# ALEXANDER CAMPBELL and THOMAS JEFFERSON

It was an October day in 1839 when Alexander Campbell stood at the tomb of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. He had just driven the three miles from Charlottesville where he had visited the University of Virginia, founded by Jefferson in 1819. He later recorded his impression of the University: "Its localities are well selected; and its architectural designs, execution, and general taste reflect great credit on the distinguished mind of its illustrious founder." He went so far as to say that the Grecian orders of architecture are "the best specimen of good style and taste that we have seen in the United States."

He was not so impressed as he stood at the grave of the Sage of Monticello. The man who had served as the third President of the United States had been dead only thirteen years, and yet his country estate was in such a state of disrepair that Campbell viewed it as having "the appearance of a splendid failure." The farm was sterile and exhausted, to use Campbell's description, while the mansion had "the patchwork appearance." Campbell suggested that the whole scene implied that its proprietor had been "a rather ideal and imaginative than practical sound in his views and undertakings." Then he added: "Of the wisdom of his other theories, it is to be hoped

that time, the great interpreter of all human effort, will speak more favorably than of those that appear to have been cherished by the occupant and proprietor and improver of Monticello."

Campbell found the tomb and its surroundings in ruins. The fence was dilapidated, the frame of the gate was swinging in the air, the post and bars prostrate on the ground, the monument, tottering, the tombstone broken and trodden by swine. To him it all seemed to say, "Here lies in this neglected spot, some Arnold guilty of his country's blood" rather than *Here lies the Author of the American Declaration of Independence.*

The visitor from the little village upstate called Bethany was shocked and incensed by what he saw. On previous celebrations of the Fourth of July, he had delivered orations in tribute to Jefferson. Often had he said: "The praises of a Washington, a Franklin, and a Jefferson will long resound through the hills and vallies of this spacious country" (*Mill. Harb.* 1, p. 307). And yet here at Monticello, so loved by its illustrious sage, it was as if he were a forgotten man. "Ought not the nation, the state of Virginia, or the citizens of Albemarle, to pay some attention to this deserted piece of ground!!" He complained that the inscription on the monument had no nominative case, but only "Was born April 13th, O. S. 1743—died July 4th, 1827." He protested: "Did Mr. Jefferson or his heirs presume that all the world would forever find, by intuition, the subject of this verb! What eccentric folly!" (*Mill. Harb.* 10, *p.* 59). The interesting thing about

all this is that the attitude of Campbell at Jefferson's estate is much what we would expect Jefferson's own attitude to be should he have visited Monticello when Campbell did. He too was particular and meticulous; he too insisted that things should be done right. He would have registered the same complaints, I think, and much the same way Campbell did.

That there was an affinity of thought between these two old Virginians I have thought for sometime. Having lived in (West) Virginia for awhile, serving on the faculty of Bethany College with its rich traditions, I have basked somewhat in the historical splendour of both of these men. Since it has long been my conviction that the best study of historical values is through biography, I concluded that it might be well to look at Jefferson and Campbell in an essay together.

They should both be remembered first of all as dedicated citizens of the Old Dominion. They were Virginians first, then Americans; or at least it was this way in the early part of their lives, but they eventually gave themselves not only to America but to the entire world. It is evident that Campbell came to view Virginia, its University, and Thomas Jefferson as a kind of triumvirate. It was typical for him to say to the people of Tennessee in 1855: "We plain folks of Virginia, with the immortal Jefferson and his State University, dare not emulate the magnificence of this rich and enterprising maiden State" (*Mill. Harb.* 26, *p.* 218).

Campbell talked about Virginia much as one would speak of his mother: "Men of truth, whose feet have trod the mountains and plains of Italy, Spain, Portugal, France; concur in awarding to this delightful region the greatest amount of attractions, the most to please and admire, the most to raise, excite, and transport the mind of a scientific and cultivated beholder" (*Mill. Harb.* 16, p. 345). He was incidentally speaking of that particular part of Virginia made holy by "the grave of the far-famed Jefferson." But he talked about the hills of Bethany the same way, "salubrious" being his over-worked adjective.

He had an affection for Monticello similar to that of its famed proprietor. Even though it was over 300 miles from Bethany in a day when travel was difficult, he made no less than three pilgrimages to the place, the last time being when he was nearly 70 years old. ("We thought it expedient that Mrs. Campbell should make a visit to Monticello.")

But these visits, as we have seen in part, appear now to have been disturbing to Campbell. Perhaps it did not make sense for him, a religious reformer, to have such admiration for an irreligious man, yea even a Deist. What he saw *inside* the edifice during his 1855 visit disturbed him as much as the dilapidation he witnessed *outside* the edifice during his 1839 visit. There were busts of Voltaire and Paine in the chambers! "Why should this Voltaire stand enshrined in the antechamber and Paine in the bedchamber of the sage of Monticello?"

