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Thomas Jefferson's Natural History Writings and the Construction of American National Culture

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Abstract

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) is a late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century American writer who is the principal author of The Declaration of Independence (1776) and who composes many works about political philosophy and statesmanship. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most critics regard Jefferson as one of the great philosopher-statesmen because his writings often advocate the ideas of democracy, human rights, liberty, and political independence. Completely different from this perspective, this essay focuses its emphasis on Jefferson's effectiveness as a natural history writer. The aim of this essay is to point out that through his natural historical discourse in Notes on the State of Virginia (1787) and letters, Jefferson describes and studies the flora, fauna, geography of America, helping ground American national culture upon the land, thereby constructing a distinctive national culture for early America. In this way, this essay hopes to refer the readers interested in an alternative view to the writings of Jefferson.

Keywords: Thomas Jefferson, natural history writing, the construction of American national culture, Notes on the State of Virginia, "Instructions to Captain Lewis"

I. Prologue

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) is a late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century American writer who composes *The Declaration of Independence* (1776) and many works about law, political philosophy, and statesmanship. He is generally considered as one of the great philosopher-statesmen because his writings often advocate the ideas of democracy, human rights, liberty, and so forth.1 In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most critics regard Jefferson as a writer of political philosophy who concerns himself with theories of government, human rights, or political independence, because of his "lifelong passion to liberate the human mind from tyranny" (Baym 649). True, Jefferson is famous for his declaration that "all men are created equal; that they are endowed . . . with certain inherent rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (D 235).2 Such an emphasis is understandable, indeed nearly inevitable. Nevertheless, to think of Jefferson as -- in Skipp's words -- "the greatest of philosopher-statesmen" is to miss the crucial aspects of environmental awareness in his writings (20).

In effect, Jefferson is not merely a writer of political philosophy; he is also a natural history writer. Although Jefferson's writings are best known for formulating sound theories of government, his works are also a detailed study and an exploration of American natural environment that frequently invokes natural history. On the whole, Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) and letters are a comprehensive look at America; these works contain prosaic accounts of his state's geology, geography, flora, fauna, and landscape. Natural history, in other words, is the primary intellectual orientation of Jefferson's works. However, the formal and intellectual debt to natural history in Jefferson's writings is rarely acknowledged and

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[1] In *Thomas Jefferson and His World* (1965), Malone asserts that Jefferson is one of the greatest political philosophers and champions of human liberty in American history (5), establishing him as a writer of political philosophy. In his introduction to *The Portable Jefferson* (1977), Peterson states that "Jefferson embodied the new nation's aspiration for freedom" and that "Jefferson earned his place in literary history primarily as a statesman identified with the revolutionary experiment in America" (xi). In *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), Elliott maintains that Jefferson's works exhibit "the freedom and equality of all selves" (132); in *American Literature: A Prentice Hall Anthology* (1991), she contends that Jefferson's works chiefly intend to offer "the best hope for establishing a society based upon mankind's natural, inalienable rights" (431); and in *the Cambridge Introduction to Early American Literature* (2002), she maintains that Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* belongs to the categories of political and philosophical essay and document (160).[1] In *A History of American Literature* (2004), Gray argues that the general thrust of Jefferson's books is toward "celebration of the rights of all people" (76).

[2] In this paper, the following abbreviations will be used throughout to refer to sources of quotations from Jefferson's natural history writings:

D: "The Declaration of Independence"
I: "Instructions to Captain Lewis"
W: *Thomas Jefferson*: *Writings*
NV: *Notes on the State of Virginia*

analyzed.[3]

Completely different from the readings of most critics, this essay will focus its emphasis on Jefferson's effectiveness as a natural history writer. The aim of this essay is to explore the construction of American national culture in Jefferson's natural history writings and to point out that through his natural historical discourse in *Notes on the State of Virginia* and letters (such as "Instructions to Captain Lewis," and so forth), Jefferson studies and celebrates the flora, fauna, geography of America, helping ground American national culture upon the vast terrain and the natural resources in his homeland, thereby constructing a distinctive national culture for early America. In this way, this essay hopes to refer the readers interested in an alternative view to the writings of Jefferson.

