Jefferson to Robert Walsh

Dear Sir,

Monticello, December 4, 1818

—Yours of November the 8th has been some time received; but it is in my power to give little satisfaction as to its inquiries. Dr. Franklin had many political enemies, as every character must, which, with decision enough to have opinions, has energy and talent to give them effect on the feelings of the adversary opinion. These enmities were chiefly in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. In the former, they were merely of the proprietary party. In the latter, they did not commence till the Revolution, and then sprung chiefly from personal animosities, which spreading by little and little, became at length of some extent. Dr. Lee was his principal calumniator, a man of much malignity, who, besides enlisting his whole family in the same hostility, was enabled, as the agent of Massachusetts with the British government, to infuse it into that State with considerable effect. Mr. Izard, the Doctor's enemy also, but from a pecuniary transaction, never countenanced these charges against him. Mr. Jay, Silas Deane, Mr. Laurens, his colleagues also, ever maintained towards him unlimited confidence and respect. That he would have waived the formal recognition of our independence, I never heard on any authority worthy notice. As to the fisheries, England was urgent to retain them exclusively, France neutral, and I believe, that had they been ultimately made a *sine quâ non*, our commissioners (Mr. Adams excepted) would have relinquished them, rather than have broken off the treaty. To Mr. Adams' perseverance alone, on that point, I have always understood we were indebted for their reservation. As to the charge of subservience to France, besides the evidence of his friendly colleagues before named, two years of my own service with him at Paris, dailyvisits, and the most friendly and confidential conversation, convince me it had not a shadow of foundation. He possessed the confidence of that government in the highest degree, insomuch, that it may truly be said, that they were more under his influence, than he under theirs. The fact is, that his temper was so amiable and conciliatory, his conduct so rational, never urging impossibilities, or even things unreasonably inconvenient to them, in short, so moderate and attentive to their difficulties, as well as our own, that what his enemies called subserviency, I saw was only that reasonable disposition, which, sensible that advantages are not all to be on one side, yielding what is just and liberal, is the more certain of obtaining liberality and justice. Mutual confidence produces, of course, mutual influence, and this was all which subsisted between Dr. Franklin and the government of France.

I state a few anecdotes of Dr. Franklin [see pages 3-7], within my own knowledge, too much in detail for the scale of Delaplaine's work, but which may find a cadre in some of the more particular views you contemplate. My health is in a great measure restored, and our family join with me in affectionate

recollections and assurances of respect.

Th. Jefferson

[Anecdotes of Dr. Franklin]
“Our revolutionary process as is well known, commenced by petitions, memorials, remonstrances &c. from the old Congress. These were followed by a non-importation agreement, as a pacific instrument of coercion. While that was before us, and sundry exceptions, as of arms, ammunition &c. were moved from different quarters of the house, I was sitting by Dr. Franklin and observed to him that I thought we should except books: that we ought not to exclude science, even coming from an enemy. He thought so too, and I proposed the exception, which was agreed to. Soon after it occured that medicine should be excepted, & I suggested that also to the Doctor. ‘As to that,’ said he ‘I will tell you a story. When I was in London, in such a year, there was a weekly club of Physicians, of which St. John Pringle was President, and I was invited by my friend Dr. Fothergill to attend when convenient. Their rule was to propose a thesis one week, and discuss it the next. I happened there when the question to be considered was whether Physicians had, on the whole, done most good or harm? The young members, particularly, having discussed it very learnedly and eloquently till the subject was exhausted, one of them observed to St. John Pringle, that, altho’ it was not usual for the President to take part in a debate, yet they were desirous to know his opinion on the question. He said, they must first tell him whether, under the appellation of Physicians, they meant to include old women; if they did, he thought they had done more good than harm, otherwise more harm than good.’“The confederation of the States, while on the carpet before the old Congress, was strenuously opposed by the smaller states, under apprehensions that they would be swallowed up by the larger ones. We were long engaged in the discussion; it produced great heats, much ill humor, and intemperate declarations from some members. Dr. Franklin at length brought the debate to a close with one of his little apologues. He observed that ‘at the time of the Union of England & Scotland, the Duke of Argyle was most violently opposed to that measure, and among other things predicted that, as the whale had swallowed Jonas, so Scotland would be swallowed by England. However,’ said the Doctor, ‘when Ld. Bute came into the government, he soon brought into it’s administration so many of his countrymen that it was found in event that Jonas swallowed the whale.’ This little story produced a general laugh, restored good humor, & the Article of difficulty was passed.

“When Dr. Franklin went to France on his revolutionary mission, his eminence as a philosopher, his venerable appearance, and the cause on which he was sent, rendered him extremely popular. For all ranks and conditions of men there, entered warmly into the American interest. He was therefore feasted and invited to all the court parties. At these he sometimes met the old Duchess of Bourbon, who being a chess player of about his force, they very generally played together. Happening once to put her king into prise, the Doctor took it. ‘Ah,’ says she, ‘we do not take kings so.’ ‘We do in America,’ said the Doctor.

