

## **“I shall not retain a single one”: The Limits of Thomas Jefferson’s Library Catalogues**

Thomas Jefferson was a remarkably comprehensive and diligent record-keeper. He took pride in the completeness with which he documented his expenditures in his Memorandum Book, his incoming and outgoing correspondence in his Summary Journal of Letters, the dates of his vegetable and flower plantings in his Garden Book, and his twice-daily meteorological observations in his Weather Memorandum Book. During his years as president he kept track of the arrival and departure of fruits and vegetables in the market at Washington and produced a schematic diagram summarizing the results shortly after his final return to Monticello. The notes he took on household consumption at Monticello enabled him to calculate that one pint of olive oil was being used each week in 1810 and that during a forty-five day span in one cold winter he burned a cord of firewood to heat his bedroom.

Given this general tendency toward meticulous, if not obsessive record-keeping, it is not surprising that Jefferson also maintained a series of catalogues of his library. He began the largest of his surviving catalogues not long after his first library burned at Shadwell in 1770 and then added to it and edited it continuously until 1812, three years before he sold his library to the nation in 1815 to replace the congressional library destroyed by the British the year before. The new catalogue that he began by copying the old one in 1812 is no longer extant, but its surviving predecessor, a separate catalogue of books Jefferson purchased in Europe, and early published catalogues of the post-fire Library of Congress served as the blueprint for Millicent Sowerby’s five-volume *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson*, which will always stand as one of the great works of Jeffersonian scholarship. Jefferson’s surviving manuscript catalogue, Sowerby’s reconstruction, and a subsequently rediscovered transcription by Nicholas P. Trist of Jefferson’s lost fair copy are all extensive, covering thousands of volumes in a dozen languages and ranging

from brief pamphlets to massive multivolume reference works and full runs of newspapers. Jefferson pledged that “I shall not retain a single one” of his books from the sale to Congress, and he added unlisted books that more than compensated for listed books that had gone missing (TJ to Samuel Harrison Smith, 27 Feb. 1815, and TJ to Alexander J. Dallas, 18 Apr. 1815, both DLC: Jefferson Papers). Most scholars, including this one, have probably taken Jefferson at his word and concluded that the collection that left Monticello for Washington in 1815 corresponds reasonably well to the whole of Jefferson’s collection of printed works as it stood in that year.

This paper tests that proposition. Was the collection that Jefferson catalogued and then sold to the nation substantially complete? If not, what got left out of the 1815 sale, and what does that tell us about what the catalogue meant to Jefferson, how he thought about his library, and the extent to which it fully reflects the culture of print at Monticello? The key to answering these questions can be found in the published volumes of the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Published by Princeton University Press since 1950 and comprising 45 volumes to date, this definitive enterprise aspires to print or otherwise account for what the first editor defined as “everything legitimately Jeffersonian by reason or authorship or relationship” (1:xiv). Unsurprisingly, it is full of references to books ordered, received, requested, given, read, and reflected on. Any list of catalogues of Jefferson’s library needs to include his correspondence in its entirety as a de facto additional catalogue. Sowerby recognized this and mined the collection with extraordinary diligence as far as one could in the 1940s for references to the individual book titles she was cataloguing. Her presentation of this material, rich with Jefferson’s comments on the material in his library, is a big part of what makes her volumes so valuable. However, by definition Sowerby’s work did *not* extend to publications mentioned in the letters she was reading but *not* forming part of the collection sold to Congress.