II. Early American Natural History Writings and Cultural Nationalism

Natural history is generally used to refer to all descriptive aspects of the study of nature; in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century America, natural history became a flourishing discipline (Branch 1996: 1059). The writers of natural history (also called natural historians or natural history writers) take for their subject matter all of what they call the Creation. Any object within the natural world -- such as rocks, mountains, plants, animals -- is a proper subject of natural historical inquiry. Natural history is a broad area of scientific and literary inquiry; it records the information and fact relating to all natural productions, such as earth's flora and fauna; it represents a picture of untouched nature; and it documents a world captured by human observers in a particular cultural frame. The writing about natural history (also called natural history writing or literary natural history) draws on scientific information and knowledge about the natural world, but at the same time, it is frequently written in the first person and incorporates personal observations of nature. Natural history writing, in other words, combines the qualities of scientific objectivity and literary subjectivity. In an essay entitled "Writing about Nature in Early America: From Discovery to 1850," Johnson and Patterson define natural history writings as "texts in which authors, in representing the natural world in language, deliberately bring together science and literature . . . in order to effect some artful end" (3). Natural history, in brief, is viewed as both science and belles letters.

[3] For instance, in Thomas J. Lyon's *This Incomperable Lande: A Book of American Nature Writing* (1989) and John Elder's *American Nature Writers* (1996), two anthologies of nature writing, Jefferson's name and works are not included. In another anthology entitled *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English* (2002; the previous edition of this book was published as *The Norton Anthology of Nature Writing* in 1990), for another example, Jefferson's writings and name are not mentioned, either.

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, natural history writing had become a well-established genre and discipline in America; it encompassed "the aggregate of facts relating to the natural objects, etc. of a place, or the characteristics of a class of persons or things" (Regis 5) and it presented natural historians' observations, perceptions, reflections, and descriptions of the natural world. In their activities to explore the world of nature, natural historians primarily employed two basic procedures: observing and describing. Through these two procedures, natural historians described and recorded what they saw in the world of nature. For the natural historians in early America, observable phenomena included land-forms, bodies of water, minerals, plants, mammals, birds, reptiles, fishes, amphibians, invertebrates -- all the expected and unexpected flora and fauna -- as well as weather, trees, landscapes, woods, forests, and so forth. Early American naturalists exemplified the practice of natural history as expressed in descriptive and analytic essays. Such texts introduced generations of American readers to the life and physical character of America's wild landscapes, communicated scientific knowledge about nature accessibly and eloquently, and celebrated the beauty and power of nature in America. Early natural history literature, as eco-critic Michael P. Branch suggests, turned "American attention toward the cultural possibilities of the land" (1996: 1059).

In early America, natural history writers -- including Jefferson, William Bartram (1739-1823),[4] Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813),[5] Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827),[6] and so forth -- frequently described the impressive natural resources of America. They described nature's wonders and beauty, expressing their feeling of great liking and fervent admiration for the primeval and magnificent scenes of the New World. Also, these naturalists believed that indigenous species should be studied and housed in America and that "funding for conducting surveys, creating permanent collections, and publishing natural history at home were essential to nurturing the

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[4] William Bartram is the son of John Bartram (1699-1777) -- a notable natural historian in the eighteenth century; he is famous for his botanical and ornithological drawings and for his book entitled *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, etc.*, which was considered at the time to be one of the foremost writings on American natural history (Irmscher 37).

[5] Crèvecoeur is an eighteenth-century American naturalist who composes two works of natural history: *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) and *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America: More Letters from an American Farmer* (written between 1770 and 1778, yet published together in the twentieth century). These works offer comprehensive look at America, constructed around a natural historical core that took characteristic forms of the manners-and-customs account and the natural history essay on a single kind of flora and fauna.

