

Jefferson's Cop-Out

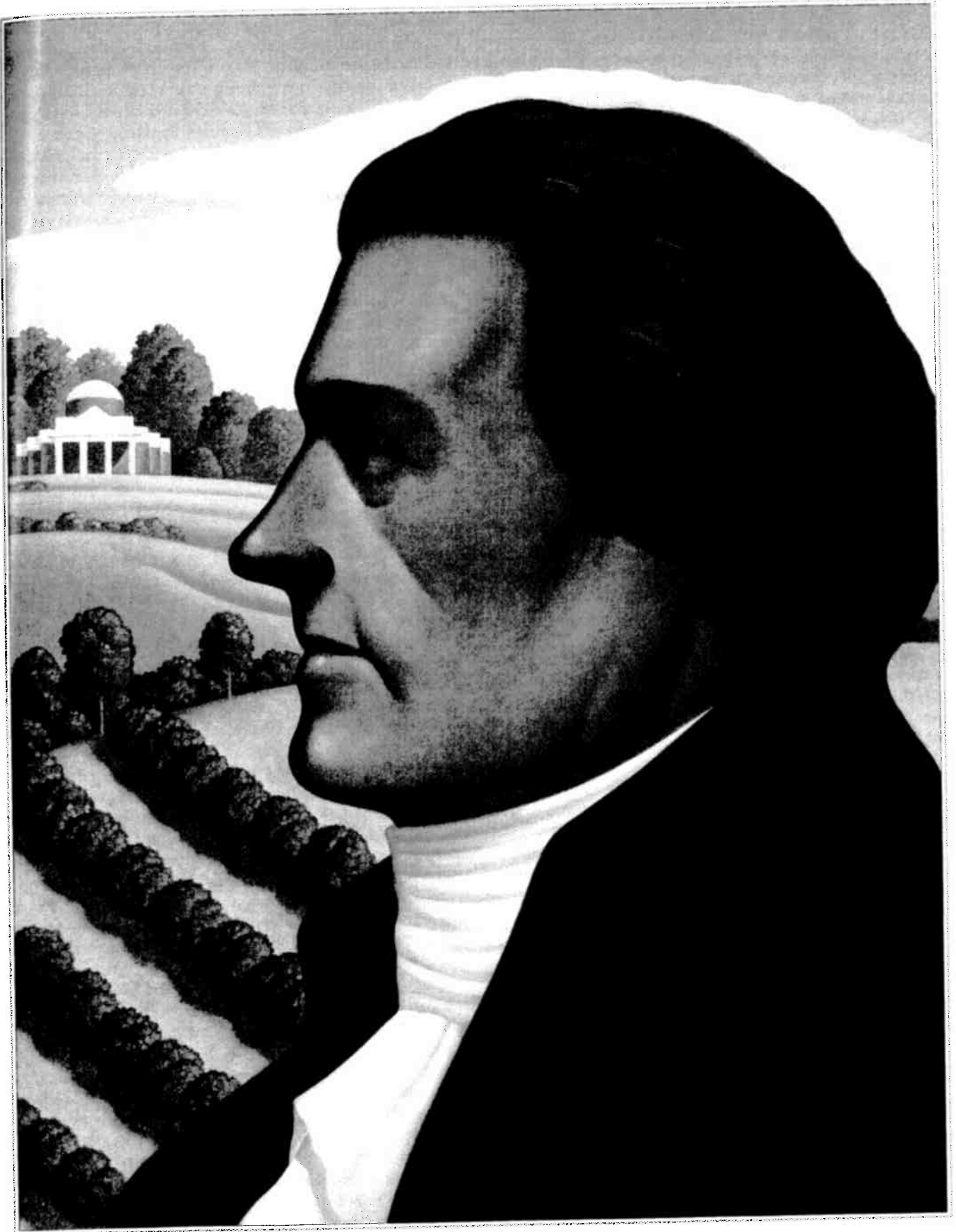
Of all the gaps between his words and his actions, Jefferson's ownership of slaves is the most troubling. How did he manage the contradiction?

