Empire of Liberty. In a lovely microhistory, Frank Shuffelton delves into Jefferson's personal library and book recommendations to friends. Craig Reynolds contributes an outstanding analysis of Jefferson's republican architectural vision for America. And Gaye Wilson paints the details of Thomas Sully's portrait of Jefferson, commissioned by West Point in 1821.

A second theme that runs through the book is the relationship among nature, science, and religion in Jefferson's thought. While each of the first four chapters sheds light on one aspect of this nexus, the cumulative effect of the book is to help the reader appreciate anew the ways in which Jefferson understood each idea in relation to each other and, perhaps even more importantly, in relation to good government. What is often missing in today's debates about that relationship in public education—which tend to focus on the rights of parents and children—are much deeper questions about the distinction between what we believe and what we know, and how vital that distinction is for our ability as a society to engage each other in democratic republicanism. The editor's choice to place the chapter on the Westward orientation of West Point in the fifth position, then, proves to be a clever move—subtly drawing together Jefferson's politics and epistemology into a new interpretation of the original meaning (for Jefferson) of the Military Academy.

A third theme, and this is a considerable weakness in several chapters, the introduction, and the book as a whole, is the absence of race and slavery. The editor acknowledges the absence in the introduction though does not remedy it, while Joyce Appleby highlights the oversight in her afterward—expressing surprise, as well, at the celebratory tone adopted by so many of the authors in the volume. The editor's introduction brushes these concerns aside too lightly. He writes, "As Joyce Appleby points out..., the limitations of Jefferson's vision still matter and his views on race, slavery, and gender continue to merit careful consideration." So far so good. But he then explains, "Yet this study aims less to point out what he did not do or did not think than what he actually accomplished or contemplated" (pp. 14–15).

Here I must beg to differ. Jefferson did a great deal and thought a great deal about race, slavery, and (for that matter) gender. The evidence is too overwhelming to fully enumerate. He enslaved a woman with whom he had sex for much of his life, and enslaved the children she

bore him. He spoke passionately against slavery early in his life, but he ended up defending Southern States' Rights arguments and supported the spread of slavery in the Missouri Crisis (though with the flimsy argument that spreading it would actually end it). He went out of his way to undermine the accomplishments of Afro-American intellectuals. He expressed complex views about the intellectual capacities of women, overseeing the education of his own daughter but making little effort to include girls and women in his republican vision, which gendered women and men in ways fundamental to his views (just as it raced people as well). His westward "Empire of Liberty" was, of course, already occupied by nations of people who had to be killed or removed from their homelands, a point which Jefferson himself understood full well, as Appleby reminds us.

We need not necessarily judge this man out of the context of his day, as revisionists have sometimes asked us to do, in order to appreciate the beauty and significance of his life and works. But by the same token, we must acknowledge that slavery, race (and gender) are fundamental if we are to understand Jefferson's views on light, liberty, and especially the "power of knowledge." Of course in some cases, categories of race and gender would be not be especially useful for the authors' purposes: analyzing Jefferson's architectural vision, for example, uncovering the background story of his portrait, or even (perhaps) his secular view of education. Others, however, could benefit a great deal from such categories. If, for example, West Point was designed to conquer the West, surely a deep discussion of the people conquered in the name of liberty deserves some consideration. How did West Point deploy notions of race to convince one group of humans that they could wipe out another in the name of liberty? How did this make sense to Jefferson? An analysis of Jefferson's "Natural aristocracy," including its eugenic tendencies, surely needs to explore Jefferson's race theory in depth, just as knowledge diffusion to help people exercise their freedom in midst of a fundamentally patriarchal, slave society warrants some discussion of what slavery and freedom meant, for men and for women, and how these ideas could be mutually reinforcing.

This is not to say the authors of the essays in *Light and Liberty* completely ignore race and slavery. The first paragraph of Brian Steele's chapter acknowledges Jefferson's problematic views on race and gender, for example, before leaving them behind. But none of the chapters takes advantage of the revolution in historical scholarship in the last two generations that has demonstrated the centrality of slavery, race, and gender to understanding the early republic in general, Jefferson in particular, and above all, how power is organized. A stand-alone chapter on such issues could have helped fill the vacuum, as could have

an introduction that acknowledged and elaborated on the significance of what was not in the body chapters.

If, as I suggested, the lack of critical analysis of race, slavery, and other unseemly issues can be attributed to the occasion for the conference that led to the book, however, then it is only fair to conclude my review by reiterating what the book does do well and why it deserves to be read and appreciated. Consider my previous paragraphs to be my asterisk. *Light and Liberty* includes several outstanding chapters and fresh perspectives. The authors represent a great range of experiences and specialties, from award-winning veterans to talented up-and-comers. And the generous spirit with which Joyce Appleby writes her critical afterword, and editor Robert M. S. McDonald publishes it, promotes the kind of open dialogue and quest for knowledge that Jefferson championed, and that make him worthy of celebration in any age.

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