

Was Thomas Jefferson Fair to King George III?



I have spread my dreams under your feet, tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Sometimes the supposed Truth is true. In November 2021, astronomers for the first-time detected light coming from behind a black hole, proving Albert Einstein right, confirming his theory of general relativity of 1915. The team of scientists at Stanford University using high powered telescopes had studied a pair of extreme stars to examine how gravity affects the fabric of space-time, analyzing how light appears around a massive black hole located 800 million light-years away.

In a less celestial assertion, light out of a black hole of misunderstanding and misinterpretation appeared recently in Washington, D.C. We were told by Thomas Jefferson almost 250 years ago of self-evident Truths, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. We were also told that the history

of the king of Great Britain, at the time, was a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny.

In the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, King George III was accused of 28 grievances resulting from his decisions and actions. The conclusion was that a "Prince whose character was marked by every act which may define a tyrant was unfit to be the ruler of a free people."

But softly, don't tread on the truth. Jefferson should have picked his words on assertion of tyranny with care. He did so in part. In his original draft of the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson denounced the so-called tyrant George III, 1760-1820, for forcing the slave trade onto the American colonies, and for the slave trade in South Carolina, but this charge was withheld from the final Declaration.

Jefferson, a skilled, brilliant propagandist, called slavery a mortal depravity and a hideous blot, though he owned 400 slaves in Monticello and another 200 in other of his properties. George III, whatever his other faults, never owned slaves, but 41 of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence were slave owners. Whether Jefferson is to be regarded as an honorable founder of the American Republic or a self-righteous hypocrite is open to question. Certainly, the Declaration is only partly true, and curiously barely deals with the main original grievance of the colonists, no taxation without representation.

The abuses, partly true and taken out of context, cited by Jefferson were that George III had replaced representative government with tyrannical rule, rejected colonial legislation, prevented the right to self-rule, interfered with judicial independence, kept a standing army in times of peace, and hired foreign mercenaries to fight against the colonies.

Jefferson did not know, nor did everyone else until very recently that George III had argued against slavery in an essay he wrote as a teenager, in a 200 page essay, precis of the 1748 *De L'Esprit des Lois*, by Montesquieu, "Of laws relative to government in general." It was written while the Prince of Wales was a pupil of John Stuart, Earl of Bute. George wrote that slavery was repugnant, that it was equally repugnant to the civil law as to the law of nature. The early essay has been found by Professor David Armitage of Harvard who argues that this essay "Briefly placed the Prince of Wales in the vanguard of contemporary arguments against slavery and the slave trade." The young George challenged the argument that the European traffic of black slaves was justifiable because it was not possible to cultivate New World colonies without them.

Jefferson should have known that George was well educated in political as well as in other subjects. The young Prince of Wales was a student of science: his collection of scientific instruments, camera obscura and pendulum is in the Science Museum, London, and 65,000 of his books went to the British Museum. Because of his farming interest and agricultural improvements he was popularly known as "Farmer George." As heir to the throne, he was knowledgeable of constitutional law and of the law of nations. He chose ministers wisely, Pitt the Younger to be prime minister, and was patron to cultural figures including Handel and Mozart. He was responsible for about half of the present Royal collection of paintings and drawings, and bought the house which is now Buckingham Palace.

George was King of Great Britain and Ireland, 1760-1801, and King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland 1801-1820. He was to preside over British expansion in South Asia, and North America, triumph in the Seven Years war, over Napoleon, and remained steadfast during the French Revolution, but also was in power during the loss of the U.S

for which he was not personally responsible.

In 1807, George signed the British abolition of the slave trade. It is interesting to put this into the contemporary context. Only in 1789 did Benjamin Franklin, who owned slaves as a young man, publish essays supporting the abolition of slavery and in 1790 urging Congress to abolish the slave trade. In England, William Wilberforce in April 1791 introduced his first bill in Parliament making it illegal for British citizens to participate in the slave trade, and led the campaign against it. In May 1806 Britain made it illegal for British citizens to be involved in shipping slaves to non-British territory, and in March 1807 George signed the bill abolishing the slave trade.

In recent years, George III has not been neglected, appearing as a character, in the musical *Hamilton*, but in rather absurd comic, unflattering fashion and unfairly ridiculed. His supposed lyric is unseemly, "When push comes to shove, I will kill your friends and family to remind you of my love, da dada da."

However, George III is also disappearing: a carving of him, in the guise of a Roman emperor wearing a laurel wreath, with on the side two kneeling African men with clasped arms, was removed from the National Maritime Museum, London. The bust, made of mahogany, had been the figurehead on the Royal George yacht launched in 1817, probably to celebrate the victory over France, rather than to be political iconography, a statement on anti-slavery. The purpose of the two Africans and the symbolism of the bust is unclear.

The Maritime Museum explained its removal of the bust because it contained "Imagery of a powerful white king with two subservient black men that is a hurtful reinforcement of enduring racial stereotypes." Such images, the Museum said, overshadow the determined actions and huge sacrifices of black people to end slavery. It also said the BLM

protests last year hastened its decision to remove the bust from display.

The Royal yacht was finally broken up on 1905. The bust was removed from the Museum.

Was George III mad? The case is argued in the play *The Madness of George III* by Alan Bennett, dealing with the unravelling of his mind in the latter part of his life and the inability of the Court to handle the condition. Certainly, he had periods of mental illness, convulsions, depressions, when he was unable to govern in coherent fashion, and his mental health problems induced a regency to replace him in 1810. By his end he was mostly deaf and blind. He might have had a blood disease, one which attacked the central nervous system, called porphyria. This theory has been challenged or discarded and it is most likely he suffered from bipolar disorder which incapacitated him.

George III was a complex figure but then of course so was Jefferson, owner of slaves with a long term affair with his black mistress, Sally Hemings, starting when he was 43 and she was 14. George was not responsible for policies that annoyed the colonists, not the Stamp Act of 1765 that proposed a direct tax on the colonies and required a revenue stamp on paper produced in London, or the Townshend tax, 1767, the first internal tax levied directly on the colonists. one to help pay for the cost of the Seven Years war.

The life of George III was nuanced, but he was not a bloodthirsty tyrant or an evil figure. He never exceeded his constitutional powers. George was not the noblest man that ever lived in the tide of times, but he was not cruel or criminal like Richard III..

Andrew Roberts in a new biography of the king, refers to him as Britain's most misunderstood monarch, a ruler who was wise, humane, and even enlightened, a monarch unfortunate

to have enemies and to suffer from mental illness. It is intriguing to recall that no writer in the colonies was imprisoned or shipped to England because of their criticism of George III.