CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Practical Scientist

ONCE BACK HOME IN VIRGINIA, Jefferson was able to turn the inventiveness of European science to his own use. Today, when the words "Jefferson" and "science" are brought together, the response of most people is to conjure up the man who was famous for his inspired attention to every kind of mechanical device and technological innovation. That is the Jefferson familiar to the general public; his mechanical genius is demonstrated, with justifiable pride, in tours of his magnificent home, Monticello. Unfortunately, it has to be recorded that the number of devices that Jefferson actually *invented* is very small; he borrowed and adapted many more. But that does not matter; there was much more to Jefferson's philosophy than tinkering. What he was able to do was to take existing ideas and devices and improve them, bringing to bear his depth of learning, his wide travels, and, in some cases at least, his ability in mathematics.[1] Just to have improved one or two objects would have been enough for ordinary mortals to procure fame, if not fortune.

In his later years (especially during and after the presidential years, 1801–1809), Jefferson's scientific interests shifted. Books on science had been the largest single category in his great library but when it was sold and he assembled his "Retirement Library," scientific books now accounted for only 9 percent of the total 931 titles (as listed in the catalogue of its sale in 1829).[2] The library of some 350 titles that he created for his house at Poplar Forest, another retirement project, had only 8 titles in natural science (but that included the full 52 volumes of Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*).

By this stage he had clearly moved away from some of his more theoretical interests in natural philosophy, considering contemporary specula-