BY JOSEPH J. ELLIS

Illustrations by Robert Goldstrom

HOMAS JEFFERSON was many things, but mostly he was a creature of paradox: the wealthy Virginia aristocrat who wrote the most famous statement of equality in American history; the sincere advocate of agrarian simplicity who worshipped the art and architecture of Paris; above all, the fervent believer in human freedom who lived his entire life as a slave owner. This last paradox has always seemed the most poignant, in part because Jefferson himself acknowledged the massive gap between his principled ideals and his personal reality, and in part because the paradox Jefferson lived was emblematic of the larger disjunction in American society—now generally regarded as the central dilemma of American history—between the promise of liberty and the fact of racial discrimination.

Jefferson never resolved the paradox. He went to his grave owning almost 200 slaves and just after drafting a last letter in which he paid tribute to the egalitarian prin-



ciples of the Declaration of Independence. The question has always been: How did he manage this glaring contradiction? Granted, we all live lives that require us to straddle the space between our fondest hopes and our imperfect actions. But in Jefferson's life that space was a yawning chasm that seemed to defy the customary internal compromises. How did he do it?

If we had access to a time machine, and were also allowed to bring along a tape recorder and lie detector, the obvious place to interrogate Jefferson would be at Monticello, preferably as he strolled along Mulberry Row, where his household slaves were quartered. We could walk alongside the master of Monticello, reading for the record several of his most uplifting public statements about human rights and individual freedom, then ask him to comment on the apparent contradictions between the lyrical rhetoric and the sordid reality of the scene.

Since we obviously can't interview Jefferson, the next best course is to recover as much of the surviving historical evidence as possible, acknowledge that it is unavoidably incomplete and fragile, then do all we can to interrogate that evidence with disciplined empathy. We must not be merely accusatory (i.e., how could you do it?). We shouldn't search the past for trophies that satisfy our political agenda in the present. We must show, as Jefferson so famously put it, "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind"—including those of dead men whose opinions, shaped by conditions two centuries ago, differ from our own. We also need to be canny about the place and time from which we extract our historical sample. The obvious place is Monticello. The most revealing moment is the three-year period between 1794 and 1797:

Jefferson has retired to Monticello after serving four years as America's first secretary of state. His evolving attitude toward slavery is just reaching a crucial stage of its development. And, most helpfully for our purposes, he is surrounded by his slaves. We even have an intriguing historical clue to confirm we are looking in the right place, for Jefferson tells us what is in his mind at the time: "I have my house to build, my fields to farm, and"—here is the clue—"to watch for the happiness of those who labor for mine."

Precisely because Jefferson's most inspiring utterances about humankind's prospects seem capable of levitating out of any specific social context, floating above messy realities like balloons at a political convention, we need to bring our recovered Jefferson back to earth. That means Monticello.

CONTEXT IS CRUCIAL TO OUR PURSUIT. THE most elemental fact confronting Jefferson upon his return to Monticello in 1794 was that he was heavily in debt. He owed about £4,500 to English creditors and another £2,000 to bankers in Glasgow. (Comparisons in modern-day terms are notoriously tricky to calculate, but can conservatively be estimated at several hundred thousand dollars.) He was not, as he liked to describe himself, an independent yeoman farmer but an indebted Virginia planter. His many statements about returning to the bucolic splendors of the agrarian life were unquestionably sincere, but they masked the

more pressing reality that farming for Jefferson, now more than ever before, meant making money.

His landed assets were impressive, but deceptively so. Jefferson owned nearly 11,000 acres, about equally divided between estates surrounding Monticello in Albemarle County and western lands concentrated in Bedford County, about 90 miles away. This made him one of the largest landowners in the state. One of the reasons he found it difficult to accept the full implications of his indebtedness was that he thought of wealth like an old-style Virginia aristocrat, in terms of land rather than money. For Jefferson, land was the best measure of a man's worth and, as he put it, "that of which I am the most tenacious." Despite the haunting presence of his English and Scottish creditors, he thought of himself as a landed and therefore a wealthy man.

