

introduction: the age of jefferson

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Whatever American civilization is today is due in no small measure to what American civilization was in the Age of Jefferson. No other era in our national past is so important as Jefferson's time in aiding our study of what we have been and what we have become. In searching the American panorama for the values that inhere in our past, then, we turn in this special issue of the *Journal* to the time of national beginnings—of political beginnings, of the first major steps toward internal economic growth, of the rise of nationalism in the arts and education, of the incredible expansion of our national territory—the list could go on. We seek here “the trends among our arts and sciences as well as politics and economics for clues as to our national motivation and the direction in which our civilized culture has been moving”;¹ for “the defining characteristic of American Studies is not the size of its problems but the effort to view any given subject of investigation from new perspectives, to take into account as many aspects of it as possible.”²

We have limited the size of our problem to a period of some fifty years, and have taken account of several aspects of our subject, as the articles that follow will show, from new perspectives. There is an interesting precedence for such a procedure, set by the pioneer Americanist, Samuel L. Knapp:

I shall divide our history into four periods, of half a century each, for the sake of more easily managing my subject. These periods are, indeed, arbitrary, it may be said, and will not correspond with any remarkable events in politics or literature. This is very true; but still the division may aid my labours. The skilful painter of a panorama, divides his canvass into portions before he takes up the pencil; but these mechanical arrangements are not seen when the whole surface glows with life and action.³

We, of course, are not the painters of the panorama, but rather its viewers. And the value to us of isolating periods of it for study is that we may view them in detail. Interdisciplinary study of the details of short peri-

ods, and the synthesis then of the period-studies, is a valuable method for Americanists. Quite likely the reader will find the detailed studies that follow very useful in forming an impression of what American civilization in the Age of Jefferson was like. He may then fit it into his present view of the panorama, or test and measure its current relevance, as he is able or desires to do so.

It will be noticed that comparatively little of what is said in these essays has to do directly with Thomas Jefferson himself. True, Jefferson walks the boards briefly in one or two of the articles, but he remains for the most part just off-stage in the other discussions. No article was forthcoming for the issue solely on the central figure who lends his name to the era. Perhaps in this there is no important loss. A great deal is known about Jefferson through many excellent studies. His works are now being reprinted and newly edited. It seems we always expect a new book on Jefferson, and we get it without a long wait. (The editor himself is now writing the Jefferson volume for Twayne's United States Authors Series.) Perhaps, all in all, it is better here to let the man who probably contributed most to his age remain just out of sight, or nearly so, while we examine other details. After all, "The American myth unlike the Roman was not fashioned ultimately by a single man of genius. It was and it has remained a collective affair; it must be pieced together out of an assortment of essays, orations, poems, stories, histories and sermons."⁴

But as we think of Jefferson, and of his death in 1826, we realize his Age was not only one of beginnings, but of the end of something. We see the people of his time explore the origins of the natives whose lands they took; we consider various esthetic, social, and intellectual problems, primarily observing the beginnings of trends, patterns, and values in American culture. But then when Mr. Simpson's article effects something of a transition out of the Age of Jefferson and into the next era, we sense perhaps the passing of a kind of giant who helped form the older American myth.

If those were the times that tried men's souls, there was at least no wanting for great men to meet the crises. But no more beyond the Age of Jefferson would the many-sided Man of the Enlightenment walk among us—no more Franklins, Websters, Rushes, Barlows, no Jeffersons. One manifestation, one almost mythic, one demigodlike figure representing what Jefferson once called "the American mind," was lost and cannot be recovered. This is in part the measure of how far American civilization today has moved away from the former time.

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To begin the Age of Jefferson Issue project, over 120 prospectuses were sent out to a great variety of scholars—scholars various in their specialties and disciplines, in their geographical locations and institutional affiliations, scholars old and new. All who replied, including several of

our leading historians, biographers, critics, and others, wished us well. Many of those who replied, expectedly, could not arrange to submit an article, but they in turn often suggested other scholars whom the original survey had missed, and further solicitations went out. The undersigned then served as a guest member of the *Journal's* board of editors. Submitted papers were run through the customary editorial evaluation by a series of consultants. A good number, alas, some the result of worthy scholarship but unsuited to the editorial policies of the *Journal*, failed to survive the process.

The mailing described our intention, in part, thus:

It is with the "spirit" of the time that we want most to deal. A writer on Jefferson himself, for example, might assess how or whether even so prominent a figure exemplifies the spirit of the time. A writer on poetry or fiction might assess whether or how these media exemplify the spirit of the time. The reader of the issue may, then, be better able to generalize about or interpret the Age of Jefferson, for the articles themselves will have gone beyond the mere exposition of facts and pointed toward or drawn conclusions about what American civilization was like *then* as we can see it *now* by analyzing a variety of subjects and achievements.

I was not disappointed with the results of the survey, and am not disappointed with the ultimate make-up of the issue. Emerson himself might have been pleased with such American scholarship.

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One other word must be said, appropriately in closing. We regret to recount the passing of a respected Americanist, Frank Roos, late Professor of Art at the University of Illinois. Professor Roos had promised what we feel sure would have been an excellent article for our issue, but he never finished it. He said he would explore "Mr. Jefferson's intense concern with Architecture and stated (1788) lack of interest in the study of Painting and Sculpture, and the possible reasons why he felt as he did." We are the poorer without this exploration.

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footnotes

1. Harvey Wish, *Contemporary America*, rev. ed. (New York, 1955), xix.
2. Henry, Nash Smith, "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?" *American Quarterly*, IX, ii (Summer 1957), 197.
3. Samuel L. Knapp, *Lectures on American Literature, with Remarks on Some Passages of American History* (New York, 1829), reprinted as *American Cultural History, 1607-1829*, Richard B. Davis and Ben H. McClary, eds. (Gainesville, Florida, 1961), 29-30.
4. R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago, 1955), 4.