



column: parisien portrait

'Thomas Jefferson in Paris' by Howard C Rice, Jr

by Raana Haider

"Ask the travelled inhabitant of any nation, in what country on earth would you rather live? — certainly in my own, where are all my friends, relations, and the earliest and sweetest affections and recollections of my life. Which would be your second choice? France."

Thomas Jefferson
Autobiography, 1821

WHEN good Americans die they go to Paris, thought one of Oscar Wilde's characters. Oscar Wilde, an Irishman is buried in the Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris. Some even made it in their lifetime.

The last book I bought in Paris was 'Thomas Jefferson in Paris' at Brentano's, the American bookstore which opened in Paris in 1895; some hundred years following Thomas Jefferson's stay in Paris from August 1784 to September 1789. Thomas Jefferson had a diplomatic appointment to the French court as Minister at the United States Mission in Paris. These five years represented the longest period of his living outside America and importantly his longest experience of urban living for Washington DC "was a city in name only" in the late eighteenth century.

The author, Howard C Rice, Jr, an American scholar has spent years of research on Thomas Jefferson at Princeton University. His expertise on his subject has been combined with a life-long interest — Paris. He writes in the Preface, "I take some satisfaction in recalling that I first saw Paris in 1925. This preface thus becomes also an envoi (dispatch), addressed to friends of half a century; Parisians by birth, adoption or inclination."

Paris of the 1780s covered about half of the Paris of today. An engraved map of 1787, shows clearly the successive rings of growth of the city from the era when Paris was the Roman Lutetia. Paris has grown in ever-expanding circles; a spiral of twenty arrondissements (neighbourhoods) starting from the First Arrondissement where one finds the Louvre, Tuileries gardens, Place Vendome...

Jefferson's Paris was the Paris of Louis XVI just prior to the cataclysmic events of 1789. Even in that period Jefferson found Paris "everyday enlarging and beautifying." Construction work was underway all over the city and if there is any truth to the French saying, 'Quand le batiment va, tout va,' (When the building-trade moves, then all moves), then the Paris of the 1780s was certainly a prosperous growing city. 'Sebastien Mercier's Tableau de Paris' (1782-1788) remains the incomparable and inexhaustible chronicle of Louis XVI Paris," notes Rice. The 'Views of

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Paris' was followed by the new 'Nouveau Paris' after the revolution, in which Mercier remarked, "Toiseau passe, le nid demeure" (the bird has flown but the nest remains) and "old buildings were put to new uses." There was a pause in new construction but there was also no widespread destruction of existing edifices.

In an interesting observation, Rice remarks that, "Indeed, some appreciation of this building fever is necessary to understand the generally optimistic mood in which public opinion approached the beginning of the French Revolution. Later apologists of the Ancien Regime, the victims of the Revolution, have looked back nostalgically to the Paris of the 1780s as the time of the only true *bonheur de vivre* (quality of life). In so doing they have transfixed the city in their own static memories and made it seem stationary and unchanging. Yet, when one attempts to live in the Paris of the 1780s with Jefferson and see it from day to day through his eyes, it is impossible not to feel it as a living, forward-looking, rapidly evolving city."

The 'old' Palais Royal opposite the Louvre on the Rue de Rivoli, named after one of Napoleon's early victories became the 'new' Palais Royal in the 1780s after undergoing extensive renovation. Rue de Rivoli was the main street of the bourgeois Right Bank. Mercier described the centre of the city life as follows: "The capital of Paris... There, you can see everything, hear everything, learn everything... There is no spot in the world comparable to it. Visit London, Amsterdam, Madrid, Vienna, you will see nothing like it; a prisoner could, live here free from care for years with no thought of escape." Mercier was speaking of the new Palais Royal which had regained its pivotal position in the capital.

The building and its gardens gave him some food for thought for a similar construction in America, for he discussed his ideas with a Virginian friend, a Dr James Currie. Jefferson during his Parisian sojourn, always had in mind the Parisian-style of city planning for his home state Virginia and later Washington DC. Another example of the influence of Parisian architecture on Jefferson was his proposal that the dome covering the House of Representatives in the Capitol at Washington DC be similar to that of the Halle aux Bleds (the municipal grain market). However,

problems of design led to the proposal not being implemented.

