

# Jeffersonian Bon Mots

A Book Review by John H. Tanton

I hate quotations. Tell me what *you* think.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson  
*Journal*, May 1849

In literature quotation is good only when the writer I follow is going my way, and, being better mounted than I, gives me a cast.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson  
*Quotation and Originality* (1876)

It is a good thing for an uneducated man to read books of quotations. *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* is an admirable work and I studied it intently. The quotations when engraved upon the memory give you good thoughts. They also make you anxious to read the authors and look for more.

—Winston Churchill  
*Roving Commission: My Early Life* (1930)

[The above quotations are from *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 15th Edition.]

With all due respect to Mr. Emerson, I love quotations and have spent many a happy odd moment browsing in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* or *Respectfully Quoted*, published by the Library of Congress in 1989.

I say many a happy "odd moment" rather than "hour" since, with this type of book, I follow another piece of Churchillian advice found on the wall of the library at his country home, Chartwell. He suggests, as a way to become or stay familiar with one's books, taking one down at random and letting it fall open where it will, reading a page or two, and then replacing it on the shelf. In this way, Churchill says, it is possible to stay in touch with a large collection of books.

Books of quotations don't lend themselves to reading cover to cover, though in those organized alphabetically by author (as are *Bartlett's* and *Oxford*), reading all of an author's entries is worthwhile. *Respectfully Quoted* is organized by topic, and this, too, lends itself to browsing.

Given these interests and proclivities, the new Madison House collection of Jefferson's wit and wisdom is a welcome addition to my collection of quotation books. Handsomely produced, organized by topic and well indexed, this book will well repay the time spent with it, especially for fans of Mr. Jefferson. Some samplings:

## Cynicism:

"There is no act, however virtuous, for which ingenuity may not find some bad motive."

This put me in mind of Cardinal Richlieu's dictum, found in *Respectfully Quoted*: "If you give me six lines written in the hand of the most honest of men, I will find something in them which will hang him."

## Reform:

"The hole and the patch should be commensurate."

Good advice to those on both sides of a reform movement!

## Decalogue of Canons for Observation in Practical Life

(written for his grandson):

1. Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today.
2. Never trouble another for what you can do for yourself.
3. Never spend your money before you have it.
4. Never buy what you do not want, because it is cheap; it will be dear to you.
5. Pride costs us more than hunger, thirst and cold.
6. We never repent of having eaten too little.
7. Nothing is troublesome that we do willingly.
8. How much pain have cost us the evils which have never happened.
9. Take things always by their smooth handle.
10. When angry, count ten, before you speak; if very angry, an hundred."

CITIZEN JEFFERSON:  
THE WIT AND WISDOM  
OF AN AMERICAN SAGE  
Edited by John Kaminski  
Madison, WI: Madison House, 1994  
144 pages, \$14.95

*Citizen Jefferson: The Wit and Wisdom of an American Sage* is an altogether fine book of quotations, one of many books stemming from the early years of our Republic and listed in the Madison House catalog, which I'm sure they would be happy to send you. Write them at 2016 Winnebago Street, PO Box 3100, Madison, WI 53704; phone 608-244-6210; or FAX 608-244-7050. ■