

The Man Who Could Not Live Without Books

Old Master had abundance of books; sometimes would have twenty of 'em down on the floor at once—read fust one, then tother.

—Isaac Jefferson

FOR EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEANS, safe in the gilded (if drafty) halls of London and Paris and the celebrated university towns of Edinburgh and Freiberg and secure in their sense of superiority, the idea that Americans could be serious intellectuals was absurd. America was a land of farmers and Indians, forests and swamps, mosquitoes and bears. Even as late as 1820, Sydney Smith, an English littérateur and coiner of witty aphorisms, observed: “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? Or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue? What does the world yet owe to American physicians or surgeons? What new substances have their chemists discovered? Or what old ones have they advanced? What new constellations have been discovered by the telescopes of Americans? Who drinks out of American glasses? Or eats from American plates? Or wears American coats or gowns? or sleeps in American blankets? Finally, under which of the old tyrannical governments of Europe is every sixth man a slave, whom his fellow-creatures may buy and sell and torture?”¹

One exception to this blanket condemnation of America and Americans was Benjamin Franklin, who was admired by the British and adored by the French and to whom the Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote, “America has sent us many good things, Gold, Silver, Sugar, Tobacco, Indigo, etc. But you are the first philosopher, and indeed the first Great Man of Letters, for whom we are beholden to her.”²

If Franklin was America’s first scientific philosopher, then Jefferson was the second. The author of *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, the Declaration of