As a book-lover, Jefferson shipped home mountains of books bought from bouquinistes along the quays of the Seine to begin a Library of Congress. He donated eventually his private book collection to the Library of Congress. Jefferson wrote, "While residing in Paris I devoted every afternoon I was disengaged, for a summer of two, in examining all the principal bookstores, turning over every book with my own hands, and putting by everything related to America, and indeed whatever was rare and valuable in every science." Jefferson also had standing orders on the principal book marts of Europe — Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Madrid, and London — "for such works as could not be found in Paris." His avid interest in books led him to the discovery that printing costs were considerably lower in Paris than in Philadelphia. This prompted him to have printed in Paris the manuscript of his 'Notes on Virginia' written in 1781 and 1782. His order was for two hundred copies which he distributed to selected friends in Europe and America.

The splendid Place de la Concorde was prior to 1789, the Place Louis XV. Where the Egyptian obelisk now stands, stood an equestrian statue of Louis XV. Work begun during Louis XV's time was completed in the reign of Louis XVI. Ironically, the square was the site where he lost his head. The grandiose setting for the statue "is not properly a square, but a very noble entrance to a great city," noted Arthur Young in 1787 in his 'Travels in France and Italy during the years 1787, 1788 and 1789.'

Jefferson also greatly admired the symmetrical two grand buildings facing the Place Louis XV — the current Hotel de Crillon and the present Naval Headquarters. The two buildings and the square were designed by the architect, Ange-Jacques Gabriel whose architectural legacy so enriches the Paris of today. So enamoured was Jefferson of the two facades, "celebrated fronts of modern buildings" which along with the Galerie du Louvre and the Hotel de Salm (a predecessor of the present Palais de la Legion d'Honneur, close to the Musee d'Orsay, that he cited them as worthy models for his homeland. He is known to have "sent a roll of city plans and engraved plates collected in Europe and suggested the front of the present-day Naval Headquarters as a possible model

for the President's house in the new capital city of Washington DC. The Chateau de Marly in the outskirts of Paris bears some resemblance to Jefferson's design for the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, notes Rice.

Two of Jefferson's daughters attended the convent school of Pentemont in the Rue de Grenelle. Martha, the older twelve year old wrote to an American friend after a year at the school, "and I leave you to judge of my situation. I did not speak a word of French...there are fifty or sixty pensioners in the house, so that speaking as much as I could with them I learn the language very soon. At present I am charmed with my situation." The church is today the Temple de Pentemont at 106 Rue de Grenelle. Another of the convent buildings is today occupied by the Ministry of War Veterans. Among the alumni of Pentemont was Josephine de Beauharnais, who later became the Empress Josephine to Napoleon I.

Jefferson had a keen interest in coinage and he closely supervised the minting of medals voted by the American Congress to commemorate persons and events of the American Revolution. "But of all the Paris-made American medals the one most truly his is the very rare 'Diplomatic Medal' conceived by him as a parting gift to retiring envoys.

A life-long passion of Jefferson was plants and he benefited considerably from his meeting with French naturalists, botanists, landscape gardeners and friends with whom he maintained common ties of the green world. A few months before his death in July 1826, Jefferson was discussing plans for the Botanical School he envisioned at the University of Virginia. According to Rice, the massive oasis of green in the heart of the metropolitan city of Paris, the Bois de Boulogne, covered much of the same area as it does today, though its general appearance has undergone transformation. "It was in the mid-nineteenth century that Napoleon III's landscape architects remodelled it and created the 'romantic' Bois known to subsequent generations. In Jefferson's day the geometric pattern of roads and lanes was still that of the traditional royal hunting ground.

Howard C Rice, Jr titles the final chapter of his 'Jefferson in Paris' — Adieu to Jefferson's Paris. Jefferson left Paris in September 1789. Abigail Adams, an American told Jefferson, "I

think I have somewhere met with the observation, that nobody ever leaves Paris but with a degree of tristeness," (tristesse for sadness). She made the comment as she was leaving Paris for London. Jefferson was no exception to the same "tristeness" but he left Paris on leave and intended to return after a few months. As it turned out, his departure from Paris was permanent. Thus, the Paris that was imprinted in his mind and his heart forever was the Paris of the Ancien Regime. The nouveau Paris and France were to entertain new players.

