

**OBSERVATIONS ON THE WRITINGS OF
THOMAS JEFFERSON, WITH PARTICULAR
REFERENCE TO THE ATTACK THEY
CONTAIN ON THE MEMORY OF THE LATE
GEN. HENRY LEE. IN A SERIES OF LETTERS**

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Observations on the writings of Thomas Jefferson, with particular reference to the attack they contain on the memory of the late Gen. Henry Lee. In a series of letters by H. Lee

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H. LEE

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OBSERVATIONS, &c.

LETTER I.

I HAVE read, my dear sir, with great regret, in Jefferson's "Writings" (v. 3 p. 330.) the following letter from that gentleman to General Washington; which contains, as I conceive, a gross and unprovoked slander on the character of my father, and which, as I design to make it the subject of examination, is transcribed here without alteration or curtailment.

TO THE PRESIDENT.

Monticello, June 19th, 1796.

"In Bache's Aurora of the 9th inst. which came here by the last post, a paper appears which having been confided as I presume, to but few hands, makes it truly wonderful how it should have got there. I cannot be satisfied as to my own part, till I relieve my mind by declaring, and I attest every thing sacred and honourable to the declaration, that it has got there neither through me nor the paper confided to me. This has never been from under my own lock and key, or out of my own hands, no mortal ever knew from me that these questions had been proposed. Perhaps I ought to except one person, who possesses all my confidence, as he has possessed yours. I do not remember indeed that I communicated it even to him. But as I was in the habit of unlimited trust and counsel with him, it is possible I may have read it to him, no more: for the quire of which it makes a part was never in any hand but my own, nor was a word ever copied or taken down from it by any body. I take

on myself without fear, any divulgement on his part. We both know him incapable of it. From myself then, or my paper, this publication has never been derived. I have formerly mentioned to you; that from a very early period of my life, I had laid it down as a rule of conduct, never to write a word for the public papers. From this I have never departed in a single instance; and on a late occasion, when all the world seemed to be writing, besides a rigid adherence to my own rule, I can say with truth that not a line for the press was ever communicated to me by another, except a single petition referred for my correction; which I did not correct, however, though the contrary, as I have heard, was said in a public place, by one person through error, through malice by another. I learn that this last has thought it worth his while to try to sow tares between you and me, by representing me as still engaged in the bustle of politics, and in turbulence and intrigue against the government. I never believed for a moment that this could make any impression on you, or that your knowledge of me would not outweigh the slander of an intriguer, dirtily employed in sifting the conversations of my table, where alone he could hear of me; and seeking to atone for sins against you by sins against another who had never done him any other injury than that of declining his confidences. Political conversations I really dislike, and therefore avoid where I can without affectation. But when urged by others I have never conceived that my having been in public life requires me to belie my sentiments, or even to conceal them. When I am led by conversation to express them, I do it with the same independence here which I have practised everywhere, and which is inseparable from my nature. But enough of this miserable tergiversator, who ought indeed either to have been of more truth, or less trusted by his country.*

While on the subject of papers, permit me to ask one from you. You remember the difference of opinion between Hamilton and Knox on the one part, and myself on the other, on the subject of firing on the little Sarah, and that we had exchanged opinions and reasons in writing. On your arrival in Philadelphia, I delivered you a copy of my reasons, in the presence of Col. Hamilton. On our withdrawing he told me he had been so much engaged that he had not been able to prepare a copy of his and Gen. Knox's for you, and that if I would send you the one he had given me, he would replace it in a few days. I im-

* Note by the Editor. "(Here in the margin of the copy, is written, apparently at a later date, 'Gen. H. Lee.'")

mediately sent it to you wishing you should see both sides of the subject together—I often after applied to both the gentlemen, but could never obtain another copy—I have often thought of asking this one, or a copy of it, back from you, but have not before written on subjects of this kind to you. Though I do not know that it will ever be of the least importance to me, yet one loves to possess arms, though they hope never to have occasion for them. They possess my paper in my own hand writing. It is just I should possess theirs. The only thing amiss is that they should have left me to seek a return of the paper, or a copy of it from you.

I put away this disgusting dish of old fragments, and talk to you of my peas and clover. As to the latter article, I have great encouragement from the friendly nature of our soil. I think I have had, both the last and present year, as good clover from common grounds, which had brought several crops of wheat and corn without ever having been manured, as I ever saw on the lots around Philadelphia. I verily believe that a field of thirty-four acres, sowed on wheat, April was twelvemonth, has given me a ton to the acre at its first cutting this spring. The stalks extended, measured three and a half feet long, very commonly—another field, a year older, and which yielded as well the last year, has sensibly fallen off this year. My exhausted fields bring a clover not high enough for hay, but I hope to make seed from it. Such as these, however, I shall hereafter put into peas in the broadcast, proposing that one of my sowings of wheat shall be after two years of clover, and the other after two years of peas. I am trying the white boiling pea of Europe (the Albany pea) this year, till I can get the hog pea of England, which is the most productive pea of all. But the true winter vetch is what we want extremely. I have tried this year the Caroline drill. It is absolutely perfect. Nothing can be more simple, nor perform its office more perfectly for a single row. I shall try to make one to sow four rows at a time of wheat or peas, at twelve inches distance. I have one of the Scotch threshing machines nearly finished. It is copied exactly from a model Mr. Pinckney sent me, only that I have put the whole works (except the horse wheel) into a single frame, moveable from one field to another on the two axles of a wagon. It will be ready in time for the harvest which is coming on, which will give it a full trial. Our wheat and rye are generally fine, and the prices talked of bid fair to indemnify us for the poor crops of the two last years.