Although Jefferson never fully grasped the intractability of his economic predicament, he had a sharp sense of the need to generate income. He described his thinking in a letter to a French correspondent in the spring of 1795:

On returning home after an absence of ten years, I found my farms so much deranged that I saw evidently ... that it was necessary for me to find some other resource in the meantime... I concluded at length ... to begin a manufacture of nails, which needs little or no capital, and I now employ a dozen little boys from 10 to 16 years of age, overlooking all the details of their business myself and drawing from it a profit on which I can get along till I can put my farms into a course of yielding profit.

Every morning except Sunday he walked over to the nailery soon after dawn to weigh out the nail rod for each worker, then returned at dusk to weigh the nails each had made and calculate how much iron had been wasted by the most and least efficient workers. Isaac Jefferson, a young slave at Monticello at the time, later recalled that his master made it clear that the nailery was a personal priority and that special privileges would be accorded the best nailmakers: "[He] gave the boys in the nail factory a pound of meat a week.... Give them that wukked the best a suit of red or blue; encouraged them mightily." Jefferson even added the nailery to his familiar refrain in the pastoral mode: "I am so much immersed in farming and nail-making," he reported in the fall of 1794, "that politicks are entirely banished from my mind."

From a financial perspective the nailery made perfect sense. But seen in the context of Jefferson's eloquent hymn to the bucolic beauties of the pastoral life, it was a massive incongruity. Jefferson himself gave no sign that he was aware of any contradiction: At times his obliviousness seemed almost calculated. There is no evidence that it ever occurred to him that his daily visits to the nail factory, with its blazing forges and sweating black boys arranged along an assembly line of hammers and anvils, offered a graphic preview of precisely the kind of industrial world he devoutly wished America to avoid.

At a more mundane level, Jefferson's dedication to the meticulous management of the nailery illustrates what compelled his fullest energies as master of Monticello. Both Madison Hemings, son of Sally Hemings, and Edmund

Bacon, who was Jefferson's overseer for 16 years, recalled that Jefferson never showed much enthusiasm for agricultural pursuits. "It was his mechanics he seemed mostly to direct, and in their operations he took great interest," Hemings remembered. Jefferson spent little time in his fields, preferring to leave their cultivation to his overseers except at harvest time. He spent no time at all behind a plow and almost no time watching his slaves perform the arduous tasks of farming. What most fascinated him and commanded his fullest attention were new projects that demanded mechanical or artisanal skill of his laborers and that allowed him to design and superintend the entire operation. The nailery was the first of such projects, but it was followed by construction of a new threshing machine, plans for a flour mill, and an expensive canal along the Rivanna River.

But the biggest project of all was Monticello itself. He had been contemplating a major overhaul of his mansion ever since his return from France in 1789. From a financial point of view the idea of renovating Monticello, unlike his plans for the nailery, made no sense at all. But when it came to the elegance and comfort of his personal living space, Jefferson's lifelong habit was to ignore cost altogether, often going so far as to make expensive architectural changes in

state of repair or improvement throughout most of Jefferson's lifetime. More to our purposes, from 1794 to 1797 Monticello was part-ruin, part-shell and mostly still a dream.

ALMOST ALL THE WORK, WHETHER IN THE fields, the nailery or at the construction site for Monticello itself, was done by slaves. The total slave population on Jefferson's several plantations was a fluctuating figure, oscillating above and below 200 and divided between Albemarle and Bedford counties at the ratio of roughly three to two. Between 1784 and 1794, as Jefferson attempted to consolidate his landholdings and reduce his mounting debts, he had disposed of 161 slaves by sale or outright gift. But natural increase had raised the slave population on all his estates to 167 by 1796, and that number would grow gradually over the ensuing years. On his plantations in Albemarle County it would seem safe to estimate that Jefferson was surrounded by about 100 slaves during his three-year retirement. African-American slaves constituted the overwhelming majority of residents at Monticello.