Paris in 1789 was encountering a climate of change. The winter was severe. "We never had such a winter, as makes me shiver whenever I think of it," he reported to a New York correspondent. The political climate was also brewing. "The change in this country, since you left it," Jefferson wrote David Humphreys, "is such as you can form no idea of. The frivolities of conversation have given way entirely to politics — men, women and children talk of nothing else; and all, you know, talk a great deal," stated Jefferson. The composition of the Assembly of Deputies elected to represent the three orders — Nobility, Clergy and Third Estate — met at Louis XVI's Versailles palace in the spring of 1789. Jefferson was apprehensive. Twelve hundred persons of any rank and of any nation, "would with difficulty be prevented from tumult, and confusion," but when they were to compose an assembly for which no rules of debate had been established, "and to consist moreover of Frenchmen among whom there are always more speakers than listeners," he confessed he "apprehended some danger."

Jefferson received word of the tumultuous storming of the Bastille prison while he was with French friends. Rice writes that, "As an artisan of the American Revolution and author of the Declaration of Independence, he was a living authority whose counsel was eagerly sought." However, he was reluctant as a diplomat to involve himself with the internal affairs of the host country. Nevertheless, his advice was keenly sought by Marquis de Lafayette. "I beg for liberty's sake you will break every engagement to give us a dinner tomorrow Wednesday. We shall be some members of the National Assembly — eight of us whom I want to coalesce as being the only means to prevent a total dissolu-

tion and civil war..." pleaded Lafayette.

Chaos and confusion soon followed. The optimistic beliefs Jefferson had held up to his departure from Paris in September 1789, soon gave way to disillusionment. "Years later in 1815, when reviewing with Lafayette "the crimes and cruelties" through which France had passed, he was able to rationalise his false prophecies by reaffirming his faith in democratic government while admitting that the French, at least in 1789, were unprepared for it." News of the bloody turn of events in Paris continued to reach him through French visitors to Paris and the increasing number of emigres seeking refuge in the United States.

Jefferson went on to become Secretary of State, Vice-President and President of the United States of America. As Rice argues, "The Dialogue of the Head and the Heart continued... (the Head) never losing sight of what he believed the true interests of the United States... After his release from the burdens of public office — especially after 1815, when books, seeds, and wine from France could reach him without interference from the "pirates of the seas" — his Heart could have free rein. "Now that Bonaparte is put down," he told Short when the latter was contemplating taking up permanent residence abroad, "France, freed from that monster, must again become the most agreeable country on earth."

It was in such a mood that Jefferson composed his classic tribute to France, "A more benevolent people, I have never known, nor greater warmth and devotedness in their select friendships. Their kindness and accommodation to strangers is unparalleled, and the hospitality of Paris is beyond anything I had conceived to be practicable in a large city. Their eminence, too, in science, the communicative dispositions of their scientific men, the politeness of the general manners, the ease and vivacity of their conversation, give a charm to their society to be found nowhere else." A more generous tribute could not be penned.

And at his home in Monticello, Virginia he had with him "the treasures of art, science and sentiment" gathered from his years in Paris. The Parisian ambience never left him. It caused Henry Adams, the historian, when attempting to fathom the puzzling intricacies of Jefferson's personality, to remark, "with all his extraordinary versatility of character and opinions, he seemed during his entire life to breathe with perfect satisfaction nowhere except in the liberal, literary, and scientific air of Paris in 1789."

It was another American who said, "Every man has two countries, his own and France."

Benjamin Franklin

events

Between Languages

conference

opens Feb 17

THE English Department of the University of Dhaka has organized a two-day conference on the theme of 'Between Languages' on February 17 and 18 at the Centre for Advanced Research in the Social Sciences of the University (Lecture Theatre Building). This conference will discuss issues relating to teaching and writing between languages in the region. Papers will be presented on Indian and African writing in English, Comparative Literature, English Language teaching in Bangladesh, Computer languages and English language teaching, and translation studies.

The conference will be inaugurated by professor A. K. Azad Chowdhury, Vice-Chancellor, University of Dhaka on Wednesday, February 17 at 9:30 am. Among the participants will be university teachers from England, India, and Pakistan, as well as Rajshahi University, and faculty and students of the University of Dhaka.

The two evening sessions of the conference — starting at 4:30 pm — will be devoted to readings in English and Bangla. On the inaugural day the readings will be in English and on the 18th in Bangla. Among the writers reading from their works will be the Indian poet Sureep Sen, and Razia Khan, S Manzoorul Islam, Kaiser Haq, Niaz Zaman, and Khondoker Ashraf Hossein from Bangladesh. All sessions of the conference are open to the public.

