

“I Tremble for My Country”: Thomas Jefferson and the Virginia Gentry. By RONALD L. HATZENBUEHLER. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. 219 pages. \$55.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Peter S. Onuf, *University of Virginia*

Thomas Jefferson “is best understood as an uneasy member of the Virginia gentry” (5), Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler argues in an engaging set of linked essays on the author of the Declaration of Independence. That Jefferson’s first loyalty was to Virginia, his “country,” is well known, as is his regret at getting stuck in Philadelphia drafting the Declaration and not taking a lead role in drafting the commonwealth’s constitution. But Hatzenbuehler pushes Jefferson’s provincialism a step further. Not only did the new nation’s charter have “Virginia roots” (Jefferson borrowed liberally from George Mason’s Virginia Declaration of Rights) but “Jefferson wrote his famous document less as a statement of American nationalism than as evidence that his views coincided with those of his gentry peers at Virginia’s constitutional convention” (61). He may have launched a brilliant career in national politics, but Jefferson’s heart remained in Virginia, torn between his desire to reform its gentry and his need to retain their approval.

Hatzenbuehler’s Jefferson is less a tragic than a pathetic figure, thwarted in his career as a provincial reformer by his class’s and his country’s resistance to change—that is, by their provincialism. Nor could Jefferson sufficiently extricate himself from his position as a great landowner and slave owner to promote his country’s republican renovation. The pathos of Jefferson’s later years was a function of the increasingly conspicuous discrepancy between the young reformer’s vaulting hopes and the economic and social realities of a society ever more committed to slavery. “At the end of his life,” Hatzenbuehler concludes, “we confront a gentry squire deeply entwined in the major inconsistencies of his life and culture regarding slavery” (130).

Hatzenbuehler’s framing of Jefferson’s dilemma, focusing obsessively and sometimes reductively on his identity as a provincial Virginian, is fresh and provocative. But the portrait that emerges is all too familiar. Hatzenbuehler clearly sympathizes with his subject; “his countrymen consistently protected their privileged position in their society and forced him to retreat” from “several areas” (6) of his reform program. Jefferson’s ideals and “devotion to change” were thus fatally compromised by deep-seated prejudices and interests. Had Jefferson’s Virginia been transformed according to his (putative) vision, it would have become some other place, a postprovincial, perfect republic that would have been an inspiration for all Americans and for peoples across the world.

Jefferson initiated his reform efforts with his 1774 *Summary View of the Rights of British America*, another document of continental significance that “relied primarily on local texts, especially the writings of George Mason” (31). Jefferson sought to secure provincial liberties against imperial encroachments, elaborating a federal “concept of shared authority between centralized and local government” (49) that was the enduring mark of his provincialism. Rather than looking forward, Jefferson and Mason looked back, drawing inspiration from provincial historians such as Robert Beverley, William Keith, and William Stith. These

historians had depicted Virginia as a failed paradise that could only fulfill its potential with crop diversification, economic development, and independence from British creditors. Jefferson saw the break with Britain as a providential opportunity for the gentry “to undertake a wholesale reformation of their country” and redeem this promise. There would be “no more quibbling over internal or external taxes, royal charters, mercantilist theory, or the ambiguities of the British constitution.” The provincial reformer transcended provincialism, banishing the metropolis in one bold theoretical stroke: “Virginians had received the right to rule themselves from nature” (52), not from Britain.

Yet Jefferson’s hopes for his country would be frustrated. The new state legislature rejected key provisions of his ambitious revisal of the laws—an effort to reconstitute Virginia by other means—including his bills for public education and religious freedom (finally enacted in 1785–86, thanks to James Madison’s astute leadership, when Jefferson was in Paris). Jefferson’s unhappy experience as war governor underscored his frustrations, demonstrating that the constitution he had not written was fundamentally flawed. The cautious Jefferson, in this as in all other cases, capitulated to his countrymen, accommodating “himself to the inefficiencies of the system” (66). He also recognized the impossibility of promoting his visionary plan for the emancipation and expatriation of Virginia’s enslaved population. “By the end of the American Revolution,” Hatzenbuehler concludes, “Jefferson had lost faith in the ability of his peers to change Virginian society because they had not seized the opportunity that independence from Great Britain offered” (54).

