

Looney, J. Jefferson (ed). *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson – Retirement Series, Vol.5: May 1812 to March 1813*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. 812pp.

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This volume is the latest addition to the modern edition of the Thomas Jefferson papers. In progress since 1950, a greater urgency has recently gripped the series which is now publishing the volumes covering the presidency and retirement concurrently. The series provides a unique perspective on the complexities of Jefferson's character, his wide-ranging interests, and the broader history of revolutionary and early national America. This speedier schedule is thus very welcome, and it is to be regretted that the other similar ongoing project, the Adams papers, has not yet emulated it (their published volumes have yet to progress beyond the early 1780s).

Given that Jefferson claimed frequently in his letters of this period that he had retired from public life, and that death could not be far away, his range of activities is striking. While the outbreak of the War of 1812 and the early American military disasters feature heavily, these compete for Jefferson's time with land disputes, plantation management problems, seemingly endless appeals for support from aspirants to office, authors promoting new works and scientists with new discoveries. The pose of the disinterested sage in retirement may have been a convenient one, particularly with those pestiferous office seekers, but it was quite clearly often a pose.

The chronological layout also emphasises the gaps between these Jeffersonian worlds. Many of those seeking patronage clearly imagine, or affect to do so, an almost god-like figure of national significance in his secluded retreat, and, as noted, some of Jefferson's replies do emphasise the seclusion. But the letters are eloquent on the struggles of plantation life. A lengthy sequence shows Jefferson grappling with the era's problematic transportation, exacerbated by the outbreak of war, as he tries to move a newly purchased spinning machine from New York to Monticello. Towards the close of the volume the author of the Declaration of Independence is reduced to lobbying Virginian legislators in an effort to protect his lands from what

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appears to be the rather dubious behaviour of a canal company. Throughout there are frequent notes about debts to be paid, and queries as to what sums various crops may hope to fetch. Jefferson's mountain-top is a complex and not always comfortable place.

Nor is the retirement as complete, even in the political sphere, as Jefferson sometimes liked to imply, and it is these letters which are particularly revealing of his complex character. Some have seen modern publication before (correspondence with John Adams and James Madison), but it is highly instructive to read them side by side, a process which makes Jefferson's silences to one recipient as eloquent as his loquacity to another. This juxtaposition shows that the correspondence with Adams, at least on Jefferson's side, was not a free, frank exchange of views. In several of his earlier letters, Adams was voluble on the subject of the war and foreign affairs, drawing not a jot of response on those topics from Jefferson. In parallel with this silence, Jefferson was writing forcefully to others, whom one suspects he regarded as reliable republican correspondents (Madison, Elbridge Gerry and others). These letters expressed feverish hopes of the conquest of Canada, and roundly denounced traitors, aristocrats and the "English faction" (125), sometimes in language not completely dissimilar to that adopted by the High Federalists during the war crisis of 1798. Eventually, Adams retreated into obscure byways of New England history and by the end of the volume Jefferson could write to Benjamin Rush, who originally kick-started their renewed connection, that he and Adams avoided politics because it was the only subject on which they differed. Whether this displays a noble reticence preserving a great friendship, or a disquieting unwillingness to face a past where neither's actions to the other had been whiter than white, the reader will have to determine.

Jefferson's tendency to show two faces is clearer in two letters to Madison regarding David Higginbotham's aspiration to become consul at Lisbon (313-314). The first is a straightforward outline of Higginbotham's character and qualities. The second, enclosed within the first and urged not to be retained in the public files, rescinds it entirely, now describing the man as wholly unfit for the post, and protesting that only the duties of friendship obliged Jefferson to write it. Such underhandedness seems compatible neither with friendship nor the image of the sage of Monticello.

Textual reproductions in this volume now mirror the originals more closely than in earlier volumes (including preserving superscriptions above the line and Jefferson's habit of not capitalising at the beginning of sentences), but not at the expense of clarity and readability. Editorial notes are richly detailed, although a brief

recapitulation of Jefferson's legal dispute with Edward Livingston (presumably covered in an earlier volume) would have been helpful for those without immediate access to it.

These comprehensive volumes bring us as close to Jefferson, warts and all, as we are ever likely to get. They are central to any examination of Jefferson and his era. The completion of the series is eagerly anticipated.