Thomas Jefferson
(1743-1826)

Notes on the State of Virginia
(1787)
(Query VI and Query XI)

Although he penned thousands of letters and important government documents, Thomas Jefferson wrote but one book. Published in English in 1787, Notes on the State of Virgina represented several years of research and reading. The work was written "in response to a questionnaire about conditions in Virginia, sent out in 1780 by Francois de Barbe-Marbois, secretary of the French legation in Philadelphia" (Cohen 73). When Jefferson retired as governor of Virginia in June of 1781, he began to organize the notes and statistical data he had collected over the years. Marbois had posed twenty-two questions, and Jefferson expanded the queries to twenty-three. Jefferson's first draft was completed in December of 1781, and the work soon grew to book length. Because publication costs in America were prohibitive, Jefferson took the manuscript with him to France, where it was first published in 1785 in a small, privately distributed edition. Two years later, another French edition was released, and an English edition was published in London.

Notes on the State of Virginia was Jefferson's rebuttal to the theory of degeneration in the New World, a theory espoused by French writers such as Count de Buffon, Cornelius de Pauw, and the Abbe Raynal. (Both Buffon, one of the world's foremost naturalists, and Raynal are named by Jefferson in our reading from Query VI, and the lengthy quote which appears early in Query VI is taken from the writings of Buffon.) Briefly stated, the degeneration theory "held that plants and animals, and even human beings, of the New World were inferior to those of the Old. The theory also asserted that there would be a degeneration in plants and animals transplanted from the Old World to the New" (Cohen 73).

Although Buffon had not visited America, he argued that the climate--the extremes of cold and moisture--contributed to degeneration in the New World. This "combination of the elements and other physical causes, so contrary to the enlargement of animal nature in this new world" were "obstacles to the development and formation of great germs" for reproduction, resulting in inferior and smaller forms of life. For example, Oliver Goldsmith had noted that nightingales, which existed in both Europe and America, did not sing in America. The American tapir, which Buffon considered to be the "elephant" of America, was only the size of a small cow. For Buffon, it was a "general fact that living natural beings are smaller in this entire continent.""

In terms of human life, Buffon also argued that the aboriginal peoples of America were subject to the same degeneration. Although the American Indian male was of about the same stature as men in Europe, he was "weaker" in body and "weak and small with regard to reproductive organs." He had "little potency" and "no body hair, no beard, nor any desire for his female partner." These "savages of the New World" were "fearful and cowardly," without liveliness or activity of soul." In Buffon's opinion, their indifference toward sex" was "the original blemish" which spoiled their nature. This blemish prevented their development, destroyed "the germs of life," and thus cut "the root of society."

And what of Europeans who made their way to the New World? Were they destined to become victims of degeneration? Raynal applied Buffon's theory of degeneration "to the race of whites, transplanted from Europe," and claimed evidence for degeneration: "America has not yet produced one good poet, one able mathematician, one

man of genius in a single art or a single science."

Acting in his dual role as scientist and statesman, Jefferson intended to demonstrate the falsity of the theory of degeneration and to encourage, rather than discourage, future immigration to America. In response to Raynal's claim that America had not produced men of talent and genius, Jefferson pointed to Benjamin Franklin in the realm of science, to George Washington as a man to be remembered "among the most celebrated worthies of the world, when that wretched philosophy shall be forgotten which would have arranged him among the degeneracies of nature," and to David Rittenhouse as a self-taught genius, "second to no astronomer living." To complement his extensive refutation, Jefferson sent Buffon specimens of large New World animals, such as the skin and skeleton of a moose from New Hampshire.

Beyond serving as a refutation of the theory of degeneration, Notes on the State of Virginia confirmed Jefferson's embrace of the Enlightenment and his breadth of interests. The volume was a venture in geography, natural history, anthropology, government, history, economics, and education. Jefferson celebrated the resources of his beloved homeland and also showed a remarkable ability to probe and penetrate unexplored phenomena. His pages contained numerous statistical compilations and were meant for careful consideration by his readers. William Peden, editor of a modern edition of Notes, recognizes this writing as "probably the most important scientific and political book written by an American before 1785" and the work on which "much of Jefferson's contemporary fame as a philosopher was based." Here Jefferson presented his "ideas concerning religious freedom or the separation of church and state, his analysis of the ideals of representative government versus dictatorship, his theories of art and education, his attitude concerning slavery and the Negro, his interest in science" (Peden xi).