If Jefferson had a discernible public position on slavery in the mid-1790s, it was that the subject should be allowed to

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houses or hotels where he was only a temporary resident. His much grander plans for Monticello followed naturally from two idealistic impulses that seized his imagination with all the force of first principles: First, he needed more space, more than twice the space of the original house, in order to accommodate his domestic dream of living out his life surrounded by his children and grandchildren; second, his revised version of Monticello needed to embody the neo-classical principles of the Palladian style that his European travels had allowed him to study firsthand. Since the expansion had to occur within severely constrained conceptions of symmetry and proportion, the new structure could not just spread out like a series of boxcars; but neither could it rise vertically, since Palladian buildings must present at least the appearance of a one-story horizontal line, preferably capped by a dome. What this meant, in effect, was that the original house needed to be almost completely torn down and rebuilt from the cellar up.

Monticello became a congested construction site replete with broken bricks, roofless rooms, lumber piles and, if some reports are to be believed, over 100 workmen digging, tearing and hammering away. The millions of 20th-century visitors to the mansion are the real beneficiaries of Jefferson's irrational decision to redesign and rebuild Monticello in the 1790s, though they would be mistaken to think the house in which Jefferson lived looked as it does now. It was in some

retire gracefully from the field of political warfare, much as he himself was doing by retiring to Monticello. He wanted the whole controversy over slavery to disappear. This represented a decided shift from his position as a younger man, when he had assumed a leadership role in pushing slavery onto the agenda in the Virginia legislature and the federal Congress. His most famous antislavery formulations, it is true, were rhetorical: blaming the slave trade and the establishment of slavery itself on George III in the Declaration of Independence; denouncing slavery as a morally bankrupt institution that was doomed to extinction in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. His most practical proposals, all of which were made in the early 1780s, envisioned a program of gradual abolition that featured an end to the slave trade, the prohibition of slavery in all the western territories, and the establishment of a fixed date (he suggested 1800) after which all newborn children of slaves would be emancipated. Throughout this early phase of his life it would have been unfair to accuse him of hypocrisy for owning slaves or to berate him for failing to provide moral leadership on America's most sensitive political subject. It would, indeed, have been much fairer to wonder admiringly how this product of Virginia's planter class had managed to develop such liberal convictions.

Dating the onset of a long silence is an inherently imprecise business, but Jefferson's more evasive posture toward slavery seemed to congeal in the 1780s with the pub-

lication of *Notes on the State of Virginia*. It was written in 1781 and 1782, when he was still reeling from charges of cowardice for fleeing a marauding British army in his last days as governor. *Notes* contained the most ringing denunciation of slavery Jefferson had yet composed, including an apocalyptic vision of racial war if emancipation were postponed too long. But these unquestionably sincere sentiments, written when he was emotionally exhausted and his customary protective shield was down, were not intended for public consumption. Jefferson never authorized the initial publication of *Notes*, which appeared in a French edition in 1785, and only grudgingly agreed to an English edition two years later, when it was clear there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Notes, in fact, was the only book that Jefferson published in his lifetime, for he much preferred to convey his opinions on controversial issues in private conversations and personal letters, where he could tailor his views to fit his particular audience. The publication of *Notes* put him "out there" on the most controversial subject of the day without the capacity to modulate or manipulate his language to fit different con-

ditioned, was that white and black Americans could not live together in harmony. He had already explained why in *Notes*:

Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.