[6] Peale is a zealous naturalist in late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century America. In his lifetime, his great dream was to open a public museum of natural history in the United States -- an ideal that was "quite radical at a time when collections of natural history were quite modest" and were generally restricted to the "cabinets of curiosity" kept by wealthy gentlemen (Branch 2004: 197). Later on, Peale established the internationally famous museum of natural history in Philadelphia. His "American Museum" was a major public attraction in early America (Branch 2004: 197).

emergence of American culture" (Branch 1996: 1063).[7] Efforts to establish American natural history, in this way, were successfully carried forward on a wave of cultural nationalism, and the opinion that the American wilderness environment and its inhabitants were both natural and cultural resources gradually took root in the literary imagination of the young republic. Celebrating the beauty and notable features of the terrain in New England and introducing American readers to scientific information about nature, early American naturalists introduced a fit subject for American national literature -- the vast and unexplored wilderness of the American continent and its nonhuman inhabitants. In other words, late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century natural history writings helped nurture awareness of an emergent American culture's unique dependency upon the land. Jefferson's works of natural history (especially his *Notes on the State of Virginia*) displayed one of the important contributions made by early American natural historians. Delineating the impressive geography, flora, and fauna of the young nation and claiming that the species of America were unique and distinct from European counterparts, Jefferson's natural history writings helped define a uniquely American subject and construct distinctively American culture.

III. The Construction of National Culture in Jefferson's Natural History Writings

Although Jefferson's importance as an early American writer who advocated the ideas of liberty, equality, or political independence was widely acknowledged, his significance as a natural history writer had been overlooked. In effect, many of Jefferson's important achievements were in the field of natural history: he composed *Notes on the State of Virginia,* which is an important contribution to American natural history writings; it was Jefferson who articulated the belief that contact with the land -- whether scientific or literary -- was an ennobling pursuit that would help unify the nation As president, Jefferson also effected the Louisiana Purchase in part because he recognized the scientific and cultural value of the acquisition (Branch 1996: 1069). In addition, the expedition of Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809) and William Clark (1770-1838) was conducted at Jefferson's direction.[8] What is more, Jefferson was a

[7] During the Revolutionary era and early-nineteenth-century, natural history writing in America did not shy away from political engagement; some important works of natural history during this period of time were related to politics. Part of the agenda of natural historians -- such as Jefferson and Peale -- was to forward their program of cultural nationalism and celebrated the natural world and its wild inhabitants in New England.

[8] Both Lewis and Clark were natural history writers in early-nineteenth-century America. When Jefferson became president in 1801, the territory between the Mississippi and the Rockies was little-known. To explore this *terra incognita* west to the Pacific, Jefferson chose Lewis and Clark to lead the expedition of the Corps of Discovery and to document the natural history of the American

member of the American Philosophical Society and, in recognition of his contributions to natural history, he was installed as the president of the American Philosophical Society (Patterson 207).

A patriotic natural historian, Jefferson was in contact with the intellectual circle of natural history in America. He made close contact with the members of natural history circle, such as Crèvecoeur, Peale, and Bartram. In 1785, Jefferson wrote a letter to Crèvecoeur, his one-time neighbor in New York, giving him helpful advice about plants (Regis 112). Also, Jefferson and Peale were good friends; he was a powerful advocate for the establishment of permanent collections of natural history in America and an early supporter of Peale's Philadelphia Museum, the first museum of natural history in the United States (Branch 1996: 1069).[9] In addition, Jefferson carried on an active correspondence with the Bartrams -- both John Bartram and William Bartram, who established one of America's first botanical gardens (Regis 112).[10]