Other American statesmen, such as James Madison and Benjamin Franklin, joined with Jefferson in the degeneration theory controversy. Madison contributed to Jefferson's anti-degeneration campaign by sending Jefferson measurements of the organs of a weasel and mole, proof that American varieties were larger than their European counterparts. Franklin's "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America," written at Passy, France, in 1783, can be placed within the broad context of the degeneration debate. From the standpoint of an early sociologist, Franklin described the customs and cultures of American Indians, and suggested that we "examine the manners of different nations with impartiality."

The year that Jefferson's Notes appeared in unabridged French and English editions, Franklin used his own wit and diplomacy to "demonstrate" the apparent absurdity of the degenerative theory. In Science and the Founding Fathers, I. Bernard Cohen reports the event: "In 1787, William Carmichael sent Jefferson a report on a dinner party [in France] hosted by Benjamin Franklin. One of the guests asked Franklin what he thought of the theory that animals and humans in the New World were not the equal of those from the Old World. Franklin noted that the American guests were huge and very muscular compared to their French counterparts. 'In fact,' according to Carmichael's account, 'there was not one American present who could not have tost out of the Windows any one or perhaps two of the rest of the Company, if this Effort depended merely on muscular force.' Franklin asked his interrogator to look around him at the dinner guests and then 'Judge whether the human race had degenerated by being transplanted to another section of the Globe." Cohen adds, "Franklin's demonstration may possibly have been as effective an argument

against 'degeneration' as the scientific evidence amassed by Jefferson in his Notes."

Evidently the efforts of Jefferson, Franklin, and others altered the thinking of Buffon and Raynal. Count de Buffon eventually retracted on degeneration in the New World; however, his books continued to promulgate the theory, and he died before making a promised correction in the next volume of his natural history. Raynal, in later editions of his work, deleted his assertion that America had produced no single man of genius or real talent.

The following selections, taken from Query VI and Query XI, focus on Jefferson's perceptions of Native Americans and are representative of his investigations. (Later in this volume we turn to Query XIV, in which Jefferson recorded his observations of black slaves in Virginia.) In Query VI, note how Jefferson presents and then directly refutes Buffon's claims. In Query XI, what was the significance of Jefferson's archaeological excavation? Usually heralded as the first important venture of its kind in the Americas, what made it "scientific"? What was Jefferson's view on the origin of the Native Americans? How did he think their origins might be definitively ascertained?

rev. intro., JMW

Sources: I. Bernard Cohen, Science and the Founding Fathers (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995); Antonello Gerbi, The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750-1900, trans. Jeremy Moyle (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 1973); Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1955).

[From] QUERY VI: Productions Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal [1782]

. . . Hitherto I have considered this hypothesis as applied to brute animals only, and not in its extension to the man of America, whether aboriginal or transplanted. It is the opinion of Mons. de Buffon that the former furnishes no exception to it.

> Although the Savage of the New World has more or less the same stature as mankind in our world, this is not enough for him to be considered an exception to the general fact that living natural beings are smaller in this entire continent: the Savage is weak and small with regard to reproductive organs, he has no body hair, no beard, nor any desire for his female partner. Although lighter than a European because more used to running, his body is weaker; he is also quite less sensitive, more fearful and cowardly; he has no liveliness, no activity in his soul. His bodily activity is less of an exercise, but rather a voluntary movement, an action necessitated by need. Take hunger and thirst away from him, and you destroy at the same time the active principle of all his movements. He will rest stupidly still on his feet or lie down for entire days. There is no need to seek any further the cause of the savages' scattered lifestyle and their being distanced from society: the most precious spark of the fire of nature has been denied to them; they have no desire for their females and consequently no love for their equals: since they do not know the most vivid, the most tender of all attachments, their other feelings of this kind are cold and languishing; their love for fathers and children is weak; the most intimate social bond of all, the one within the same family, has only weak links in their community, there are none at all from one family to another: hence no meetings, no republic, no social organized state. The physical aspect of love is for them the morality of manners; their heart is cold as ice, their society is cold, and their political structure is hard. They consider women as servants for hard jobs, beasts of burden that they charge, without consideration, with burdens when they go hunting, and whom they force, without pity and recognition, to do chores which often are beyond their strength; they have few children; they take little care of them. All this stems from their primary fault. They are indifferent because they have little potency and their indifference toward sex is the original blemish which spoils their nature. It prevents them from blossoming. It destroys the germs of life and thereby cuts the root of society. Man is not an exception here. By denying him the power of love, nature mistreats and short-changes him more than any animal.