If Campbell did not know why Jefferson would esteem these two, we now know why. Loving France almost as well as his native country, having lived there as Ambassador, hardly any event was viewed more seriously by him than the French Revolution, which began to brew while he yet lived there. It was Voltaire (partly because of the literary influence of John Locke) who helped to inspire that revolution, giving it what it most needed, philosophical and moral justification. But the *most* significant thing in Jefferson's life was the American Revolution, and it was Thomas Paine who helped to ignite it. So, to the Sage of Monticello these busts symbolized *freedom,* the biggest word of all in the lives of both Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Campbell.

Campbell was hurt that Jefferson's life was not made perfect by Christianity: "He repudiated the Bible," Campbell complained while viewing those busts and thinking of Jefferson, "and he dreamed of making a free and a happy people without faith, a hope, or a desire for Christian immortality." His mixed feelings become even more apparent when he writes: "the painful associations, the unwelcome reminiscences of the godless life and the hopeless death of its gifted and politically honored proprietor" (*Mill. Harb.* 27, p. 89).

It is a point of interest around Bethany that Alexander Campbell's youngest daughter, Decima, married into a family that was once the proud owner of Monticello. James Turner Barclay purchased Monticello in 1832. His son, Judson, who became Campbell's son-in-law, was

born there in 1843. In his account of the 1855 pilgrimage Campbell mentions the Barclay ownership, pointing out that he sold it "for a tythe of its intrinsic value." He adds: "It is a place too much visited to be a private residence for any Christian man."

This essay proposes to show that Campbell had a hero who was much closer to his own views than he realized, for much of what Jefferson believed (especially about religion) was hidden away in private letters that have since become public. This study also aims to show that the two men had so much in common that if they could have known each other they might well have started a *third* revolution, a religious renaissance in America that might well have changed the course of history!

The two men almost certainly never met personally. Jefferson was 45 years older, representing the preceding generation. When Jefferson died at 84, Campbell was in his fourth year as editor of *Christian Baptist,* a man of 39, and he was already well-known throughout Virginia. Being mentally alert to the very last, Jefferson could well have known of the Sage of Bethany. In this essay we not only make mention of a reference by Jefferson to the Campbellites as one of the creedless groups in Christendom, but there are the remarkable statements about the restoration of primitive Christianity, which express hope that there will be younger men coming along who can accomplish this great work.

Campbell was unhappy to see busts of Voltaire and Paine within the sacred confines of Monticello. Let us say that in this essay we will show that it might be in order for a bust of Thomas Jefferson to be enshrined at Bethany College and for a bust of Alexander Campbell to grace the halls of the University of Virginia, or even at Monticello alongside Paine and Voltaire, as a testimonial to what might have been, *the third Revolution,* if these two old Virginians could have walked together in their prime.

# UNIVERSAL MINDS

Jefferson's interests were vast. In his library at Monticello there were books on art, science, farming, poetry, architecture, history, music, religion and philosophy. He read avidly from the works of Homer, Cicero, Milton, Pope, Dryden, Locke, Hobbes, Adam Smith, Hume, Voltaire, Montesquieu—and on and on the list could be extended, including of course the Bible. As in the case of Campbell, he was especially impressed by John Locke's writings.

In his study of Jefferson, Gilbert Chinard points out that America's third president complained in his old age that "the decays of age had enfeebled the useful energies of the mind," but that in fact Jefferson remained alert and retained his encyclopaedic curiosity and unusual capacity for work almost to the very end of life. Chinard observes that in 1820 alone Jefferson personally replied to 1,267 letters, many of which required painstaking research in his vast library. Some of his letters turned out to be essays that dealt with every possible subject under heaven.

His visitors at Monticello were from all walks of life, kings and peasants alike, and he entered into conversation with them on many subjects: political economy, education, woolen goods, nails, boats, warfare, farming—and

like his young neighbor upstate, Alexander Campbell, he was very interested in merino sheep.

His interest in books was so great that after selling his library to Congress he undertook to collect another, a difficult task in his day. From France and Germany, he ordered the best editions of Greek and Latin classics. Friends in Europe were asked to send copies of the latest publications. He was a man of ideas as well as action and his mind was as big as the universe itself.

Campbell's attitude toward the world of ideas and learning was strikingly similar to Jefferson's. One only needs to thumb through the many volumes of *Millennial Harbinger* or to peruse the remains of his personal library in the Campbell Room at Bethany College to appreciate the magnitude of his interests. And if one were to look for that vast Jeffersonian dimension in Campbell's thinking in but a single essay, I would suggest his "Philosophy of Memory" in the 1841 *Harbinger.* Indeed, it would take a mind like a Campbell or a Jefferson to create such a work of genius.

When I conjure up my fanciful dreams, I sometimes envisage Jefferson and Campbell at "Table Talk" either at Monticello or the Bethany Mansion. Chinard's description of the Sage of Monticello in a dinner conversation can only be equaled by Selina Campbell's portrayal of the Sage of Bethany at table-talk. In *Home Life of Alexander Campbell* she describes these table-talks as edifying and engaging, including such topics as the eye and eyelash,

the hand and fingers, and—especially when the candles would flicker out—a dissertation on the value and nature of light. Selina was convinced that her husband's table-talks exceeded those of Coleridge himself.