Jefferson is an ardent natural history writer; his devotion to natural history writing is evident in his study of American landscape and its vital relationship to American national culture. In 1800, Jefferson's election for president revived his interest in exploring the natural history of American West. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 had doubled the territory of the United States,[11] Jefferson appointed Lewis and Clark as the leaders of an exploratory expedition to the West, and sent Lewis a set of specific "Instructions" for the expedition on June 20, 1803.[12] The majority of Jefferson's "Instructions to Captain Lewis" reflected his interest of natural history. According to Jefferson's "Instructions," Lewis and Clark must keep the sort of thorough, daily, and descriptive diary that Jefferson had specifically requested of them; Jefferson wrote:

> Your observations are to be taken with great pains & accuracy, to be entered distinctly, & intelligibly for others as well as yourself, to comprehend all the elements necessary, with the aid of the usual tables, to

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West. And many of the specimens sent back from the journey were maintained at Jefferson's Poplar Forest estate and in Peale's Museum (Branch 1996: 1069).

[9] The correspondence between Jefferson and Peale can be found in *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988). In their correspondence, Jefferson and Peale often discuss the importance of establishing permanent collections of natural history in America.

[10] Jefferson was one of the Bartrams' allies in American natural history (Regis 83). The last footnote in this essay displays a short passage of Jefferson's letter to William Bartram.

[11] The Louisiana Purchase sparked Jefferson's enthusiasm about the commercial, scientific, and literary possibilities of the American West.

[12] Jefferson hoped that Lewis and Clark would closely record the natural history of the West, chart precisely the geographical locations of all rivers, mountains, and other landmarks, and thus, map a territory that had so far existed only in the imagination of most Americans. In fact, Jefferson's choice of naturalist Lewis to lead the exploring party with Clark across the American frontier was an immense boon to the literature of early American natural history.

> fix the latitude and longitude of the places at which they were taken, . . . (I 482)

Mentioning that Lewis' observations should "be taken "with great pains & accuracy" and "with the aid of the usual tables" in these lines (I 482), Jefferson emphasized the use of natural historical methods to document the unknown land of the American West. Through this famous letter ("Instructions to Captain Lewis"), Jefferson not only created the planet's first government-funded scientific expedition and set in motion the first transcontinental exploration of the regions west of the Mississippi, but also ordered the first of what would become many written accounts of the vastly fascination American West through all the decades of the nineteenth century.

In his "Instructions to Captain Lewis," Jefferson also specified the study of soil, topography, animals, forests, minerals, traces of volcanic activities, and climate. He further asked Lewis to seek out scientific novelties such as plants and animals "not known in the U. S." and "the remains or accounts of any which may be deemed rare or extinct" (I 483). Lewis, according to Jefferson's "Instructions," should assess the climate according to temperatures, "the portion of rainy, cloudy, & clear days, by lighting, hail, snow, ice, by the access & recess of frost, by the winds prevailing at different seasons, the dates at which particular plants put forth or lose their flowers, or leaf, times of appearance of particular birds, reptiles or insects" (I 482-83). At their return, finding about 300 miles of mountainous terrain separating the headwaters of the Missouri and Columbia, Lewis and Clark brought back knowledge of hitherto unknown animal and plant species. The result, *The Journals of Lewis and Clark,* is a great narrative of natural history that portrays hundreds of species (such as the bighorn sheep, coyote, prairie dog, and so forth) new to science and documents the unknown prairies, mountains, rivers, desert wilderness of the American West.

In addition to his notable "Instructions to Captain Lewis," Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) is a significant contribution to American natural history writing. This book is "an admirably researched and constructed monograph on the natural history, climate, resources, and geography of his native state" (Kastner 121), and it is motivated largely by Jefferson's desire to help ground American national literature upon American landscape. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson closely records the intricate lives and habits of the flora and fauna, the landscape features, and the beauty of American natural environment; through his descriptive essays, Jefferson exemplifies the practice of natural history. Simply stated, introducing generations of American readers to the life and physical character of America's wild landscape, communicating scientific knowledge about nature accessibly and eloquently, and celebrating the beauty and power of nature in America, Jefferson's natural history writings turn American attention toward the cultural and

literary possibilities of the land.