An afflicting picture indeed, which for the honor of human nature, I am glad to believe has no original. Of the Indian of South America I know nothing, for I would not honor with the appellation of knowledge, what I derive from the fables published of them. These I believe to be just as true as the fables of Aesop. This belief is founded on what I have seen of man, white, red, and black, and what has been written of him by

authors, enlightened themselves, and writing amidst an enlightened people.

The Indian of North America being more within our reach, I can speak of him somewhat from my own knowledge, but more from the information of others better acquainted with him, and on whose truth and judgment I can rely. From these sources I am able to say, in contradiction to this representation, that he is neither more defective in ardor, nor more impotent with his female, than the white reduced to the same diet and exercise: that he is brave, when an enterprize depends on bravery; education with him making the point of honor consist in the destruction of an enemy by stratagem, and in the preservation of his own person free from injury; or perhaps this is nature; while it is education which teaches us to honor force more than finesse: that he will defend himself against an host of enemies, always chusing to be killed, rather than to surrender, though it be to the whites, who he knows will treat him well: that in other situations also he meets death with more deliberation, and endures tortures with a firmness unknown almost to religious enthusiasm with us: that he is affectionate to his children, careful of them, and indulgent in the extreme: that his affections comprehend his other connections, weakening, as with us, from circle to circle, as they recede from the center: that his friendships are strong and faithful to the uttermost extremity: that his sensibility is keen, even the warriors weeping most bitterly on the loss of their children, though in general they endeavour to appear superior to human events: that his vivacity and activity of mind is equal to ours in the same situation; hence his eagerness for hunting, and for games of chance. The women are submitted to unjust drudgery. This I believe is the case with every barbarous people. With such, force is law. The stronger sex therefore imposes on the weaker. It is civilization alone which replaces women in the enjoyment of their natural equality. That first teaches us to subdue the selfish passions, and to respect those rights in others which we value in ourselves. Were we in equal barbarism, our females would be equal drudges. The man with them is less strong than with us, but their woman stronger than ours; and both for the same obvious reason; because our man and their woman is habituated to labour, and formed by it. With both races the sex which is indulged with ease is least athletic. An Indian man is small in the hand and wrist for the same reason for which a sailor is large and strong in the arms and shoulders, and a porter in the legs and thighs. -- They raise fewer children than we do. The causes of this are to be found, not in a difference of nature, but of circumstance. The women very frequently attending the men in their parties of war and of hunting, child-bearing becomes extremely inconvenient to them. It is said, therefore, that they have learnt the practice of procuring abortion by the use of some vegetable; and that it even extends to prevent conception for a considerable time after. During these parties they are exposed to numerous hazards, to excessive exertions, to the greatest extremities of hunger. Even at their homes the nation depends for food, through a certain part of every year, on the gleanings of the forest: that is, they experience a famine once in every year. With all animals, if the female be badly fed, or not fed at all, her young perish: and if both male and female be reduced to like want, generation becomes less active, less productive. To the obstacles then of want and hazard, which nature has opposed to the multiplication of wild animals, for the purpose of restraining their numbers within certain bounds, those of labour and of voluntary abortion are added with the Indian. No wonder then if they multiply less than we do. Where food is regularly supplied, a single farm will shew more of cattle, than a whole country of forests can of buffaloes. The same Indian women, when married to white traders, who feed them and their children plentifully and regularly, who exempt them from excessive drudgery, who keep them stationary and unexposed to accident, produce and raise as many children as the white women. Instances are known, under these circumstances, of their rearing a dozen children. An inhuman practice once prevailed in this country of making slaves of the Indians. It is a fact well known with us, that the Indian women so enslaved produced and raised as numerous families as either the whites or blacks among whom they lived. -- It has been said, that Indians have less hair than the whites, except on the head. But this is a fact of which fair proof can scarcely be had. With them it is disgraceful to be hairy on the body. They say it likens them to hogs. They therefore pluck the hair as fast as it appears. But the traders who marry their women, and prevail on them to discontinue this practice, say, that nature is the same with them as with the whites. Nor, if the fact be true, is the consequence necessary which has been drawn from it. Negroes have notoriously less hair than the whites; yet they are more ardent. But if cold and moisture be the agents of nature for diminishing the races of animals, how comes she all at once to suspend their operation as to the physical man of the new world, whom the Count acknowledges to be "Σ peu pres de meme stature que l'homme de notre monde," and to let loose their influence on his moral faculties? How has this "combination of the elements and other physical causes, so contrary to the enlargement of animal nature in this new world, these obstacles to the developement and formation of great germs," been arrested and suspended, so as to permit the human body to acquire its just dimensions, and by what inconceivable process has their action been directed on his mind alone? To judge of the truth of this, to form a just estimate of their genius and mental powers, more facts are wanting, and great allowance to be made for those circumstances of their situation which call for a display of particular talents only. This

