



Thomas Jefferson's Enlightenment: Paris 1785

James C. Thompson

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This narrated (rather than illustrated) version of Thomas Jefferson's enlightenment as the Minister of France reconstructs the French concept of Progress, how Jefferson became its agent, and what this means to American history. It describes the intellectual environment Jefferson entered in the fall of 1784 then introduces readers to Jefferson's instructors, the society in which they communed, and the circumstances in which they shared their ideas with him. In France, Jefferson entered a world unlike anything he knew in America—one filled with disengaged men who reflected and theorized. Their leader was the brilliant Marquis de Condorcet. As a member of this elite circle, Jefferson embraced the marquis' implausible thesis that all of the problems of French society would be solved by replacing France's monarchy with a constitutional government resting on a Bill of Rights. But Jefferson's aristocratic cohorts knew comparatively little about public rights and even less about constitutional government. Quite naturally, they assumed that the author of the Declaration of Independence was versed in these matters and could explain how they would work in France. Pleased to be consulted by France's leading reformers, Jefferson took on the role of a philosophe and became an agent of Progress. When he returned to America in September of 1789, he brought with him this new view of himself and the imperative it entailed.

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