In addition, Jefferson's works of natural history introduce the scientific facts about New England's geography, climate, wild landscape and its nonhuman inhabitants into American prose writing, and thereby help define a uniquely American subject. *Notes on the State of Virginia* becomes one of the first comprehensive works of literary natural history published on the subjects of Virginia's "Rivers," "Sea-ports," "Mountains," "Cascades," "Productions mineral, Vegetable and Animal" (NV ix); in this book, Jefferson intends to construct an independent and distinctive national culture for early America. He sees the publication of this book as a deeply American venture, an act of patriotism that asserts the greatness and scope of his new country's cultural and literary resources.

Of the contributions that *Notes on the State of Virginia* makes to American natural history, the most important is Jefferson's justly emendation of French naturalist Count Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon's theories concerning nature in the New World.[13] In "Query VI," the longest chapter of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson joins a larger eighteenth-century discussion known as "the dispute of the new world" (Patterson 203). In the eighteenth century, European scientists established a theory of the degeneration (also called "degeneracy theory") of nature in New England.[14] They argued that the American "wilderness" was evidence of the land's ongoing decline. Only cultivation could maintain a standard of fertility and health. The most well-respected proponent of this theory was Buffon. Count Buffon had advanced the specific argument that New World animals were smaller than their Old World counterparts, that the animal species in Europe were larger, stronger, more diverse, and greater in number than their American counterparts, and that domestic animals introduced to America declined in size and weight because of the continent's supposedly cold and humid climate. For Jefferson, who knew the huge bison, bear, and elk living in the fecund wilds of his home country, the idea that American animals were enfeebled was a national insult as well as simply bad science.

Jefferson found Buffon's degeneracy theory repellent. What most offended him was the European imputation that American animals had degenerated over time from European prototypes. The proposition outraged both Jefferson's patriotism and his admiration for the creatures he studied. In *Notes on the State of Virginia,* Jefferson asserts:

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[13] As court naturalist to Louis XV in France, Comte de Buffon (1707-88) is the premier natural historian of the eighteenth century. The forty-four volumes of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière* (1787-1804) have given him nearly unassailable authority in the field of natural history.

[14] Engaging in one of the most hotly debated natural history issues of the century, Jefferson wrote his *Notes* to encounter Buffon, de Pauw, and other French *philosophes* who asserted chauvinistically that New World animals were weak and degenerate relatives of more powerful European species.

> It does not appear that Messrs. de Buffon and D'Aubenton have measured, weighed, or seen those of America. It is said of some of them, by some travelers, that they are smaller than the European. But who were these travelers? Have they not been men of a different description from those who have laid open to us the other three quarters of the world? Was natural history the objects of their travels? Did they measure or weigh the animals they speak of? Or did they not judge of them by sight, or perhaps even from report only? Were they acquainted with the animals of their own country, with which they undertake to compare them? Have they not been so ignorant as often to mistake the species? A true answer to these questions would probably lighten their authority, so as to render it insufficient for the foundation of a hypothesis. (54)

In response to the degeneracy theory, Jefferson in his *Notes* reasons that "So far the Count de Buffon has carried this new theory of the tendency of nature to belittle her [America's] productions," that the American naturalists have "to make a firm comparison between the two countries," and that Buffon's "candor in this [his theory of degeneracy] can never be too much praised" (NV54, 56, and 65). In this way, Jefferson's natural history writing conveys his essential belief that the writings about nature can be counted on to help Americans recognize the literary and cultural possibilities of the natural environment in New England. For Jefferson, America's wild landscape with its flora and fauna can be the cultural resources requisite for constructing national identity. As a matter of fact, during the early national period of New England, the discourse of the wilderness environment constituted not only a specifically American *nature*, but also a distinct concept of an American *nation* (Mazel xviii). Wild nature, as William Cronon points out in his *Uncommon Ground* (1995), is both a "self-conscious cultural construction" and "thoroughly contested terrain" (39 and 51). For Jefferson, representing the natural environment and the creatures in America is a conscious discursive construction indeed.

