Charles Nisbet: Second Thoughts on a Revolutionary Generation

During the next few years in connection with the celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution of 1776 we shall be asked to remember and praise the famous men whose lives, fortunes, and sacred honor were spent, or made, in a cause which some of them felt to be for the humanization of life in the eighteenth century and for posterity. Already there has been a vigorous protest in the American Historical Association Newsletter that the emphasis is too much on Great White Men to the exclusion of Women, Blacks, Indians and the “dirty people with no name.” In remembering Charles Nisbet, we recall a forgotten man.

Who was Charles Nisbet? He was the first president of Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and he held that position from 1785, when he immigrated from Scotland, to 1804, the year of his death. Nisbet was born in 1736, son of a poor Scottish schoolmaster. He entered the University of Edinburgh in 1752 during golden years of Scottish education, and studied there for two years. He spent six years more at Divinity Hall, completing the course at the age of twenty-four with a license to preach in 1760. He had a gargantuan appetite for books, and an elephant’s memory for what he found in them. As a student he bought books and parts of

2 There is no adequate biography of Charles Nisbet. Samuel Miller, who studied theology under him, wrote Memoir of the Rev. Charles Nisbet, D.D. (New York, 1840) and a number of letters and excerpts of letters appear in his treatment. Douglas Sloan has written about the founding of Dickinson College in The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal (New York, 1971). He places an emphasis upon the educational ideas of Benjamin Rush. Charles Coleman Sellers, former librarian of the college and noted art historian, generously shared with me his material dealing with Nisbet. See Sellers, History of Dickinson College (Middletown, Conn., 1973). Several other pertinent references may be found in the brief sketch in the Dictionary of American Biography.
books in sheets shipped up from London as wrapping paper, and his friends claimed that they could not mention an author with whom he was not familiar. He was, Ashbel Green writes, skilled in "Hebrew, including the Chaldee, Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, German, and probably Erse." In 1764, he was ordained by the Presbytery of Brechin and installed as the pastor of Montrose, a well-to-do and highly desirable charge where he built a reputation for kindness as well as for being a "walking library," full of learning, wisdom, and wit. He has been numbered among Commonwealthmen, as defined by Caroline Robbins, who believed, among other things, that government should be entrusted to men of leisure, learning, and virtue in Parliament who would govern for the good of the people on behalf of the people.  

Nisbet called himself "Friend of Mankind." Once he opposed the power of the Crown to dissolve a small local congregation, arbitrarily, he thought, with implications for the whole church, and he won his point as well as a name for fighting his case successfully to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. He also championed the cause of the American colonists. Being called upon to preach on a public fast day during what has been called England's Vietnam War, he took for his text Daniel 5:5-25 and used the occasion to warn the King that the handwriting was on the wall. An "empire founded in violence, and stained with blood" could never be secure. It nourished in its bosom seeds of its own dissolution. Babylon's empire did not last; Britain's would fall also. As an elitist in politics, he was the friend of lords and ladies and was maintained by some highly-placed persons, notably the Earls of Buchan and of Leven, both of whom were sympathetic to the American cause. Nisbet had long been interested in America. He expressed concern over the way in which Glasgow merchants exploited the poor seeking passage to the colonies. He had been mentioned for the presidency of the College of New Jersey, a

3 Ashbel Green to Miller, Miller, Memoirs, 308.
position his friend John Witherspoon assumed in 1768. Nisbet was not forgotten. Endearing himself to Americans because of his position on the war, John Dickinson, former governor of Pennsylvania, and Benjamin Rush, doctor and "Revolutionary Gadfly," turned to Nisbet. They asked him to give leadership to fledgling Dickinson College in which Dickinson, Rush, and some of their friends had invested high-yield expectations for a public-spirited citizenry. Nisbet was persuaded, and he left Montrose with his family in 1785. America was, he reassured his friends, a land of "Liberty & Plenty," a land where men's minds were free "from the shackles of authority" and could be more easily molded by reason. With confidence Nisbet began his American adventure.

Why should we remember Charles Nisbet? Dickinson College remembers him as its first president. We might well remember him, if for no other reason than that he taught some notable graduates, including Samuel Miller, his biographer, noted clergyman and seminary professor, and the author of *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (1803), a landmark in American intellectual history, and Roger Brooke Taney, Supreme Court justice who wrote the Dred Scott decision. During the past few years I have collected more than 200 letters Nisbet wrote to relatives and friends from Carlisle, a hotbed, he discovered, of Jeffersonian democracy. In these letters, many of them long, written in small but legible script, most of them unpublished, he poured out his acid comments and contempt for what was going on in America and the rest of the world. He attacked all of those trends which he thought were dehumanizing Americans and America—the want of public men and public spirit, the exaggeration of the sovereign power of the people,

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the indifference to and neglect of religion so essential to virtue and sound government. Therefore we might well remember Charles Nisbet for the anxiety which he, along with others like him, felt in those turbulent last years of the eighteenth century, the mood of pessimism which he expressed about America in which he had such high hopes at the outset, and for the ideas which he expressed about what it takes to make and keep life human.9

