

Introduction

Thomas Jefferson, like Tennyson's brook, goes on forever. There is no stopping him, no coming to an end either of himself as a personality or to the discoveries to be made concerning him. He himself never ceased to grow, and consequently our knowledge of him can never be considered complete.

—E. Millicent Sowerby

JOHN F. KENNEDY, HOSTING AT the White House a dinner for Nobel Prize winners from the Americas in 1962, observed: "I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone." It was a precisely crafted tease, discounting his guests and then raising them up, for to be compared with Jefferson, even en masse, was a compliment. And it was also a deft nationalistic touch, pointing out that the intellectual achievements of that one eighteenth-century man from Virginia had never been matched, even two centuries on.

Today, the popular image of Jefferson, the third president of the United States, is rather mixed. He is famous for the Declaration of Independence, his controversial views on slavery, his house Monticello with its complex interpersonal household relations, and such "inventions" as the improved plow moldboard. But we do not always appreciate that in a time of revolution in politics and in the world of the mind Jefferson was always admired (or feared) as a prodigious intellectual—one of the greatest of the age in either America or Europe. And just what that means is often also unclear, especially with respect to his fascination for, and use of, the greatest of modern inventions—science.¹

Time and history have not dealt easily with Jefferson. He was too mercurial, too complex, and too intellectual even to fit easily in his own time, and it is quite impossible for us to capture him in a few easy phrases.