In his representative natural history writing -- *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson uses the method of natural history to refute Buffon in his own discipline and to celebrate nature as the greatest endowment of the American nation. He finds Buffon's claim that animals are doomed to inferiority by residence in the inhospitable climate of the New World to be ridiculous and astonishing. In *Notes*, Jefferson assembles three tables containing data on the number and weight of quadrupeds in North America and Europe (NV 50-52), and these tables and charts undermine the very methodological and philosophical underpinnings of Buffon's argument.[15] Buffon lacks data in support of his claims, and this deficiency discredits

[15] In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson carefully constructs a series of tables comparing the

his entire work. Jefferson, in contrast, flaunts long lists of specific measurements. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson mainly relies on three different sources -- his own observations, information from a circle of friends, and books by earlier naturalists such as John Bartram, Peter Kalm (1716-79), and Mark Catesby (1682-1749), who, unlike Buffon, actually have firsthand experience of nature in the New World.[16]

What is more, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson describes such large animals as the elk to disprove Buffon's charge and to redress the offense Buffon had given to New World nature. In "Query VI" of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, by drawing upon his knowledge of paleontology, Jefferson challenges Buffon's misidentification of mastodon bones as those of the elephant, thus suggesting that America had been home to the world's largest quadruped mammal. When he wrote his *Notes*, Jefferson himself was already an accomplished naturalist with his own "cabinet of curiosity," which included many fossils and bones items which Jefferson described as "the most desirable objects in natural history" (qtd. in Semonin 13). Among the specimens of most interest to him were the yet unidentified bones from an enormous animal which had been found in North America near the Ohio River, which Jefferson called a "mammoth" (qtd. in Semonin 13). Jefferson's interest in the bones stemmed from his desire to refute the theory of degeneracy propounded by Buffon, who had argued in his epic *Histoire Naturelle* that all flora and fauna in America were inferior to Europe's owing to the deleterious effects of climatic conditions. While acknowledging his own debt to Buffon's natural history, Jefferson proceeded to discredit his theory of degeneracy through a systematic listing of the sizes and weights of North American animals compared to those in Europe. With Jefferson's reply to Buffon, the "mammoth," later to be identified as a mastodon, became inextricably linked with the national honor of the new nation, as did many other animals unique to North America like the buffalo and the bald eagle (Semonin 13-14). In Jefferson's and most early natural historians' eyes, the mastodon represented America's missing ancient history. Through the appropriation of natural history, American cultural nationalism made itself a universal creed, creating in the process the myth of a transcendent America, a nation, in Perry Miller's apt words, that was "Nature's Nation."[17]

In addition, in "Query IV" of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ""Productions Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal," Jefferson also records the natural history of the

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weights of Old and New World quadrupeds, thereby decisively refuting Buffon's theory and in fact subtly suggesting that fauna were actually larger and more numerous in New England.

[16] Jefferson bolstered the credibility of his data on the natural world in America with references to John and William Bartram, Kalm, and Catesby, New World naturalists whose work he had studied with care.

[17] In 1967, Perry Miller composes a famous work entitled *Nature's Nation*.

magnificent and beautiful scenes in New England, such as the confluence of the Shenandoah and "Patowmac" Rivers (NV 43-72). He uses these primitive, wild landscapes as examples of the scenic magnificence in which Americans live and his voice conveys a genuine enthusiasm and a sense of appreciative involvement:

