

Measuring the Shadow

AS PART OF THE MEASURE OF a complex and elusive man, we may try to sum up the balance sheet of Thomas Jefferson's science. Although he was fascinated by science, we cannot say that he was a scientist in the modern sense; he did not make a living through science, nor did he maintain a scientific laboratory. Nonetheless, he made original contributions to science, and they were highly significant, as was the role that science played in his general thinking.

Daniel Boorstin long ago showed that Jefferson's Enlightenment Age philosophy of nature and man did not survive the onslaught of nineteenth-century materialism. "His morality possessed virtues which a naturalistic morality in America one hundred years later would almost certainly lack."²¹ It may well be true that the Darwinian paradigm, industrialization, the search for precious metals and fuels to rip out of the ground, and, today, computers, nuclear energy, and DNA have pushed a Jeffersonian view of nature (and God) to the sidelines. But Jefferson's science was more than philosophy, and while one can argue about his philosophy, he also had significant scientific accomplishments.

If Jefferson's library reflected a conservative and thoroughly Baconian approach to the relationships of the various sciences, in his actions he was decidedly more modern. For him, the traditional line of separation between the observational sciences of natural history and the theoretical sciences of natural philosophy (like mathematics and physics) was blurred more often than it was honored. Finding the identity of the mastodon (the American incognitum), for example, was more than a taxonomical issue; it involved causes, climate, and geography. He used his knowledge of mathe-