Here was the single instance, with the most singularly significant consequences, when Jefferson was incapable of believing in the inevitability of human progress. Blacks and whites were inherently different, and, though he was careful to advance the view "as a suspicion only," he believed people of African descent were sufficiently inferior to whites in mental aptitude that any emancipation policy permitting racial interaction was a criminal injustice to the freed slaves as well as a biological travesty against "the real distinctions which nature has made." The unavoidable conclusion, then, was

Jefferson's fundamental conviction was that white and black Americans could not live together in harmony

stituencies in France and England or, most worrisome to Jefferson, his fellow slave owners in Virginia. From the moment that *Notes* began to circulate within the planter class of the South, Jefferson began to back away from his leadership role in the debate over slavery. His more passive and fatalistic position, which he maintained for the rest of his life, was that public opinion was not prepared for emancipation at present and must await enactment at some unspecified time in the future. In effect, he was abdicating his position as the uncrowned king of Virginia's most progressive planters.

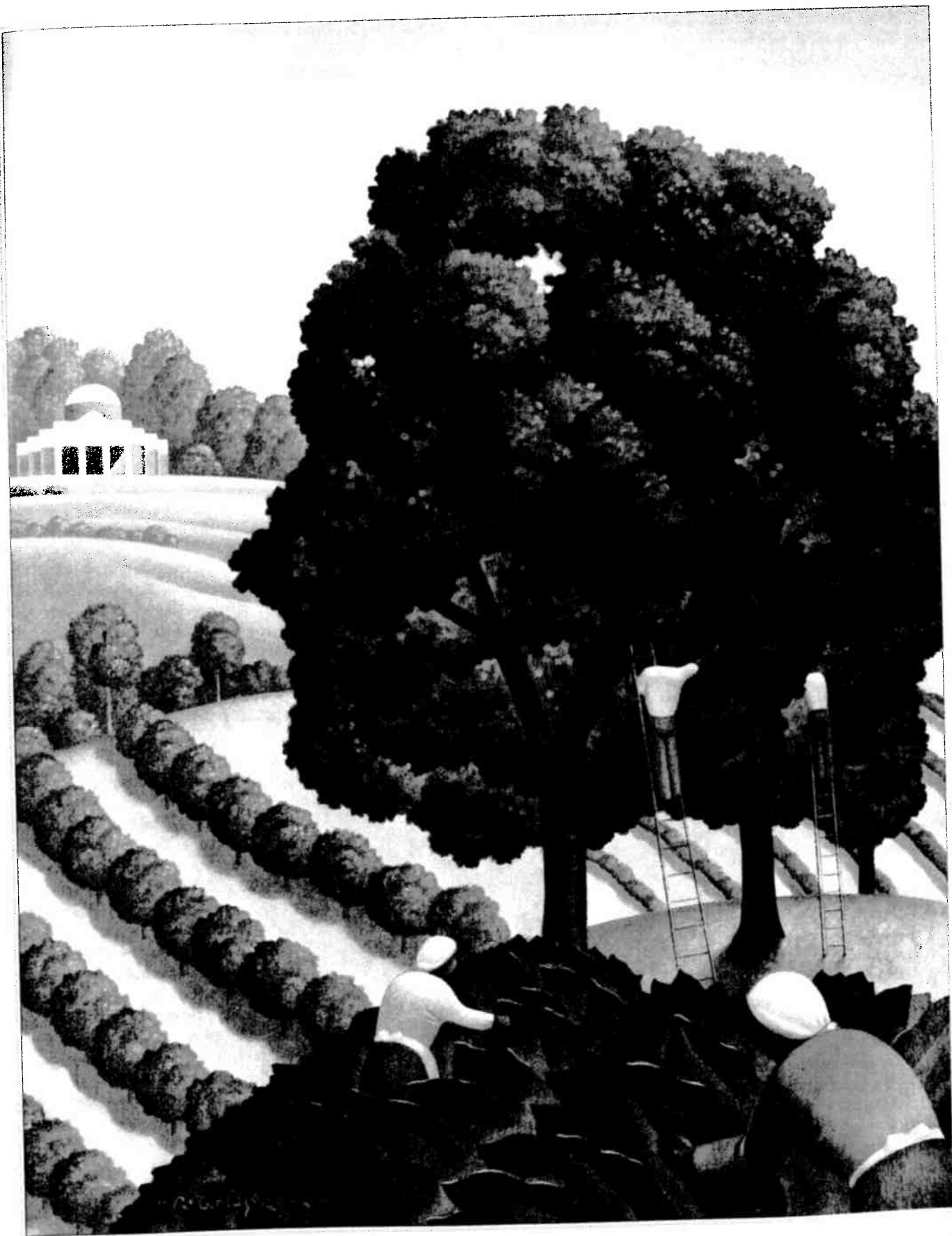
Moreover, the more pessimistic racial implications of the argument he had made in *Notes* began to settle in and cause him to realize, for the first time, that he had no workable answer to the unavoidable question: What happens once the slaves are freed? This was the kind of practical question that Jefferson had demonstrated great ingenuity in avoiding on a host of other major political issues. Indeed, one of the most seductive features of his political thinking in general was its beguiling faith that the future could take care of itself. Slavery, however, proved to be the exception to this larger pattern of inherent optimism. For one brief moment, in 1788, he seemed to entertain a bold if somewhat bizarre scheme whereby emancipated slaves would be "intermingled" with imported German peasants on 50-acre farms where both groups could learn proper work habits. But even this short-lived proposal only served to expose the inherent intractability of the postemancipation world as Jefferson tried to imagine it.