done, we shall probably find that they are formed in mind as well as in body, on the same module with the "Homo sapiens Europaeus." The principles of their society forbidding all compulsion, they are to be led to duty and to enterprize by personal influence and persuasion. Hence eloquence in council, bravery and address in war, become the foundations of all consequence with them. To these acquirements all their faculties are directed. Of their bravery and address in war we have multiplied proofs, because we have been the subjects on which they were exercised. Of their eminence in oratory we have fewer examples, because it is displayed chiefly in their own councils. Some, however, we have of very superior lustre. I may challenge the whole orations of Demosthenes and Cicero, and of any more eminent orator, if Europe has furnished more eminent, to produce a single passage, superior to the speech of Logan, a Mingo chief, to Lord Dunmore, when governor of this state. And, as a testimony of their talents in this line, I beg leave to introduce it, first stating the incidents necessary for understanding it. In the spring of the year 1774, a robbery and murder were committed on an inhabitant of the frontiers of Virginia, by two Indians of the Shawanee tribe. The neighbouring whites, according to their custom, undertook to punish this outrage in a summary way. Col. Cresap, a man infamous for the many murders he had committed on those much-injured people, collected a party, and proceeded down the Kanhaway in quest of vengeance. Unfortunately a canoe of women and children, with one man only, was seen coming from the opposite shore, unarmed, and unsuspecting an hostile attack from the whites.

Cresap and his party concealed themselves on the bank of the river, and the moment the canoe reached the shore, singled out their objects, and, at one fire, killed every person in it. This happened to be the family of Logan, who had long been distinguished as a friend of the whites. This unworthy return provoked his vengeance. He accordingly signalized himself in the war which ensued. In the autumn of the same year, a decisive battle was fought at the mouth of the Great Kanhaway, between the collected forces of the Shawanees, Mingoes, and Delawares, and a detachment of the Virginia militia. The Indians were defeated, and sued for peace. Logan however disdained to be seen among the suppliants. But, lest the sincerity of a treaty should be distrusted, from which so distinguished a chief absented himself, he sent by a messenger the following speech to be delivered to Lord Dunmore.

> I appeal to any white man to say, if ever he entered Logan's cabin hungry, and he gave him not meat; if ever he came cold and naked, and he clothed him not. During the course of the last long and bloody war, Logan remained idle in his cabin, an advocate for peace. Such was my love for the whites, that my countrymen pointed as they passed, and said, "Logan is the friend of white men." I had even thought to have lived with you, but for the injuries of one man. Col. Cresap, the last spring, in cold blood, and unprovoked, murdered all the relations of Logan, not sparing even my women and children. There runs not a drop of my blood in the veins of any living creature. This called on me for revenge. I have sought it: I have killed many: I have fully glutted my vengeance. For my country, I rejoice at the beams of peace. But do not harbour a thought that mine is the joy of fear. Logan never felt fear. He will not turn on his heel to save his life. Who is there to mourn for Logan?--Not one.