Notes on the State of Virginia was a testament to Jefferson’s frustrated republican faith, his “primary prospectus for reforming the behavior of his countrymen” (71), and an implicit acknowledgment of reform’s limits. That Jefferson did not want to publish the work at all, much less distribute it widely among his gentry peers, suggests that the reform wave had crested. Instead, Hatzenbuehler argues, Jefferson saw the *Notes* as a kind of scripture to inspire subsequent generations, beginning with future leaders at the College of William and Mary, to complete the unfinished work his own generation had begun. “*Notes* is best viewed as a book within a book,” Hatzenbuehler writes, including “Jefferson’s Pentateuch for Virginia—beginning with genesis (Genesis, in the Bible) and ending with a reformulation of his country’s laws (Deuteronomy, in the Bible)—to try to save Virginians from their self-destructive behaviors” (70–71). This is a clever reading (Hatzenbuehler is very good at teasing out Jefferson’s references to scripture), but not entirely persuasive. Contemporaries (not to mention subsequent scholars) failed to grasp this hidden structure or to understand the “game” the *Notes* supposedly furnished “for his book’s readers” (75). Did Jefferson really fashion himself a “failed Moses” because the Assembly rejected “*ten* of the ‘most remarkable alterations’” (84) he proposed for the laws? Having satisfied himself that *Notes* constituted Jefferson’s “‘book of Moses’ for his country” (86), Hatzenbuehler speculates that when Jefferson was president and still presumably obsessed with Virginia’s fate, “he edited the New Testament as a complement to his Pentateuch” (87). The two texts become one, with the God Jefferson invoked in his *Notes* ever ready to “punish the Virginia gentry for holding people in perpetual bondage” (87). Of course Jefferson’s New Testament was never

published and therefore could not possibly bring the gospel's good news to anyone but its editor.

Hatzenbuehler continues to insist on the centrality of provincial concerns in his discussion of Jefferson's career after he left Virginia. He is most convincing in analyzing his subject's belligerent reaction to the alleged Aaron Burr conspiracy and the contemporaneous *Chesapeake* crisis. He is less sure handed on Jefferson's attitude toward the French Revolution, a favorite topic for scholars more attuned to the cosmopolitan Jefferson. "In 1787, Jefferson deliberately downplayed the radicalism of the French Revolution and elevated the dangers he saw on the part of American leaders' reactions to Shays's Rebellion" (105–6). Leaving aside the shaky chronology—in 1787 the French Revolution had not yet begun—Hatzenbuehler's unexceptionable point is that Jefferson was more concerned with events in the United States than in Europe. But it does not follow that Jefferson's primary concern was that "the revolt in Massachusetts would lead to the formation of a stronger central government in the United States" (95), a government that would in turn jeopardize Virginia's provincial liberties. After all as a diplomat Jefferson was acutely aware of and embarrassed by the weakness of the Articles of Confederation. Shays's Rebellion was most troubling because it suggested that the new American republics (including Virginia) were incapable of governing themselves.

The major problem with Hatzenbuehler's larger argument is that his definition of Jefferson's provincialism reduces to a reactionary defense of states' rights. But Jefferson was a cosmopolitan as well as a provincial— or, rather, his provincialism was itself cosmopolitan. Jefferson and other forward-looking patriot-cum-revolutionaries began by imagining themselves as part of an idealized British Empire. Frustrated in their quest for equality, they broke from Britain, as Hatzenbuehler suggests, to create more perfect republics in their respective provinces. But they also sought to create a more perfect union that would promote republicanism, guarantee their collective security, and facilitate their private pursuits of happiness. Jefferson could and did embrace both perspectives, provincial and national, and historians wishing to properly assess "the meaning of his life and his contributions to his country" (157), whether that country is Virginia or the United States as a whole, need to do so as well.