His fundamental conviction, one that he never ques-

tioned, was that slavery was morally wrong, but racial segregation was morally right. And until a practical solution to the problem of what to do with the freed slaves could be found, it made no sense to press for emancipation.

Finally, during the 1780s Jefferson became more intensely aware how much his own financial well-being depended upon the monetary value and labor of his slaves. As the depth of his own indebtedness began to sink in, there seemed to be three ways to raise large amounts of capital to appease his creditors: He could sell off land; he could sell slaves outright; and he could rent or lease the labor of his slaves to neighboring planters. He expressed considerable guilt about pursuing the latter two options, suggesting they betrayed his paternal obligations to the black members of his extended "family." He gave specific instructions to his overseers that particular slaves who had been with him for some time should not be sold or hired out unless they wished it. But much as he disliked selling his slaves or temporarily transferring control over them to others, he recognized that such a course constituted his only salvation. In short, once he grasped the full measure of his personal economic predicament, the larger question of emancipation appeared in a new and decidedly less favorable light. It was now a matter on which he could literally not afford to be open-minded; nor, as it turned out, were the exigencies of this debt-induced predicament to change over his lifetime, except to grow worse.

The net result of all these influences was a somewhat tortured position on slavery that combined unequivocal condemnation of the institution in the abstract with blatant pro-



crastination whenever specific emancipation schemes were suggested. The Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, a French aristocrat fleeing the revolutionary bloodbath in Paris, captured the essential features and general flavor of Jefferson's slavery stance during his visit to Monticello in June of 1796:

The generous and enlightened Mr. Jefferson cannot but demonstrate a desire to see these negroes emancipated. But he sees so many difficulties in their emancipation even postponed, he adds so many conditions to render it practicable, that it is thus reduced to the impossible. He keeps, for example, the opinion he advanced in his notes, that the negroes of Virginia can only be emancipated all at once, and by exporting to a distance the whole of the black race. He bases this opinion on the certain danger, if there were nothing else, of seeing blood mixed without means of preventing it.

selected from his more remote Bedford plantations and that the sale itself be carried out in a distant location, explaining that he "[did] not like to have my name annexed in the public papers to the sale of property." Or, to take another example, in 1792 he approved the sale of Mary Hemings to Thomas Bell, a local Charlottesville merchant, claiming that the sale was justifiable "according to her desire." What he did not say was that Bell, a white man, was the father of Mary's two youngest children. The sale permitted the couple to live as common-law husband and wife.

Part by geographic accident, part by his own design, the organization of slave labor at Jefferson's plantations reinforced this shielding mentality in several crucial ways. Recall, first of all, that Jefferson's cultivated lands were widely distributed, half of them at Bedford several days' ride away.