To test the completeness of the Sowerby snapshot of Jefferson's library, the first five volumes of the Retirement Series of the Jefferson Papers, covering a full four years from March 1809 to March 1813, were examined for references to published material, especially things enclosed in letters to or from Jefferson. A total of 102 publications that are recorded in Sowerby were identified as enclosures to Jefferson letters during this period. In the same interval, the number of publications enclosed but NOT listed in Sowerby came to 167. Neither number can be regarded as precise. From Jefferson's epistolary record it can be inferred that something like 10 percent of the letters that he wrote or received in this period no longer survive, and presumably they enclosed or acknowledged some Sowerby and non-Sowerby publications. Extant letters sometimes allude vaguely to books or newspapers or orations sent to Jefferson, and a few of these references may also be to Sowerby material. In the case of both of these caveats, however, there is no reason to assume that the ratio of Sowerby to non-Sowerby material differs significantly from that for the letters discussed above. This leads to the somewhat surprising conclusion that Jefferson apparently omitted at least as many pieces of printed material from his manuscript book catalogue as he included in it. The question then becomes: was Jefferson a sloppier record-keeper than has been supposed, or were his omissions intentional and central to his definition of and ambitions for his library?

Breaking down the non-Sowerby publications in more detail will help to address this issue. The 167 printed items sent to or by Jefferson during the period from March 1809 to March 1813 and apparently not recorded in his catalogue by the time of the 1815 sale consist of the following:

- 74 Books and pamphlets
- 20 Broad sides NOT selling books
- 32 Broadside publication prospectuses and subscription papers
- 4 Sales catalogues

- 15 Newspapers, magazines, and clippings and articles from them
- 5 Official forms, notices, and printed blanks
- 4 Maps
- 3 Engravings
- 10 Items of unidentified format, but probably printed, such as a “small notice on the geology of the Island Guadeloupe” or “something that will give you an idea of the compositions of the best [French] poets” (1:184, 4:324. Here and below, all references are to the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, unless otherwise noted).

The largest category is books and pamphlets, containing some 74 items and more than 40 percent of the whole. Some of the books in question are political pamphlets or learned works that do not seem to differ in any obvious way from material to be found in Sowerby. For example, Jefferson received but did not record in his book catalogs such political treatises and polemics as Augustus B. Woodward’s 1809 *Considerations on the Executive Government of the United States of America* (1:164); orations on Independence Day 1811 from Benjamin Franklin Thompson to a Tammany Society on Long Island and from Benjamin Markley to the ’76 Association in Charleston, South Carolina (4:53–4, 4:105–6); a pamphlet attacking the new Spanish constitution by the Spanish diplomat Valentin de Foronda (1:471, 606n); the constitution of the new state of Louisiana (4:648); George Tucker’s essay seeking public support for an inland navigation system connecting the Roanoke River and its branches to Norfolk (5:458); and the pseudonymous Cerus’s 1809 *Observations on Infidelity, and the Religious and Political Systems of Europe, compared with those of the United State of America: showing the incompatibility of religion with the despotism of national churches: . . . to which are added the essays of Amicus on the Maryland church-bill, and Quakers’ petition, &c.* (2:125).

Publications on arts and science received but not recorded before 1815 include Benjamin Latrobe’s 8 May 1811 anniversary oration to the Society of Artists of the United States (3:624–5), Friedrich Adelung’s discussion of the similarities between Russian and Sanskrit (4:99),

William Duane's *Hand Book for Riflemen* (5:256, 257n); Frederic Tudor's discussion of a revolutionary new approach to ship construction (5: 491); David Bailie Warden's description of a meteorite that landed in America in 1807 (2:406), John Wood's *A New Theory of the Diurnal Rotation of The Earth; Demonstrated upon Mathematical Principles, from the Properties of the Cycloid and Epi-Cycloid* (2:95), lists of inventions awarded United States patents (6:282, 362, 363n), and Shadrach Ricketson's *Brief History of the Influenza, Which prevailed in New-York in 1807* (1:257).

Omission of this sort of material from Jefferson's catalogue and thus from the collection sold to Congress is surprising. Comparable pieces are certainly to be found there. Length of the items in question is probably a factor. There are puzzling exceptions, but most of the publications in question are pamphlet length. A working hypothesis would be that Jefferson kept tracts below a certain size distinct from his library until he had enough to send to a binder, and that he recorded them in his catalogue only after he had had them bound in the sequence in which they were going to go on the shelf. Two of the tracts mentioned above, those by Warden and Wood, support this theory: the copies acquired by Jefferson were evidently bound at his direction with other scientific works after the sale of his library to Congress, added by him then to his final manuscript library catalogue, sold in the auction of his Monticello library in 1829, and still bound together when the University of Virginia eventually acquired the volume.