Before we condemn the Indians of this continent as wanting genius, we must consider that letters have not yet been introduced among them. Were we to compare them in their present state with the Europeans North of the Alps, when the Roman arms and arts first crossed those mountains, the comparison would be unequal, because, at that time, those parts of Europe were swarming with numbers; because numbers produce emulation, and multiply the chances of improvement, and one improvement begets another. Yet I may safely ask, How many good poets, how many able mathematicians, how many great inventors in arts or sciences, had Europe North of the Alps then produced? And it was sixteen centuries after this before a Newton could be formed. I do not mean to deny, that there are varieties in the race of man, distinguished by their powers both of body and mind. I believe there are, as I see to be the case in the races of other animals. I only mean to suggest a doubt, whether the bulk and faculties of animals depend on the side of the Atlantic on which their food happens to grow, or which furnishes the elements of which they are compounded? Whether nature has enlisted herself as a Cis or Trans-Atlantic partisan? I am induced to suspect, there has been more eloquence than sound reasoning displayed in support of this theory; that it is one of those cases where the judgment has been seduced by a glowing pen: and whilst I render every tribute of honor and esteem to the celebrated Zoologist, who has added, and is still adding, so many precious things to the treasures of science, I must doubt whether in this instance he has not cherished error also, by lending her for a moment his vivid imagination and bewitching language.

So far the Count de Buffon has carried this new theory of the tendency of nature to belittle her productions on this side the Atlantic. Its application to the race of whites, transplanted from Europe, remained for the Abbe Raynal. "On doit etre etonne (he says) que l'Amerique n'ait pas encore produit un bon poete, un habile mathematicien, un homme de genie dans un seul art, ou une seule science." "America has not yet produced one good poet." When we shall have existed as a people as long as the Greeks did before they produced a Homer, the Romans a Virgil, the French a Racine and Voltaire, the English a Shakespeare and

which had not yet cut its teeth. This last furnishing the most decisive proof of the burial of children here, I was particular in my attention to it. It was part of the right-half of the under-jaw. The processes, by which it was articulated to the temporal bones, were entire; and the bone itself firm to where it had been broken off, which, as nearly as I could judge, was about the place of the eye-tooth. Its upper edge, wherein would have been the sockets of the teeth, was perfectly smooth. Measuring it with that of an adult, by placing their hinder processes together, its broken end extended to the penultimate grinder of the adult. This bone was white, all the others of a sand colour. The bones of infants being soft, they probably decay sooner, which might be the cause so few were found here. I proceeded then to make a perpendicular cut through the body of the barrow, that I might examine its internal structure. This passed about three feet from its center, was opened to the former surface of the earth, and was wide enough for a man to walk through and examine its sides. At the bottom, that is, on the level of the circumjacent plain, I found bones; above these a few stones, brought from a cliff a quarter of a mile off, and from the river one-eighth of a mile off; then a large interval of earth, then a stratum of bones, and so on. At one end of the section were four strata of bones plainly distinguishable; at the other, three; the strata in one part not ranging with those in another. The bones nearest the surface were least decayed. No holes were discovered in any of them, as if made with bullets, arrows, or other weapons. I conjectured that in this barrow might have been a thousand skeletons. Every one will readily seize the circumstances above related, which militate against the opinion, that it covered the bones only of persons fallen in battle; and against the tradition also, which would make it the common sepulchre of a town, in which the bodies were placed upright, and touching each other. Appearances certainly indicate that it has derived both origin and growth from the accustomary collection of bones, and deposition of them together; that the first collection had been deposited on the common surface of the earth, a few stones put over it, and then a covering of earth, that the second had been laid on this, had covered more or less of it in proportion to the number of bones, and was then also covered with earth; and so on. The following are the particular circumstances which give it this aspect. 1. The number of bones. 2. Their confused position. 3. Their being in different strata. 4. The strata in one part having no correspondence with those in another. 5. The different states of decay in these strata, which seem to indicate a difference in the time of inhumation. 6. The existence of infant bones among them.