In his declining years, Jefferson retreated even further from the progressive views he had held as a young man

If his position on slavery as a young man merits a salute for its forthright and progressive character, his position as a mature man invites a skeptical shaking of the head for its self-serving paralysis and questionable integrity. He saw himself, even more than his slaves, as the victim of history's stubborn refusal to proceed along the path that all enlightened observers regarded as inevitable. In that sense, he and his African-American charges were trapped together in a lingering moment, a historical backwater in which nature's laws would be sorely tested as both sides waited together for the larger story of human liberation to proceed with freed blacks finding a more suitable location with people of their own kind in Africa or the Caribbean. In this overly extended transitional moment, his primary obligation, as he saw it, was to serve as a steward for those temporarily entrusted to his care and to think of his slaves, as he listed them in his *Farm Book*, as members of "my family," to be cared for as foster children until more permanent and geographically distant accommodations could be found.

Jefferson's sophisticated network of interior defenses allowed him to sustain this paternalistic self-image by blocking out incongruous evidence. For example, when forced by his creditors to sell 11 slaves in 1792, he ordered that they all be

Until he completed his second house at Poplar Forest during his final retirement, Jefferson seldom visited those distant estates. Recall, too, that he seldom ventured into his fields at Monticello or Shadwell, leaving daily management of routine farming tasks to overseers. While he kept elaborate records of his entire slave population in his *Farm Book*, including the names and ages of all hands, his direct exposure to field laborers was limited. His cryptic notation on the division of slave labor is also revealing in this regard: "Children till 10 years of age to serve as nurses. From 10 to 16 the boys make nails, the girls spin. At 16 go into the ground or learn trades." The ominous phrase "go into the ground" accurately conveyed

Jefferson's personal contact with that considerable majority of adult slaves who worked his fields. Except as names in his record books, they practically disappeared.

When Jefferson did encounter them, they were usually working on one of his several construction projects or apprenticing in the nailery. Most of his face-to-face contact with laboring slaves occurred in nonagrarian settings—the nailery, the sawmill, the construction site around the mansion—where he supervised them doing skilled and semiskilled jobs. Even the nailery, with its overtones of assembly-line monotony and Dickensian

Books of Interest

**White over Black: American Attitudes
Toward the Negro, 1580-1812**

by Winthrop Jordan (University of North Carolina
Press, 1968)

*The best study of racism in early America with a
penetrating assessment of Jefferson's psychological makeup*

The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery
by John Chester Miller (University Press of
Virginia, 1991)

The standard account of Jefferson's shifting position on slavery

American Slavery, American Freedom
by Edmund S. Morgan (W.W. Norton, 1976)
*The story of the origins of slavery in Virginia and Jefferson's
complicity in its preservation*

drudgery, allowed him to think about the work of the slave boys as an apprentice experience providing them with a marketable trade. In explaining Jefferson's compulsive tendency to launch so many mechanical and construction projects at Monticello, it is possible that they not only served as outlets for his personal energies, but also allowed him to design a more palatable context for interacting with his slaves as hired employees rather than as chattel.

All the slaves working in the household, and most of the slaves living along Mulberry Row on the mountaintop, were members of two families that had been with Jefferson for over two decades. They enjoyed a privileged status within the slave hierarchy at Monticello, were given larger food and clothing rations, considerably greater latitude of movement, and even the discretion to choose jobs or reject them on occasion. Great George and his wife, Ursula, referred to as King George (a joke on George III) and Queen Ursula, were slaves in name only and effectively exercised control over management of the household. The other and larger slave family were all Hemingses, headed by the matriarch, Betty Hemings, whom Jefferson had inherited from his father-in-law, John Wayles, along with 10 of her 12 children in 1774.