Length is also the likely reason that broadsides, engraved illustrations, printed circulars, and some maps did not find their way into the manuscript catalogues or the Sowerby bibliography. In his early retirement Jefferson received broadsides and circulars of a poem by Philip Freneau singing the third president's praises (1:226–9); likenesses of himself, the first four American presidents, and Alexander von Humboldt (1:23, 2:488, 4:540–1, 5:221); maps of

western New York, the Mediterranean and Black seas, and of the areas in conflict during the War of 1812 (1:247–8, 3:597–8, 5:442–3, 492–3); Tennessee congressman John Rhea’s circular letters to his constituents (2:358, 3:439, 5:662–3); a Fourth of July prayer from the pseudonymous “Goodwill” urging the Almighty to keep America free from “the stupidity, power and tyranny of kings” (1:292n); a catalogue of the officers and students of South Carolina College (1:112), pleas for geographical information from the gazetteer compiler Horatio Gates Spafford (2:144–5); and bills of mortality for Portsmouth, New Hampshire (3:374).

The largest collection of broadsides, known to us from Jefferson’s correspondence rather than his catalogues, are publication prospectuses and subscription forms, along with a few sales lists from booksellers. Their great interest to historians of publishing did not prevent Jefferson from keeping them filed with his letters or discarding them rather than putting them on the shelves of his library. The wide range of books and periodicals he was urged to support during this period are a cross-section of American publishing, including encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases, and journals (3:51, 97, 98n, 296–7, 552, 578–9, 589); a treatise on mineralogy (2:404); histories and biographical dictionaries (1:288–9, 3:296–7, 4:350, 5:492, 545); engravings of Greek vases (1:452–3); a translation of a French medical text (1:597), newspapers in Annapolis, Bardstown, and Charleston (1:303–4, 4:277n, 5:330n); biographies of the novelist Charles Brockden Brown and the scientist David Rittenhouse (3:632, 5:372); a lavishly illustrated Bible that would showcase developing American technical skills (5:654–5, 662), and a free-thinking work on the creation of the world that led to blasphemy prosecutions which in turn elicited a classic statement by Jefferson on freedom of inquiry (5:466–7; Julian P. Boyd, “Subversive of What?,” *Atlantic Monthly* 182 [Aug. 1948]: 19–23). They are of special interest to historians of Jefferson’s book collecting because they show what he did *not* choose to buy or support, as when

he wittily remarked to one supplicant that his “bibliomany” had put him in possession of 20,000 volumes, that he would read 1,000 of them of choice before he would take up the book now being offered to him, that the mortality tables showed that he would probably die before getting through 50 of them, and that he saw no point in adding “to the 19,950. which I shall never read” (3:578).

Jefferson also received but did not record a substantial grouping of newspapers, journals, magazines, and clippings from them. He did include periodicals in his library catalogues, such as his extended runs of colonial Virginia newspapers, the proceedings of the American Philosophical and Royal societies, and the *Columbian Magazine* (Sowerby, 1:267–8, 278–80, 4:42–8, 5:154-5). But one needs to turn to Jefferson’s correspondence for evidence that he owned individual issues of the Winchester *Republican Constellation*, the Charleston, South Carolina, *Investigator*, the Norwich, Connecticut, *Native American*, and the *Annales du Muséum D’Histoire Naturelle* (2:120, 4:319–21, 5:330n, 5:407). As with shorter pamphlets, the likely explanation of omission is that Jefferson waited until he had a sufficient quantity of newspapers or journals to bind before he recorded them in his catalogues. This is confirmed in the case of the *Emporium of Arts & Sciences*. The first editor, John Redman Coxe, sent TJ the inaugural issue in May 1812, but Jefferson’s three-volume set of this journal is recorded only in his post-1815 library catalog (5:18).