Notice

For reasons beyond our control the 3rd installment Kazi Ghiyas: A Muslim in Painting could not be published this week also. Inconvenience regretted.

poetry

Moniruzzaman — a Poet of Language Movement and Liberation War

By A Z M Haider

To sum up, Moniruzzaman's songs and poems, written on the language movement or the liberation war, have one perceptible note which supersedes everything else. The underlying note of his poetry is reflected in his deep and passionate attachment to Bengali language.

WITH the emergence of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1947, Bangalee Muslims got into the process of building a separate socio-political milieu consistent with their dreams and aspirations of centuries. They thought their dreams will be realized within the framework of Pakistan. Bangalee Muslims were, therefore, most exuberant in bringing Pakistan into being. But soon after the partition of India and emergence of Pakistan, their dreams were dashed to the ground, when certain vested interests whipped up the smoke of learning Bengali in Arabic script. They contended Bengali language which originates from Devnagri is essentially a purveyor of Hindu culture. Bengali language, as it stands at present must, therefore, be Islamized by clothing in Arabic script. Nothing could be more preposterous than this illogical contention. Having failed to administer the potion of Arabia script to Bangalees, they came out blatantly to impose Urdu as the state language on the Bangalees. The cultural activists, educationists, scientists, teachers, students, engineers,

doctors, government employees, nay the Bangalees as a whole considered it an inroad into their cultural autonomy and an onslaught on their ethos. Therefore they unitedly rose in rebellion to resist the attempt at crushing their cultural identity.

This should serve to explain the background of poet Moniruzzaman who was then in late teens studying in higher secondary classes at Rajshahi Government College. Steeped in rapturous romantic emotion, Moniruzzaman was then writing exquisite love poems that would touch the cord of human emotion. A lyricist in his blood and bones, he was pouring forth his love-laden soul in his splendid songs which curved out a niche for himself right in those early years of his life.

But all of a sudden, his dreams were shattered and he came out of his purple plane of romance and love to face cruel realities of life. He was stirred to the core of his being when he noticed Bangalee youths, Salam, Barkat and others done to death on the streets of Dhaka for the crime they committed by asserting their inalienable right to mother tongue. They committed the crime of demanding Bengali as one of the two

state languages of Pakistan. The then alien rulers, who presided over the destiny of the Bangalees, underestimated their resolve and in utter disregard of the storm raging in Bangalee mind they sought to crush their aspiration by bullets and bayonets. Young Moniruzzaman right then and there revolted against the conspiracy to culturally dominate Bangalees and in excruciating agony he cried out
When Ekushey returns
Falgun rushes in
with streams of red hue of Palash in hand
like flags of bare-footed boys and girls

When Ekushey February comes back
all leaves shorn of memories fall
And suddenly it stirs
the depth of one's heart with poignant pain

When Ekushey February comes back
traditional songs of Bengal
starts piercing out of the voice of Bangalees

When Ekushey turns back
Bangladesh tells tale, old and new
(Translated by A Z M Haider)

In another poem entitled "Krishnachur Megh" which he wrote way back in 1954 during his college days, Moniruzzaman gave vent to his abiding love for Bengali language. As a matter of fact, his passionate commitment to his language, literature, culture was total and unmistakable. The poem "Krishnachur Megh" in which the young Moniruzzaman expressed himself clearly and courageously, was first published in "Nutun Shahitya", a literary journal of West Bengal. Paying tribute to the martyrs of the language movement, the poet said —

Hence their sad thirst
had turned into these fiery clouds
They became passion of the storm
Filling hearts of the entire nation
Defying the ravages of time
They are not mere history
With the feverish taste of this sun
In our blood let us engulf

The weariness of time
Let us bring the tireless waves
of their courage and steel desire
into the heart of the sea
And let these Krishnachura-coloured
Clouds reverberate with the

Name of our brave ones
(Translated by Razia Khan Amin)

From Rajshahi College Moniruzzaman came to Dhaka university to undertake higher study on Bengali language and literature. The deeper study of Bengali literature inducted him into its unfathomable treasure and helped him to develop a passion for it. When onslaught on Bengali language and literature came, he was filled with a sense of revolt and revulsion which found clear manifestation in a number of his other poems on the language movement. Moniruzzaman's passion for Bengali literature is based on his deeper understanding of it.

The poet was in his mid thirties when the liberation war broke out in 1971. A socially conscious poet, Moniruzzaman could not remain isolated in the ivory tower of his poetic seclusion, at that critical juncture of national life. When the occupation army pounced upon the innocent civilian population of this country, the fire in him burst forth into an uncontrollable fury.

To be continued