> The passage of the Patowmac through the Blue Ridge is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature. You stand on a very high point of land. On your right comes up the Shenandoah, having ranged along the foot of the mountain an hundred miles to seek a vent. On your left approaches the Patowmac, in quest of a passage also. In the moment of their junction they rush together against the mountain, rend it asunder, and pass off to the sea. The first glance of this scene hurries our senses into the opinion, that this earth has been created in time, that the mountains were formed first, that the rivers began to flow afterwards, that in this place particularly they have been dammed up by the Blue ridge of mountains, and have formed an ocean which filled the whole valley; that continuing to rise they at length broken over at this spot, and have torn the mountain down from its summit to its base. (NV 19)

Closely and objectively presenting the features of the American landscape in these lines, Jefferson imbues American nature with a sense of national pride. His description of the passage of the Potomac River through the Blue Ridge Mountains promotes a natural spectacle that helps introduce into American letters a new and distinctive subject. Jefferson's descriptions of the confluence of the Shenandoah and "Patowmac" Rivers reflect the culture's reading for natural history to become national literary art.

In his writings of natural history, Jefferson frequently describes nature's wonders and expresses his feeling of great liking and intense admiration for the distinctive, primeval and magnificent scenes of the United States. The following passage is another example:

> The piles of rock on each hand, but particularly on the Shenandoah, the evident marks of their disrupture and avulsion from their beds by the most powerful agents of nature, corroborate the impression. . . . It is as placid and delightful, as that is wild and tremendous. For the mountain being cloven asunder, she presents to your eye, through the cleft, a small catch of smooth blue horizon, at an infinite distance in the plain country, inviting you, as it were, from the riot roaring around, to pass through the breach and participate of the calm below. Here the eye ultimately composes itself; and that way too the road happens actually to lead. You cross the Patowmac above the junction, pass along its side through the base of the

> mountain for three miles, its terrible precipices hanging in fragments over you. (NV 19)

This passage blooms upon the stalk of the most exacting natural history. Jefferson's exhilaration at the spectacle of the Potomac's passage is yoked to speculation about the formation of mountains, the probable existence of ancient inland seas, and the erosive force of rivers. *Notes on the State of Virginia* exists on the cusp of a new era in the American understanding of nature, for it is at once a work of late-eighteenth-century science and early-nineteenth-century paean to the beauty of nature in America. In this passage, Jefferson conveys his great admiration for the wild nature and expresses his love for the pristine environment in his country.[18] Such admiration and love encourage him to compose works of natural history; his natural history writings play an important role in American cultural achievements.

In a long and significant letter entitled "Dialogue between My Head and My Heart,"[19] Jefferson also expresses his sense of appreciation toward the original, wild condition of America; he declares that "the Falling Spring, the Cascade of Niagara, the Passage of the Potowmac through the Blue Mountains, the Natural Bridge" are all "worth a voyage across the Atlantic" (W 870). This letter is significant because Jefferson expresses his great appreciation of the beautiful natural scenes in America, especially in Virginia:

> The Falling Spring, the Cascade of Niagara, the Passage of the Potowmac through the Blue Mountains, the Natural Bridge. It is worth a voyage across the Atlantic to see these objects . . . and make them, & thereby ourselves, known to all ages. And our own dear Monticello [Jefferson's Virginia estate], where has nature spread so rich a mantle under the eye? mountains, forests, rocks, rivers. With what majesty do we there ride above the storms! How sublime to look down into the workhouse of nature, to see her clouds, hail, snow, rain, thunder, all fabricated at our feet! And the glorious Sun, when rising as if out of distant water, just gliding the tops of the mountains, and giving life to all nature! (W 870)

These lines display Jefferson's appreciation for the American landscape, showing his genuine love of wild nature. To be with nature and to study all the productions of Nature are the greatest pleasure in Jefferson's life (W 1203). Expressing his great admiration for the wild domain of primeval nature -- including "mountains, forests, rocks, rivers" (W 1203) -- and portraying the pristine and magnificent quality of the American landscape he observes, Jefferson's natural history writings play a significant

[18] Jefferson's *Notes* prefigures the love of nature that would inform nineteenth- and twentieth-century nature writing in America.