The sample of unlisted material also includes certain kinds of printed ephemera, such as forms for a consular bond, commissions to depose witnesses, and instructions for planting fiorin grass (4:187, 277–8, 5:264, 265n). They are part of the world of print culture at Monticello, even though it is hard to envision a scenario where Jefferson would have regarded them as publications worth recorded in his library catalogues. Similarly, he probably failed to record

printed lists of United States post offices (1:514, 4:10), because he thought of them as tools to be referred to rather than reference works, analogous perhaps to phone books or zip-code directories today. But this invites a key question: what was he excluding on purpose even though it had a title page, a publisher, and was sold by booksellers and advertised in newspapers?

The most obvious examples of purposeful omission from Jefferson's self-defined library are children's books and teaching aides, and fiction aimed at adults. During the first four years of his retirement, Jefferson received Zadoc Cramer, *The United States spelling book*; the first American editions of Maria Edgeworth, *The Parent's Assistant; or, Stories for Children*; her *Moral Tales for Young People*; and Samuel H. Saunders, *An Easy First Book for Children; or The First Part of the Rhyming Spelling Book. on a new plan* (1:630, 2:101, 193, 263, 3:623, 4:289). Jefferson also received more adult fare, such as Maria Edgeworth's *The Modern Griselda: A Tale*, a five-volume miniature edition of Sir Walter Scott's works, and James Kirke Paulding, *The Diverting History of John Bull and Brother Jonathan. By Hector Bull-us* (3:623, 4:201–2, 561, 5:397). Jefferson received the last-named satirical work from James Madison and enjoyed it enough that he passed it on to his friend Elizabeth Trist (6:110, 11n). He was less enthusiastic about Edgeworth's *Modern Griselda*, remarking as he passed it on to a granddaughter that "the heroine presents herself certainly as a perfect model of ingenious perverseness, & of the art of making herself and others unhappy. if it can be made of use in inculcating the virtues and felicities of life, it must be by the rule of contraries" (3:633, 634n).

We tend to think from Jefferson's catalogue and his comments to friends that most of his leisure-time reading was devoted to ancient authors in the original Latin or Greek, with occasional breaks to brush up on his rusty mathematical skills. The fascinating thing about Edgeworth's novel is not that Jefferson disliked it, but that he read it. He knew her work well

enough to remark in 1818 that all of her novels were suitable for reading by young women, along with selected works by Anna Letitia Barbauld, the Comtesse de Genlis, and William Godwin (TJ to Nathaniel Burwell, 14 Mar. 1818, DLC: Jefferson Papers).

Other documents do not specifically enclose books to or from Jefferson but provide additional glimpses of the literate culture at Monticello. During her visit in the summer of 1809, Margaret Bayard Smith found Jefferson's daughter sitting up with a sick child while "deeply engaged" in Charles Robert Maturin's gothic novel, *The Wild Irish Boy* (1:391, 397n). Jefferson assured his son-in-law John Wayles Eppes that the latter's visiting son Francis spent his evenings "in reading unremittingly, regardless of the company surrounding him. he has met here with a large children's collection of books" (2: 92). Jefferson tried unsuccessfully to obtain the final volumes of Jeremiah Joyce's *Scientific dialogues, intended for the instruction and entertainment of young people*, a work that he valued because it was "easily intelligible to very young minds." When the Georgetown bookseller Joseph Milligan sent Jefferson one unsolicited publication, he justified the liberty because the work was "particularly calculated for those that purchase parlour books for children," and he reminded Jefferson that he had executed several orders of this sort for him during Jefferson's presidency. The retired statesman soothingly replied that the book was "very acceptable to my grandchildren & therefore to me" (2:193, 264).