It was an open secret within the slave community at Monticello that the privileged status enjoyed by the Hemings family derived from its mixed blood. Several of Betty's children, perhaps as many as six, had most probably been fathered by John Wayles. In the literal, not just the figurative sense of the term, they were part of Jefferson's extended family. All of the slaves that Jefferson eventually freed were descendants of Betty Hemings. If what struck the other slaves at Monticello was the quasi-independent character of the Hemings clan with its blood claim on Jefferson's paternal instincts, what most visitors tended to notice was their color. The Frenchman Liancourt left this account in 1796: "In Virginia mongrel negroes are found in greater number than in Carolina and Georgia; and I have even seen, especially at Mr. Jefferson's, slaves, who, neither in point of colour nor features, shewed the least trace of their original descent; but their mothers being slaves, they retain, of consequence, the same condition."

Since the members of the Hemings family were the front-and-center slaves at Monticello, most guests and visitors to the mountaintop experienced the Jeffersonian version of slavery primarily as a less black and less oppressive phenomenon than it actually was. And, as overseer Edinund Bacon recalled, "there were no Negro and other outhouses around the mansion, as you generally see on [other] plantations," so the physical arrangement of appearances also disguised the full meaning of the slave experience. In short, Jefferson had so designed his slave community that his most frequent interactions occurred with African-Americans who were not treated like full-fledged slaves and who did not even look like full-blooded Africans because, in fact, they were not. In terms of daily encounters and routine interactions, his sense of himself as less a slave master than a paternalistic employer and guardian received constant reinforcement.

By the same token, if slavery was a doomed institution whose only practical justification was to preserve the separa-

tion of the races until the day of deliverance arrived at some unspecified time in the future, Jefferson was surrounded by rather dramatic evidence that it was failing miserably at that task. Racial mixing at Monticello was obviously a flourishing enterprise, much more so than his wheat fields. Several of Betty Hemings's grandchildren looked almost completely white, graphic testimony that whatever had begun with John Wayles had certainly not stopped back then. Jefferson's stated aversion to racial mixture had somehow to negotiate its visible examples all around him. In a sense, what he saw only confirmed his deepest fears about an amalgamation of the races, though his code of silence dictated that no mention of the matter be permitted in public. Despite his remarkable powers of avoidance, this is one topic we can be sure he brooded about, even if he never talked about it for the record. The eloquence of his silence provides the best evidence of what Monticello was like as a real place rather than an imagined ideal. If literary allusions afford the best mode of description, we need to dispense with Virgil's pastoral odes and begin to contemplate William Faulkner's fiction.

OF COURSE, THE STORY OF JEFFERSON AND HIS slaves at Monticello does not end in 1797. Twelve years later, after four years as vice president and eight years as president, he returned for his final encampment. During his declining years, especially after the Missouri crisis of 1820, Jefferson's public stance on slavery retreated even further from the leadership position of his youth. As a young revolutionary he had opposed the extension of slavery into the western territories. Now he reversed himself, advocating what he called "diffusion," the rather preposterous idea that the best way to end slavery was by allowing it to spread beyond the South. At the public level, diffusion was the most poignant and pathetic expression of his avoidance mentality, envisioning as it did the unpalatable evil of slavery conveniently disappearing in the misty expanses of the vast and uncharted lands of the West.

At the personal level, Jefferson's providential demise on July 4, 1826, spared him from witnessing the tragic end of the story. Only his spirit was present six months later when Monticello and all its possessions, including "130 valuable negroes," were put on the auction block and sold to the highest bidders. Jefferson was the invisible man that cold January day when his surviving daughter and grandchildren cried as the slave families were split up and dispersed. His grandson "Jeffy" never forgot the sad scene, which he compared to "a captured village in ancient times when all were sold as slaves." The auction lasted five days, and when it was over the proceeds covered only a portion of Jefferson's monumental debt—by then, in modern terms, several million dollars—and the slaves he had vowed to protect disappeared "down the river."

His life had always been about promise. And his enduring legacy became the most resonant version of the American promise in the national mythology. But in his life, if not his legacy, there were some promises he could not keep, because there were some facts he had chosen never to face. □