

# A Virginia Gentleman's Library

As proposed by Thomas Jefferson to  
Robert Skipwith in 1771 and now as-  
sembled in the Brush-Everard House,  
Williamsburg, Virginia.



COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

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## Introduction

WHEN Robert Skipwith, the brother-in-law of the future Mrs. Jefferson, asked the twenty-eight-year-old sage of Monticello for guidance in choosing books, Jefferson obligingly promised to help him. On July 17, 1771, Skipwith jogged his memory with a letter: "I would have them suited," he wrote, "to the capacity of a common reader who understands but little of the classicks and who has not leisure for any intricate or tedious study. Let them be improving and amusing." In other words, Skipwith was a forerunner of a familiar modern American, the busy man of affairs whose activities leave him little time for reading. He desired, therefore, to absorb "culture" as painlessly as possible by reading the smallest number of well-selected books.

Jefferson's reply to Skipwith's letter, and the list of 148 titles comprising 379 volumes which he enclosed, is reprinted in full in this pamphlet. Although Skipwith had in mind spending no more than £25 or £30, a bibliophile like Jefferson was unsatisfied with a "partial choice," and so drew up a catalogue of books costing £107:10:0 sterling in plain bindings—a substantial sum even for a wealthy man—20 per cent more if "bound elegantly," and 50 per cent more if bound by the celebrated Baumgarten, a German bookbinder in London noted for his use of marbled papers and marbled edges.

Jefferson's literary taste on the whole was excellent. In compiling this list he not only included literary classics but also some current literature and leading works of the day on science, agriculture, and government. Yet, despite the



ephemeral nature of much of the list, at least one-quarter of the titles are still read by persons other than specialists.

Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Dryden, Milton, and Butler were, then as now, regarded as English classics. Of the eighteenth-century writers permanently added to their number are Addison and Steele, Swift, Smollett, Richardson, Goldsmith, and Sterne. And of the Continental writers other than Greek and Roman authors, Molière, Fénelon, Montesquieu, and Voltaire continue to be read generally today.

Practical works like Payne's *Observations on Gardening* and Tull's *Horse-hoeing Husbandry* have been superseded by modern books relating to considerably changed conditions, and so have the dictionaries of that day—Bailey's, Johnson's, and Owen's.

Lawyers now need works other than Lord Kames' and Cuninghame's, but they still occasionally look into Blackstone for sentimental reasons.

Tacitus, Caesar, Josephus, and Plutarch even yet occupy an important place in historical literature. And though the modern historian might justifiably ignore most of the other works listed under "History," there are several exceptions. Robertson and Hume, as the founders of modern scientific historiography, have much the same sentimental claim upon the historian of today that Blackstone has upon the modern lawyer.

Although few theologians now read Bishop Sherlock on *Death or A Future State*, his basic ideas are still held by orthodox Christians and reappear in current religious literature. And, of course, the *Holy Bible* occupies an unchallenged place today no less than in 1771. Yet despite the inclusion of the Bible and Bishop Sherlock, a notable feature of Jefferson's selection is its deficiency in theology. In a day when no one was really educated without some knowledge of the spiritual nature of man, Jefferson blithely ignored

even the most authentic conclusions of theologians. Thus he showed none of the intellectual curiosity that characterized his attitude toward natural and political science, and instead asserted that "he who knows nothing is nearer the truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors."

Another remarkable feature of the list is its profusion of novels. When this form of literature was in its infancy and many sober and pious people thought it wasteful to spend time reading mere fiction, Jefferson realized that novels often contain a kernel of truth more effectively and persuasively presented than in a ponderous treatise. In short, they were at once "improving and amusing"—just what Skipwith requested.

