

Jefferson's Genius

If Jefferson was merely restating Locke's philosophy and justifying Richard Henry Lee's resolution, and if Jefferson's words in the *Declaration* were edited by Adams and Franklin, and then the entire Congress, then what is it that Jefferson himself accomplished? What accounts for the admiration paid to Jefferson's *Declaration*, not just in the United States but in the world?

It is the choice of words. It is the graceful flow of phrases. It is the profound humanity of the expressions. It is the euphony of the consonants. It is the respectful regard for the world audience. It is the optimism, and the definition of human beings as good. It is the brilliantly compact, perfect summary of Enlightenment ideas into one (the second) famous sentence.

The first words of the *Declaration* set the tone:

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We are first touched by the graceful words, that bring the *-en* and *-em* sound to the fore: *when, in, human, events, necessary one, bands, connected, another, decent, mankind*; the sentence, though formal and scholarly, is not aloof. It is courteous, it is not a brash assertion of dogma or an attack. It is not a Patrick Henry tirade, shouting in our faces: Give me Liberty or give me DEATH! Jefferson's sentence is a soft-spoken appeal to our reason. We feel from the first words that we would like to hear what he has to say. The rhythm of the sentence is very soothing; it