



## **GRAAT On-Line issue #4 October 2008**

### **Introduction : Reading Thomas Jefferson**

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The texts in this fourth issue of *GRAAT On-Line* were amongst those presented at the seminar “Autour de Thomas Jefferson,” held at the Université François Rabelais - Tours, in April 2008. The aim of this gathering was to bring together European researchers currently working on Jefferson and his time, and the challenge was how to articulate their work around this multifaceted figure. The first point in common was that the participants carried out much of their research work as fellows at the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, located on Jefferson’s Monticello estate, in Virginia. For years the ICJS has steadily promoted the formation of a worldwide community of Jeffersonian scholars, of which Europeans are now permanent members.

The purpose of the participants was not to present a European reading of Jefferson’s work. Nevertheless, in one way or another, they all touched upon the connection between Jefferson the European and Jefferson the American. If according to the American historian Daniel Boorstin “the contemplative tradition of [the] European man has not easily harmonized with the active enterprises of the American,”<sup>i</sup> these papers suggest how the “harmonization” between Jefferson the thinker and Jefferson the maker occurred, or not.

Hannah Spahn clearly places Jefferson in the realm of contemplation. She explains that Jefferson was a forward-looking historical thinker who relied on the

visual qualities of experiences and examples of the past to pass historical judgments. His aesthetic approach was deeply rooted in the European tradition of historical thinking and writing, notably in the historical aesthetic ideas of the Scottish philosopher Lord Kames. Spahn shows how Jefferson, however, moves from imagining history as a fixed picture, in his youth, to being skeptical about conceiving historical writing equal to historical painting, later in his life. And the reason for this shift was the major upheaval in the British colonies, the American Revolution. It shattered Jefferson's assumption that historical examples under his eyes would guide his fellow men into the future as it was no longer possible to presuppose that human nature remained the same throughout time and place.

Jefferson's political thinking was also connected to European thinkers, such as the French philosophers. Indeed, Jefferson chose to translate the *Commentaire de Montesquieu* by Destutt de Tracy, which he especially admired. After closely examining both the French original and the English translation, Annie Léchenet concludes that Jefferson does not defend the classical republic, nor does he adhere to agrarian conservatism. But like Tracy, Léchenet affirms, Jefferson perceived a democratic republic as a place where citizens, because they are economically independent and virtuous, participate in the public debate in order to achieve the common good. In fact, Tracy's text enabled Jefferson to confirm his previously conceived ideas, therefore the American adopted and adapted the European.

Yet the center of Jefferson's attention would gradually move away from the Old World to the New when occupied with material tasks such as the territorial expansion of the American nation. When President Jefferson bought Louisiana from France, in 1803, Spain became a neighbor of the United States on the unclearly defined southwest border. My own paper thus focuses on the unsuccessful attempts of Jefferson's southwest expeditions up the Red and the Arkansas Rivers to collect all the geographical information necessary for the drawing up of a definitive U.S. / Spanish empire boundary. Jefferson clearly

understood, I argue, that the major threat to the expeditions was not European (Spain was suspicious of the U.S. expansionist thrust), but American, i.e. the Osage Indians, who resisted the U.S. takeover of their lands.

With these three papers and a selection of recommended Internet links, *GRAAT On-Line* hopes to contribute modestly but usefully to the development of Jefferson Studies.

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<sup>i</sup> Boorstin, Daniel. *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1948), 1993.