[19] Collected in *Thomas Jefferson: Writing,* this letter was written by Jefferson on October 12, 1786 to a friend, Maria Cosway.

role in American national literature.

IV. Epilogue

On March 2, 1809, two days before retiring from his second term as President of the United States, Jefferson wrote a letter to a friend, expressing his elation over returning his estate in rural Virginia and his delight of studying natural history:[20]

> Never did a prisoner, released from his chain, feel such relief as I shall on shaking off the shackles of power. Nature intended me for the tranquil pursuits of science, by rendering them my supreme delight. (W 1203)

In this letter, claiming that "the enormities of the times in which I have lived, have forced me to . . . commit myself on the boisterous ocean of political passions (W 1203), Jefferson asserted that to be with nature and "the tranquil pursuits of science" (the science of nature history) are his "supreme delight" (W 1203). Indeed, Jefferson frequently yeaned to leave behind his public obligations and dedicated himself to the study and writing of natural history.[21]

Today, Jefferson is still remembered as the author of *The Declaration of Independence* and is mostly regarded as a public figure who primarily cares about the issues of liberty, equality, democracy, or political independence. This essay, however, focuses its emphasis on Jefferson's effectiveness as a natural history writer. In actuality, Jefferson was well versed not only in law, political philosophy, or statesmanship, but also in natural history. He is an enthusiastic natural history writer in early America. His *Notes on the State of Virginia* and many letters (such as "Instructions to Captain Lewis" and "Dialogue between My Head and My Heart") represent his attempt to write natural history for New England and to record the environmental features in America. Through his natural history writings, Jefferson introduces a subject endemic to the United States, one that Europe lacks and can never procure; the subject is the vast, pristine, and unexplored wilderness of the American continent.

In his natural history writings, Jefferson presents the scientific knowledge and objective information about the American animals, birds, geography, climates, and plants in loving details and advertises the promise and grandeur of America to refute Buffon's degeneracy theory, thus establishing an essential link between American

[20] Collected in *Thomas Jefferson: Writing,* this letter was written by Jefferson to a friend, P. S. Dupont de Nemours (W 1203-1204).

[21] In a letter to William Bartram about some experiments he was conducting on flies for the American Philosophical Society, Jefferson confessed," I long to be free for pursuits of this kind instead of the detestable ones in which I am now laboring" (qtd. in Kastner 120).

nature and the new American nation. In his works of natural history, Jefferson also expresses his intense appreciation and conveys his great admiration for America's pristine landscapes and its nonhuman inhabitants, thus turning American attention toward the cultural possibilities of the land and introducing a fit subject for American national literature. Jefferson is unquestionably a patriotic natural history writer in early America.

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傑佛遜的自然史書寫與美國國族文化建構

摘要

在十八世紀末與十九世紀初這個美國建國早期的時空底下，傑佛遜是一位舉足輕重的作家。他為美國的《獨立宣言》起草，並書寫了許多有關政治哲學、法律、政府等議題的作品。在這些著作中，傑佛遜不時鼓吹人權、自由平等、與政治獨立，因此批評家多半將傑佛遜定位為一位提倡民主、自由、與人權的政治哲學作家。本文完全不同上述解讀。此文試圖指出，傑佛遜不只是一位主張政治獨立、自由和人權的作家，他其實更是一位為美國大地景物書寫本土自然史的早期作家，他的自然史作品包括了《維吉尼亞州的札記》及書信（例如「給路易斯將官的指示」等書信）。透過其自然史書寫，傑佛遜為美國的地理風貌及許多本土物種做了詳實的觀察、描述、與記錄，進而為建國初期的美國建構一套獨特而獨立的國族文化。

關鍵字：　傑佛遜　自然史書寫　美國國族文化建構　《維吉尼亞州的札記》　「給路易斯將官的指示」