But the field in which obsolescence is most notable is natural science. The century that produced George Berkeley, David Hume, and the *Federalist* papers made few comparable contributions to science. Nothing in Jefferson's natural science list has more than an antiquarian interest today except Franklin's celebrated treatise on electricity—now perhaps the most costly collector's item on the list. The modern reader would be safer to entrust his religious instruction to the good Bishop Sherlock, his legal education to Blackstone, and his historical learning to Robertson and Hume, than to go under the knife of a practitioner of Nourse's *Compendium of Physic & Surgery* or to receive prescriptions based on Macqueer's *Elements of Chemistry*.

\* \* \*

In furnishing the Brush-Everard House to the period of about 1770, Colonial Williamsburg was unable to discover an inventory of the estate of Thomas Everard, and it is not known what books he had in the house. But since he was, so far as we know, a typical Virginia gentlemen of his day, Colonial Williamsburg has chosen to use Jefferson's list of



1771 as its guide in reassembling a gentleman's library of the day. This decision was based on a suggestion by Dr. Douglass Adair, Professor of History at the College of William and Mary and editor of the *William and Mary Quarterly*.

Through their use of libraries such as this one, the colonists were intellectually well prepared for the struggle for independence when the war-clouds of revolution broke upon the North American continent in 1775. Despite conflicting economic interests, small and poorly distributed industrial potential, and comparatively little experience in intercolonial co-operation, the thirteen colonies not only emerged successfully from the long and bitter war but ultimately formed an enduring federal union. This was possible principally because the colonial leaders had read widely and thought deeply about the principles of freedom and government.

This was particularly true of Virginia, which with Massachusetts exerted the greatest influence of all the colonies in the colonial period. Besides the military leadership of George Washington, the Old Dominion contributed Patrick Henry to be the firebrand of revolt, Richard Bland to formulate a far-seeing theory of empire, Jefferson to pen the Declaration of Independence, George Mason to enunciate the basic civil rights of the new commonwealth, and, later James Madison to lay the foundation of political science upon which the Federal Constitution was to rest.

It is interesting to note that, except in the political realm, Virginia's culture was largely absorptive rather than productive. In this way it differed from the culture of New England where Cotton Mather could publish no fewer than 450 books and pamphlets in a single lifetime. The gentlemen of Virginia loved their books and often acquired a polished literary style, but they seldom ventured into print. William Byrd II could write sprightly narratives of his

journeys to the mines or of surveying the boundary line and, perhaps, read them aloud to add to the merriment of his guests, but to publish them for the common people to read did not accord with his sense of propriety. To put it bluntly, it was ungenteel. In this respect, subsequent generations have surely been the poorer for the sense of propriety of the early Virginians.

In reassembling at the Brush-Everard House this colonial equivalent of "Dr. Eliot's Five-Foot Shelf," Colonial Williamsburg hopes to focus attention upon the kind of books that contributed to the thought of the rank and file of Virginia gentlemen on the eve of the Revolution.

ARTHUR PIERCE MIDDLETON

Research Department  
Colonial Williamsburg



## Robert Skipwith to Thomas Jefferson

Dear Sir

17th July 1771.

This I have left at the Forest to remind you of your obliging promise and withal to guide you in your choice of books for me, both as to the number and matter of them. I would have them suited to the capacity of a common reader who understands but little of the classicks and who has not leisure for any intricate or tedious study. Let them be improving as well as amusing and among the rest let there be Hume's history of England, the new edition of Shakespear, the short Roman history you mentioned and all Sterne's works. I am very fond of Bumgarden's manner of binding but can't afford it unless Fingal or some of those new works be bound up only after that manner; that one, Belisarius, and some others of the kind I would have if bound in gold. Let them amount to about five and twenty pounds sterling, or, if you think proper, to thirty pounds.

With the list please to send me particular directions for importing them, including the bookseller's place of residence. Your very hble servant,

ROBT. SKIPWITH

## Thomas Jefferson to Robert Skipwith

Monticello. Aug. 3. 1771.