This discussion has largely confined itself to publications that are known to have reached Jefferson during the early years of his retirement. But the letters from this period also enrich our picture of Jefferson's world of books in many other ways. In 1809 three different correspondents asked him for recommendations in assembling libraries, and he responded with lists of what he regarded as the best works in history, natural philosophy, agriculture, mathematics, morals, and rhetoric, specifying which ones were available in America and which in England, and estimating

the costs (1:576–7, 580–3, 2:81–3, 5:557). Financial accounts with Joseph Milligan detail the extensive bookbinding orders Jefferson commissioned while seeing to the sorting and binding of many volumes of pamphlets as he prepared to leave Washington for the last time (1:35–8). Letters between Jefferson and men like John Adams and Thomas Cooper praise or disparage works that had entered his library long before 1809 (5:386–90, 122–5, 222–3). Other incoming letters call Jefferson’s attention to books that he probably never saw, as when Cooper spoke well of James P. Tupper’s *Essay on the Probability of Sensation in Vegetables* and added his own opinion that plants were probably also capable of volition (5:276). Correspondence with booksellers sometimes documents unsuccessful attempt to purchase other books, such as Lacroix’s *Cours de Mathematiques* (4:72, 79–80, 5:14, 501). As late as 1810 we find a record of Jefferson’s purchase of several books from the estate of Bathurst Skelton in 1772, including a copy of Tobias Smollett’s *Roderick Random* (2:465–6). The transaction was not known to Sowerby.

By the time he sold it to the nation, Thomas Jefferson had built an extraordinary library. He felt that there was “no subject to which a member of Congress may not have occasion to refer,” and that his collection was up to this challenge, with coverage of “what is chiefly valuable in science and literature generally” and special strength in the “diplomatic and parliamentary branches” and in “everything which related to America” (TJ to Samuel Harrison Smith, 21 Sept. 1814, DLC: Jefferson Papers). His vision was not that of the rabid book collector, however. Jefferson did not collect multiple editions of specific books in the interest of completeness, or obsess over first editions, or insist that his sets of multivolume works come from uniform editions, or focus on author’s inscriptions or association copies or decorative bindings. He saw no point in keeping multiple copies of the same work, even in different editions, as he

demonstrated when he gave away the majority of the volumes that he received in the 1806 bequest of the library of his beloved mentor George Wythe (Endrina Tay and Jeremy Dibbell, “A Library Rediscovered: George Wythe’s ‘legacie’ to President Thomas Jefferson,” *Common-place.org* ([forthcoming])). Jefferson was perfectly capable of declining to buy a historical atlas in 1811 because he already had more than one and events in Europe were changing its boundaries so fast that “the map of the moment is not worth it’s room” (3:579). The emphasis was on usefulness. Jefferson was happy to buy cheap pirated Irish versions of English legal works, and he wanted octavo or duodecimo reprints that were easier to handle than bulkier quartos or folios, but still set in a readable rather than a microscopic typeface. As he told a London bookseller in 1788: “I like books of a handy size” (5:549; *PTJ*, 13:650, 24:469).

The above analysis shows that Jefferson’s emphasis on the usefulness of his library also extended to the material he listed in the catalogues he created with such care. Some works, especially pamphlets and other shorter works, were not catalogued and added to its shelves until they had been bound with a suitable quantity of thematically related material. Evidently he seldom found popular fiction, hymnals, and children’s textbooks sufficiently serious to merit a place in the formal collection of a statesman and savant. Charles Brockden Brown sent Jefferson a copy of one of his novels, probably *Wieland*, late in 1798 (*PTJ*, 31:275–6). Even this indication that American literary genius was beginning to blossom did not find its way into his catalogue. Subscription lists and publication prospectuses, maps and engravings, loose issues of newspapers and magazines, and printed ephemera were also normally excluded from Thomas Jefferson’s definition of his library while remaining very much a part of his world of books, a world that can be fully understood and appreciated only by recourse to the corpus of manuscripts that he left behind.