I take the liberty of putting under your cover a letter to the son of the Marquis de la Fayette, not exactly knowing where to direct to him.

With very affectionate compliments to Mrs. Washington, I have the honor to be, with great and sincere esteem and respect, dear sir, your most obedient and most humble servant,

TH. JEFFERSON."

The respect which in common with a great majority of my countrymen, I was induced to entertain for the character of Mr. Jefferson, is now a double source of regret to me, as it enhances the duty of defending my father's memory and aggravates the pain of performing it. To add to this chagrin comes the reflection, that I may occasion to the feelings of Mr. Jefferson's relatives, a violence not unlike that under which my own are suffering—a violence to which I am forced at the sacrifice of long-cherished veneration, and which they can forgive only at the expense of a sacred affection. A shock of surprise has increased this accumulated mortification. That General Lee was politically opposed to Mr. Jefferson, I was well aware; but that personal rancour existed on either side, I had not the least suspicion. The zeal of the former you will attest, was too polished and well-tempered, to carry on its edge the taint of abuse or the poison of slander. Careless of political preferment himself, he could well endure the elevation of others. And as in the party warfare that divided the nation Mr. Jefferson was a more successful combatant, I supposed he had been at least as tolerant an adversary.

Other considerations strengthened this impression. They had both been labourers in a great and successful national struggle. They were the common friends of many eminent citizens—such as Mr. Madison and Mr. Monroe. In a controversy most painful to Mr. Jefferson's feelings, he had been indebted to the delicacy, forbearance, and liberality of Gen. Lee.* How then could I be prepared for this surviving virulence, this testamentary hatred on his part?

Before I examine its intrinsic value, it will be well to sketch its external history—as the account of a man's life is often prefaced by a description of his person.

It cannot fail to be observed that while expressing this violent abuse of Gen. Lee, in terms so flagrantly unsuitable to the dignity of his correspondent, he took care to suppress the mention of his name; thus attempting an injury, and withholding

* For the truth of this assertion I appeal confidently to Mr. Madison.

at the same time all means of its redress. It was hardly possible that Gen. Washington should repeat such vague and scurrilous language--and as little so, if he did, that Gen. Lee should take to himself its application. "At a later date," we are told, in an hour dedicated to the joys of secret malevolence, Mr. Jefferson fixed this floating defamation on Gen. Lee; and at a date still later, when death had struck with his tremendous dart the subject of this slander, and overwhelmed with pious grief his descendants, bequeathed it to posterity, as a lasting outrage to their affection, and a public stigma on his name.*

Thus the resentment of this philosopher and statesman, was appeased, neither by the fellowship of patriotism, the remembrance of kindness, the lapse of time, nor the solemnity of death. Exhibited to the world on the summit of his lofty fume, it is beheld in three stages of progression, and in as many shades of intensity. It first appears a torrent of impetuous passion. It next darkens into a stream of solitary and determined malice. And thence descending it stops, cold with hatred, and hardened by inveteracy, on the modest honours, and the silent sorrows that dwell around a patriot soldier's grave.

As the terms of the offensive passage in question, notwithstanding the greatness of their authority, are as vague as they are indelicate; present to the mind nothing but a tissue of hearsay averments and malignant insinuations, it will be expedient to unfold their confusion, and to submit to a fair and careful scrutiny whatever statements as to fact or character can be extracted from them.

One of these is that Gen. Lee, in order to convey improper information to Gen. Washington, had "dirtily intrigued, and had sifted the conversations of Mr. Jefferson's table, where alone he could hear of him" to obtain materials for his communications. Dismissing for a moment the contempt this unworthy accusation inspires, let me ask may it not be as justly retorted on Mr. Jefferson as directed against Gen. Lee? How did he learn the subject of Gen. Lee's communications either verbal or written to Gen. Washington? Was it not as necessary that for this purpose he should "dirtily intrigue and sift table conversations" as that Gen. Lee should? Was it not even more so? Gen. Washington having been a more important personage than Mr. Jefferson, and Mr. Jefferson than Gen. Lee, it results from the rule of proportion, that remarks made by Mr. Jefferson respecting Gen. Washing-

* Gen. Lee died in March, 1818, eight years before Mr. Jefferson and eleven before this slander appeared.