I sat down with a design of executing your request to form a catalogue of books amounting to about 30. lib. sterl. but could by no means satisfy myself with any partial choice I could make. Thinking therefore it might be as agreeable to you, I have framed such a general collection as I think you would wish, and might in time find convenient, to procure. Out of this you will chuse for yourself to the amount you mentioned for the present year, and may hereafter as shall be convenient proceed in completing the whole. A view of the second column in this catalogue would I suppose extort a smile from the face of gravity. Peace to it's wisdom! Let me not awaken it. A little attention however to the nature of the human mind evinces that the entertainments of fiction are useful as well as pleasant. That they are pleasant when well written, every person feels who reads. But wherein is it's utility, asks the reverend sage, big with the notion that nothing can be useful but the learned lumber of Greek and Roman reading with which his head is stored? I answer, every thing is useful which contributes to fix us in the principles and practice of virtue. When any signal act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with it's beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with it's deformity and conceive an abhorrence of vice. Now every motion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions; and dispositions of the mind, like limbs of the body, acquire strength by exercise. But exercise produces habit; and in the instance of which we speak, the exercise being of the moral feelings, produces a habit of



thinking and acting virtuously. We never reflect whether the story we read be truth or fiction. If the painting be lively, and a tolerable picture of nature, we are thrown into a reverie, from which if we awaken it is the fault of the writer. I appeal to every reader of feeling and sentiment whether the fictitious murder of Duncan by Macbeth in Shakespeare does not excite in him as great horror of villainy, as the real one of Henry IV by Ravallac as related by Davila? And whether the fidelity of Nelson, and generosity of Blandford in Marmontel do not dilate his breast, and elevate his sentiments as much as any similar incident which real history can furnish? Does he not in fact feel himself a better man while reading them, and privately covenant to copy the fair example? We neither know nor care whether Lawrence Sterne really went to France, whether he was there accosted by the poor Franciscan, at first rebuked him unkindly, and then gave him a peace offering; or whether the whole be not a fiction. In either case we are equally sorrowful at the rebuke, and secretly resolve *we* will never do so: we are pleased with the subsequent atonement, and view with emulation a soul candidly acknowledging it's fault, and making a just reparation. Considering history as a moral exercise, her lessons would be too unfrequent if confined to real life. Of those recorded by historians few incidents have been attended with such circumstances as to excite in any high degree this sympathetic emotion of virtue. We are therefore wisely framed to be as warmly interested for a fictitious as for a real personage. The spacious field of imagination is thus laid open to our use, and lessons may be formed to illustrate and carry home to the mind every moral rule of life. Thus a lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading King Lear, than by all the dry volumes of ethics and divinity that ever were written. This is my idea of well-written Romance, of

Tragedy, Comedy, and Epic Poetry. —If you are fond of speculation, the books under the head of Criticism, will afford you much pleasure. Of Politicks and Trade I have given you a few only of the best books, as you would probably chuse to be not unacquainted with those commercial principles which bring wealth into our country, and the constitutional security we have for the enjoiment of that wealth. In Law I mention a few systematical books, as a knowledge of the minutiae of that science is not necessary for a private gentleman. In Religion, History, Natural philosophy, I have followed the same plan in general. —But whence the necessity of this collection? Come to the new Rowanty, from which you may reach your hand to a library formed on a more extensive plan. Separated from each other but a few paces, the possessions of each would be open to the other. A spring, centrically situated, might be the scene of every evening's joy. There we should talk over the lessons of the day, or lose them in Musick, Chess, or the merriments of our family companions. The heart thus lightened, our pillows would be soft, and health and long life would attend the happy scene. Come then and bring our dear Tibby with you; the first in your affections, and second in mine. Offer prayers for me too at that shrine to which, tho' absent, I pay continual devotion. In every scheme of happiness she is placed in the fore-ground of the picture, as the principal figure. Take that away, and it is no picture for me. Bear my affections to Wintipock, cloathed in the warmest expressions of sincerity; and to yourself be every human felicity. Adieu.

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