The health of Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

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Third President of the United States and one of its most influential men when the nation was founded, Thomas Jefferson was a strong and wise leader when the new republic was at its most vulnerable. With Washington, Madison and Monroe he was a member of the ‘Virginia Dynasty’, and in the few years before the American Revolution he was deeply involved in the ferment of activity that finally resulted in war. He was a man of exceptional talent and was greatly respected by his contemporaries. The American nation was indeed fortunate in having so many men of such calibre available to carry forward the revolution at the only too well perceived risk to their lives. However, Jefferson was always a paradox. He was a reluctant revolutionary, and yet so extreme that he was described, along with Thomas Paine, as an anarchist and a Jacobin. He was a Virginian aristocrat torn between his sense of injustice at the treatment given to the colonies by an often misunderstood and misunderstanding Britain and his very real sense of allegiance to the Crown. Given his temperament, his attitude could hardly have been otherwise.

The range of his talents and interests is remarkable and truly enviable. He was perhaps happiest as a farmer and planter. Nevertheless, he was also a surveyor, though not as skilled as his colleague George Washington. He was, too, a noted scholar and historian, a classicist, a bibliophile, a lawyer, an architect, a musician, a politician, a statesman and, not least, a formidable correspondent. He was also of an inventive turn of mind, and few men have shown such a diversity of talent. He was truly the quintessential ‘renaissance’ man.

The list of offices that he held is formidable. As well as being the third President, he was at various times a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses and the First Continental Congress. With Patrick Henry and R. H. Lee, he created the Virginia Committee of Correspondence. He was least successful, perhaps, as a wartime governor of Virginia, but he was most influential as a member of the Second Continental Congress and he was particularly successful as the Minister to France. Later he became the United States Secretary of State before becoming Vice-President and finally President. Sadly, the price he had to pay for his last great office was to quarrel with his old friends John and Abigail Adams. That quarrel was only partially patched up in old age.

Jefferson was not a good or commanding public speaker. He chose to influence events from behind the scenes and he was an obsessional collector of committees: he is said to have been a member of 34 in the years 1775 and 1776. John Adams at the time described him as having ‘a reputation for literature, science and a happy talent of composition ... he was so prompt, frank, explicit and decisive upon committees and in conversation ... that he soon seized my heart’ [1]. As well as being a humanitarian, he was perceptive as an administrator. When President, for example, he helped organise the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the West, and he was responsible for the Louisiana Purchase. The latter act alone doubled the size of the United States for just $15,000,000—a cost of about four cents an acre. The humanist in him led to the prohibition of the importation of slaves, yet he remained equivocal about his own status as a slave owner. His architectural ambitions resulted in the planning and building of the exquisite University of Virginia as well as the building of his own house at Monticello. Such was the public face: but what about the man behind the mask?

There is little doubt that he had a compulsive and obsessional temperament, and this was well recognised by his contemporaries. For example, his Garden Book, which started in 1766 with the phrase ‘March 20th. Purple hyacinth begins to bloom’, continued with its record of planting and flowering, the passing of the seasons and detailed events for the next fifty-eight years. He rose always at dawn and, when advising a young lawyer friend, he wrote (before 8am) employ yourself in physical studies, ethics, religion, natural and sectarian, and natural law.’ From 8 am to 12 noon he advised reading law,

![Fig. 1. Jefferson’s house at Monticello.](image)

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from 12 to 1 pm reading politics, in the afternoon reading history and from dark to bedtime reading belles-lettres, criticism, rhetoric and oratory [2]. Needless to say, he practised a similar lifestyle himself. Henry Randall described him thus: ‘never was there a more methodical man from great matters down to the merest seeming trifles; never so diligent a recorder of them’ [3]. He was a hard man to know [4] and was described by Gouverneur Morris as being ‘cold as a frog’ [5], yet he was frequently capable of engendering great affection in others. His grand-daughter said of him that ‘as a child, girl and woman I loved and honored him above all others’ [6]. The Marquis de Chastellux, a member of the French Academy, when he met him said that ‘I found his first appearances serious, nay even cold; but before I had been two hours with him we were as intimate as if we had passed our whole lives together’ [7]. He wrote over 25,000 letters to his friends and acquaintances, and with his polygraph machine he copied 18,000. When President he found time, despite all his other duties, to keep a daily record of the prices and availability of twenty-nine vegetables and seven fruits in the Washington market for eight years.

Not surprisingly, he was an insomniac when young and suffered severe tension headaches. These occurred every seven to eight years coinciding with times of great stress. Examples of this occurred when his mother died, when he left Paris for the last time, when Aaron Burr was on trial for treason and when he became Secretary of State [8]. They never came again after he retired. He vividly described one of the headaches: ‘(the paper) was composed under a severe attack of periodical head ach which came on every day at sunrise, and never left me till sunset. What had been ruminated in the day under a paroxysm of the most excruciating pain was committed to paper by candlelight and then the calculations were made’ [9].