Like Jefferson at Monticello, Campbell received both the rich and the poor, the elite and the commoners at his guest house at the Mansion, dubbed by a neighbor as "Stranger's Inn," a name that stuck. He could entertain guests for days and talk about the progress of reformation in the Western Reserve with Jeremy Vardeman, merino sheep and the wool industry with John Brown the abolitionist (and slavery too of course!), the Bible with Walter Scott (and everybody else), the military with Robert E. Lee and future president Garfield, politics and education with Henry Clay, and public welfare and morality with them all. He had the best flock of sheep in Virginia, helped build roads to Wheeling and Wellsburg, and served in the state legislature. He was a husbandman, woolgrower, educator, legislator, debater, lecturer, editor, publisher, preacher, college president, and even a phrenologist!

Only the astronauts are in the class of Jefferson and Campbell!

# APOSTLES OF FREEDOM

Edward Dumbauld in his *Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson* says: "The central feature of Jefferson's political creed was his concern for human freedom." Jefferson believed in the goodness of man and avowed that man is capable of self-government. And so, his creed is well embodied in his thrustful affirmation: "I have sworn on the altar of God eternal hostility to every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

It was for his devotion to the freedom of man that Jefferson wished to be remembered by his fellow Americans. Though he achieved such high offices as governor of Virginia, Secretary of State and President of the United States, he wished to be remembered as a crusader for human liberty. He asked that his tombstone identify him not as a governor or president, but as the author of the Declaration of Independence, the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and the Father of the University of Virginia. Campbell's tombstone likewise hails him as a defender of the faith and the Founder of Bethany College.

But the affinity between Jefferson and Campbell relative to their devotion to human liberty is measured other than by epitaphs. Both were adamantly anti-sectarian and anti-clerical in both politics and religion. Concerning the

University of Virginia President Jefferson said: "This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it." His philosophy of education was to make man free through learning.

Campbell too, founded a college, not to support a sect, but to free man's mind of parochial thinking. He set up a course of studies at Bethany that he referred to as "science and literature, the useful arts, agriculture, and the learned and foreign languages." These had two general purposes: "to free the human mind from vulgar prejudices, ignorance, and error" and "to open to us an extensive acquaintance with literature, science and art, and thus furnish us with the means of extending our acquaintance with nature, society, and the Bible."

Both Jefferson and Campbell opposed creeds and partyism in their crusade against tyranny. The President once said: "If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all." And Campbell affirmed: "No human creed in Protestant Christendom can be found that has not made a division for every generation of its existence." He even warned against *unwritten* creeds as more destructive than written ones. To those who sought to make his own unity movement simply another sect, Campbell replied: "They cannot make a sect of us, for we will acknowledge all as Christians who acknowledge the gospel facts and obey Jesus Christ."

Jefferson said that his fight for religious freedom was the bitterest of his life. Campbell also believed that his enemies were those clergymen who wished to hold their people in ecclesiastical bonds. Both men contended that religion in Virginia was being stifled by religion itself. We must remember that when Jefferson commenced his crusade for religious liberty the Anglican Church bore the official seal of Virginia. Jefferson's task was to free Virginia from an established church, thus giving all denominations the right to flourish; Campbell's job was to free man's heart of sectarian pride and unite all believers in the one great Church of Christ on earth. One was more political, the other more religious.

They talked alike in their efforts to unhorse religious tyranny. In his Bill for Religious Freedom in Virginia, Jefferson said: "All men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion …" Again he said: "No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship … nor shall he be enforced, restrained, molested … or shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or beliefs …"

Campbell said it this way: "We do not ask men to give up their opinions; we ask them only not to impose them upon others. Let them hold their opinions, but let them hold them as private property. The faith is public property; opinions are private property. Men have foolishly attempted to make the deductions of some great minds the common measure of all Christians."

There are many interesting parallels in the campaigns these two Virginians conducted in the name of religious liberty, one of the significant being the calumny heaped upon them by their antagonists. Jefferson was attacked as an unbeliever. Such notable libraries as the Philadelphia Public Library refused him a place on their shelves, branding him as an infidel. When he ran for president, he suffered that acrimony that only sectarian minds can invent.

The story is somewhat the same with Campbell. He was accused of dividing churches and causing trouble. He did not believe in the Holy Spirit or in the Trinity. He was a Sandemanian, which sounded like something very bad. He wanted to start a sect of his own. He was a slave owner, a charge that led to his imprisonment in Scotland.

Another interesting parallel in their struggles for religious freedom is that *each of them issued a Bible of his own,* to put it the way their enemies did. Jefferson's "Bible" was what he called *the philosophy of Jesus* and entitled "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," which was an effort to set forth what Jefferson believed to be that part of the Bible that really counts. He was very interested in the moral force of Jesus' teaching. Said he: "A more precious morsel in ethics was never seen." And yet many modern moralists virtually ignore the ethics of Jesus!

Campbell's *Living Oracles* was a much more ambitious and extensive piece of work, being a new version of the entire New Testament. But it called forth the same kind

of criticism Jefferson received: "This man has put out a Bible of his own!"

This is a sample of the material contained in
*Alexander Campbell and Thomas Jefferson:*
*A Comparative Study of Two Old Virginians*
by Leroy Garrett

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