But on whatever occasion they may have been made, they are of considerable notoriety among the Indians: for a party passing, about thirty years ago, through the part of the country where this barrow is, went through the woods directly to it, without any instructions or enquiry, and having staid about it some time, with expressions which were construed to be those of sorrow, they returned to the high road, which they had left about half a dozen miles to pay this visit, and pursued their journey. There is another barrow, much resembling this in the low grounds of the South branch of Shenandoah, where it is crossed by the road leading from the Rock-fish gap to Staunton. Both of these have, within these dozen years, been cleared of their trees and put under cultivation, are much reduced in their height, and spread in width, by the plough, and will probably disappear in time. There is another on a hill in the Blue ridge of mountains, a few miles North of Wood's gap, which is made up of small stones thrown together. This has been opened and found to contain human bones, as the others do. There are also many others in other parts of the country.

Great question has arisen from whence came those aboriginal inhabitants of America? Discoveries, long ago made, were sufficient to shew that a passage from Europe to America was always practicable, even to the imperfect navigation of ancient times. In going from Norway to Iceland, from Iceland to Groenland, from Groenland to Labrador, the first traject is the widest: and this having been practised from the earliest times of which we have any account of that part of the earth, it is not difficult to suppose that the subsequent trajects may have been sometimes passed. Again, the late discoveries of Captain Cook, coasting from Kamschatka to California, have proved that, if the two continents of Asia and America be separated at all, it is only by a narrow streight. So that from this side also, inhabitants may have passed into America: and the resemblance between the Indians of America and the Eastern inhabitants of Asia, would induce us to conjecture, that the former are the descendants of the latter, or the latter of the former: excepting indeed the Eskimaux, who, from the same circumstance of resemblance, and from identity of language, must be derived from the Groenlanders, and these probably from some of the northern parts of the old continent. A knowledge of their several languages would be the most certain evidence of their derivation which could be produced. In fact, it is the best proof of the affinity of nations which ever can be referred to. How many ages have elapsed since the English, the Dutch, the Germans, the Swiss, the Norwegians, Danes and Swedes have separated from their common stock? Yet how many more must elapse before the proofs of their common origin, which exist in their several languages, will disappear? It is to be lamented then, very much to be lamented, that we have suffered so many of the Indian tribes already to extinguish, without our having previously collected and deposited in the records of literature, the general rudiments at least of the languages they spoke. Were vocabularies formed of all the languages spoken in North and South America,

preserving their appellations of the most common objects in nature, of those which must be present to every nation barbarous or civilised, with the inflections of their nouns and verbs, their principles of regimen and concord, and these deposited in all the public libraries, it would furnish opportunities to those skilled in the languages of the old world to compare them with these, now, or at any future time, and hence to construct the best evidence of the derivation of this part of the human race.

But imperfect as is our knowledge of the tongues spoken in America, it suffices to discover the following remarkable fact. Arranging them under the radical ones to which they may be palpably traced, and doing the same by those of the red men of Asia, there will be found probably twenty in America, for one in Asia, of those radical languages, so called because, if they were ever the same, they have lost all resemblance to one another. A separation into dialects may be the work of a few ages only, but for two dialects to recede from one another till they have lost all vestiges of their common origin, must require an immense course of time; perhaps not less than many people give to the age of the earth. A greater number of those radical changes of language having taken place among the red men of America, proves them of greater antiquity than those of Asia.

I will now proceed to state the nations and numbers of the Aborigines which still exist in a respectable and independant form. And as their undefined boundaries would render it difficult to specify those only which may be within any certain limits, and it may not be unacceptable to present a more general view of them, I will reduce within the form of a Catalogue all those within, and circumjacent to, the United States, whose names and numbers have come to my notice. These are taken from four different lists, the first of which was given in the year 1759 to General Stanwix by George Croghan, Deputy agent for Indian affairs under Sir William Johnson; the second was drawn up by a French trader of considerable note, resident among the Indians many years, and annexed to Colonel Bouquet's printed account of his expedition in 1764. The third was made out by Captain Hutchins, who visited most of the tribes, by order, for the purpose of learning their numbers in 1768. And the fourth by John Dodge, an Indian trader, in 1779, except the numbers marked, which are from other information.

But, apprehending these might be different appellations for some of the tribes already enumerated, I have not inserted them in the table, but state them separately as worthy of further inquiry. The variations observable in numbering the same tribe may sometimes be ascribed to imperfect information, and sometimes to a greater or less comprehension of settlements under the same name.