He was liable to recurrent bouts of anxiety and depression. These are recorded as having occurred particularly when his wife failed to write to him regularly when he was in Philadelphia, and when she died in childbirth [8]. After her death he became deeply and pathologically depressed, keeping to his room for three weeks and fainting each time he saw his children [8]. Her loss was the greatest catastrophe to him. He became depressed again from 1793 to 1797 before becoming Vice-President. Eventually he gained insight into his depression, and writing to his daughter he described how ‘at length I became very sensible of the ill effect it had upon my own mind, and of its direct and irresistible tendency to render me unfit for society, and uneasy when necessarily engaged in it. I felt enough of the effect of withdrawing from the world then to see that it had led me to an antisocial and misanthropic frame of mind, which severely punishes him who gives into it’ [10]. He had further episodes of depression after his term as Governor of Virginia when he was much criticised, and again at the age of 53 years. His headaches became chronic during the winter of 1790–1791 but disappeared in 1791 during a summer holiday with Madison. Jefferson then began to realise that they were associated with the stresses and strains of public office [8]. His emotions and private feelings were always kept very much to himself. After the death of his wife, the epitaph on her tomb was so private to him that it was written in Greek, not English. He learnt from his father that being worthless to society was a kind of sin and he was constantly upbraiding his daughters for lack of diligence at their schoolwork [11, 12].

There is some evidence that he suffered from the irritable bowel syndrome. When he was President, he found the task a very burdensome one, not surprisingly. As he remarked: ‘Let those come to the helm who think they can steer clear of the difficulties. I have no confidence in myself for the undertaking’ [13]. He had persistent diarrhoea in 1801, for a while, but found that riding on horseback for two hours a day seemed to cure it [4, 14]—an interesting observation considering the recent interest in the effect of exercise in helping to combat depression. There was a suspicion at one time that he might be impotent, but he had several children by his wife and by his mistress, the slave Sally Hemings. Maria Conway was also his mistress when he was in France, so the evidence for this possibility seems to be sparse [8].

On September 18th 1786, when he was Minister to France, Jefferson was out walking along the banks of the Seine with Maria Conway. He attempted to jump over a fence, fell and sustained what appears to have been a fracture-dislocation of the right wrist. It was a compound fracture that was never properly set by the surgeons [15], and it remained weak, deformed and stiff ever afterwards. There is an interesting record of how, in their last night together, Maria was so restless that she moved his wrist ‘now up, now down, now here, now there; was it to be wondered at if all its pains returned?’ [16]. The fingers remained swollen for another year and some muscles became permanently atrophied. The description suggests that he developed a Volkmann’s ischaemic contracture. Nevertheless it did not stop him from writing her a four thousand word letter My head and my heart, one of the great love letters of English literature. A year later the right hand was still crooked, and the hand was ‘losing rather than gaining in point of suppleness’ [17]. The problem was compounded in 1823 when he fractured the other wrist. In his eightieth year he was still riding up to...
fifteen miles a day, and on one occasion his horse fell in a swollen river. Clumsily, Jefferson’s wrists were caught in the reins and he had great difficulty in freeing himself and he was nearly drowned [8]. He recovered from this episode, as was usual with Jefferson, with the minimum of complaint.

In his old age he developed typical symptoms of prostatism [8]. His legs began to swell and walking became difficult, so increasingly he resorted to horse riding, which he found beneficial [18]. He did not have a high opinion of doctors. Whenever he saw three physicians huddled together he looked up ‘to discover whether there was not a turkey buzzard in the neighborhood’ [8]. He had to resort to the doctors eventually, however, because of severe bladder pain, and he obtained some relief from the use of gum catheters [19], but required increasing doses of laudanum. In 1825, Lafayette assured Jefferson that better catheters were to be obtained in Paris and supplied him with some, but they did not arrive before his death [8]. Jefferson was asked to speak at the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, but he was too ill to attend. He developed persistent diarrhoea and was greatly saddened at his inability to go, and he died on the day of the anniversary.

Jefferson was very conscious of not surviving so long as to forfeit the quality of life. Having seen Charles Thomson, a fellow signatory of the Declaration of Independence, in his dotage at the age of 93, he wrote to John Adams: ‘[he is] cheerful, slender as a grasshopper, and so much without memory that he scarcely recognises the members of his household. Is this life? It is at most but the life of a cabbage; surely not worth a wish’ [20].

Jefferson died aged 83 years. Lonely and yet reasonably content, he was nevertheless greatly harassed by increasing debts, which, unfortunately, a grateful nation had done nothing about. Thomas Jefferson was a man of huge talent who had great impact on the events of his day. Though outwardly cold and impassive, this concealed a warm and generous nature. He was stoical, obsessionial and neurotic, and yet a great scholar regarded with wide respect and affection by his contemporaries. He lived through one of the most exciting times of recent history and left his strong mark upon it. What better memorial can he have than his own words?

‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness’ [21].

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