“At one of these parties, the emperor Joseph II, then at Paris, incog. under the title of Count Falkenstein, was overlooking the game, in silence, while the company was engaged in animated conversations on the American question. ‘How happens it M. le Comte,’ said the Duchess, ‘that while we all feel so much interest in the cause of the Americans, you say nothing for them’? ‘I am a king by trade,’ said he.“When the Declaration of Independence was under the consideration of Congress, there were two or three

unlucky expressions in it which gave offence to some members. The words ‘Scotch and other foreign auxiliaries’ excited the ire of a gentleman or two of that country. Severe strictures on the conduct of the British king, in negativing our repeated repeals of the law which permitted the importation of slaves, were disapproved by some Southern gentlemen whose reflections were not yet matured to the full abhorrence of that traffic. Altho’ the offensive expressions were immediately yielded, these gentlemen continued their depredations on other parts of the instrument. I was sitting by Dr. Franklin who perceived that I was not insensible to these mutilations. ‘I have made it a rule,’ said he ‘whenever in my power, to avoid becoming the draughtsman of papers to be reviewed by a public body. I took my lesson from an incident which I will relate to you. When I was a journeyman printer, one of my companions, an apprentice Hatter, having served out his time, was about to open shop for himself, his first concern was to have a handsome signboard, with a proper inscription. He composed it in these words “John Thompson, Hatter, makes and sells hats for ready money,” with a figure of a hat subjoined. But he thought he would submit it to his friends for their amendments. The first he shewed it to thought the word “Hatter” tautologous, because followed by the words “makes hats” which shew he was a Hatter. It was struck out. The next observed that the word “makes” might as well be omitted, because his customers would not care who made the hats. If good and to their mind, they would buy by whomsoever made. He struck it out. A third said he thought the words “for ready money,” were useless as it was not the custom of theplace to sell on credit. Every one who purchased expected to pay. They were parted with, and the inscription now stood “John Thompson sells hats.” “sells hats” says his next friend? “Why nobody will expect you to give them away. What then is the use of that word?” It was stricken out, and “hats” followed it,—the rather as there was one painted on the board. So his inscription was reduced ultimately to “John Thompson” with the figure of a hat subjoined.’

“The Doctor told me, at Paris, the two following anecdotes of Abbe Raynal. He had a party to dine with him one day at Passy of whom one half were Americans, the other half French & among the last was the Abbe. During the dinner he got on his favorite theory of the degeneracy of animals and even of man, in America, and urged it with his usual eloquence. The Doctor at length noticing the accidental stature and positions of his guests, at table, ‘Come’ says he, ‘M. L’Abbe, let us try this question by the fact before us. We are here one half Americans, & one half French, and it happens that the Americans have placed themselves on one side of the table, and our French friends are on the other. Let both parties rise and we will see on which side nature has degenerated.’ It happened that his American guests were Carmichael, Harmer, Humphreys and others of the finest stature and form, while those of the other side were remarkably diminutive, and the Abbe himself particularly was a mere shrimp. He parried the appeal however, by a complimentary admission of exceptions, among which the Doctor himself was a conspicuous one.“The Doctor & Silas Deane were in conversation one day at Passy on the numerous errors in the Abbe’s Historie des deux Indes, when he happened to step in. After the usual salutations, Silas Deane said to him ‘The Doctor and myself Abbe, were just speaking of the errors of fact into which you have been led in your history.’ ‘Oh no, Sir,’ said the Abbe, ‘that is impossible. I took the greatest care not to insert a single fact, for which I had not the most unquestionable authority.’ ‘Why,’ says Deane, ‘there is the story of Polly Baker, and the eloquent apology you have put into her mouth, when brought before a court of Massachusetts to suffer punishment under a law, which you cite, for having had a bastard. I know there never was such a law in Massachusetts.’ ‘Be assured,’ said the Abbe, ‘you are

mistaken, and that that is a true story. I do not immediately recollect indeed the particular information on which I quote it, but I am certain that I had for it unquestionable authority.' Doctor Franklin who had been for some time shaking with restrained laughter at the Abbe's confidence in his authority for that tale, said, 'I will tell you, Abbe, the origin of that story. When I was a printer and editor of a newspaper, we were sometimes slack of news, and to amuse our customers, I used to fill up our vacant columns with anecdotes, and fables, and fancies of my own, and this of Polly Baker is a story of my making, on one of those occasions.' The Abbe without the least disconcert, exclaimed with a laugh, 'Oh, very well, Doctor, I had rather relate your stories than other men's truths.'"

Th. Jefferson
MONTICELLO