The first thing which must be said is that Charles Nisbet was always suspicious of cries of power to the people and for participatory democracy. He was, to be sure, concerned about the people. He was essentially a patrician in politics, a person who believed that political affairs should be left in the hands of public men with public spirit. His first complaint about America was that such men and spirit were missing and were not being nourished. However, things started off well enough. When Nisbet and his family arrived in Philadelphia they were cordially entertained by the best people, including his chief sponsor and supporter, Dr. Rush. He wrote Lord Buchan optimistically about his welcome. Party spirit was subsiding in America and he found that American sobriety was good for regular thinking and distinct perception.”10 Nisbet arrived in Carlisle, a small frontier town on Independence Day under a full, white powdered wig, with the town bells ringing. Shortly thereafter all of the euphoria had been drained out of the occasion. Nisbet and his family were sick; the president was so physically and emotionally drained that he was almost incoherent. He added to his troubles by accusing the trustees of betraying him about what he was to expect, and resigned before he had hardly time to take off his wig. In August, 1785, he addressed a curt note to Rush: “Tomb of Dickinson College.”11

9 The staff of the Dickinson College Library, particularly Dr. Sellers, has given me much help in gathering these letters. Nisbet made his students take down his lectures and many copies of students’ notes may be found in the Dickinson College archives. I found the lectures on Public Law, given during the Constitutional Convention, the lectures on Moral Philosophy, and his numerous lectures at Commencement of great interest for understanding Nisbet’s mood and also his constructive thought.

10 Nisbet to Lord Buchan, June 13, 1785, Miller, Memoir, 133-136.

11 Nisbet to Benjamin Rush, Aug. 10, 1785, LCP. Nisbet held Rush responsible for some of his problems. The relations between the men cooled. Rush lost interest in Dickinson. See David Freeman Hawke, Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly (Indianapolis, 1971).
Nisbet and his family soon recovered soundness of body and mind and some perspective on their situation. He decided to stay. He recovered his presidency, however, only after a humiliating experience with the trustees and a reduction of earlier terms of his salary. This was Nisbet’s first experience with America’s public men and public spirit. It was not a happy one, and it was one from which Nisbet never recovered. He expected the “benefit of society,” and the company as well as the support of men of influence. The men of influence betrayed him by inconstancy and by breaking their agreements with him. He was virtually isolated in a community which could offer practically nothing to a man of such learning who desperately needed and wanted friendship. Nisbet believed that public affairs should be left to the public men, the men of influence. What if they, like the trustees of Dickinson College were themselves rogues without public spirit?

This early unhappy experience only fed Nisbet’s apprehension about the leadership in American life. He was not sure that America would or could develop those public men and that public spirit so necessary to good government. Certain developments confirmed his judgments at this point. Situated in Carlisle, the gateway to Pittsburgh and points West through which Americans passed in the raw, Nisbet was able to observe some of their worse characteristics. “As this new world,” he wrote to James Paton in Scotland, in January, 1787, “is unfortunately composed, like that of epicurus, of discordant atoms, jumbled together by chance and tossed by inconstancy in an immense vacuum, it greatly wants a principle of attraction and cohesion.” This atomization encouraged a radical egalitarianism which made every man feel that he was a politician and which kept men of public spirit out of office. “It is certain that men of learning, leisure and easy circumstances,” he told his class in Public Law in 1787 when the Constitutional Convention was meeting in Philadelphia, “if they are endued with wisdom, virtue & humanity, are much fitter for every part of the business of government, than the ordinary class of people, who can bestow very little

12 Nisbet to Benjamin Rush, Sept. 7, 1785, LCP; Nisbet to Lord Buchan, Apr. 20, 1786, Miller, Memoir, 142-145; Nisbet to Benjamin Rush, Feb. 24, 1786, HSP.
13 Nisbet to James Paton, Jan. 10, 1787, Miller, Memoir, 166-175.
time on it, & whose talents for that sort of business may be sup-
posed to be very small.”¹⁴ Men were unequally endowed for the
business of government, even with “wisdom, virtue & humanity,”
essential ingredients in Nisbet’s conception of public men and
public spirit. On March 5, 1789, he was ready to deal with the
problem of equality in his lectures on Moral Philosophy. He insisted
that all men have an “equal right to natural liberty & pursuit of
happiness in consistance with the interests of Society.” It was on
this ground, and this ground only, and “not upon the old notion
of the equal right & fitness of all Men to be Kings & Rulers that the
Patriots of this Country resisted & expelled the powers of Great
Britain & attained their present independence. . . .”¹⁵ It was un
fortunate for the American people that they actually preferred
rogues for rulers, knaves who knew they needed neither learning
nor virtue to be elected to public office.¹⁶ Nisbet also believed that
atomization in American life was reflected in the party spirit,
which he felt was subsiding at first, but which, upon closer observa-
tion, he found rampant. He allowed that parties when nearly
balanced, might be useful as checks upon each other. But they
indicated how each man tended to draw to his own interest instead
of to the public concern. Thus, party spirit became the chief plague
of American democracy. It tended to “raise the fortunes of private
men at the public expense,” while the real concerns of the public
were totally neglected.¹⁷

Before Nisbet decided to immigrate to the United States he had
heard reports of anarchy in America.¹⁸ After he had lived here for
a while these reports had been verified in his own experience. This
atomization, manifested in the egalitarianism and party spirit, was

¹⁴ Nisbet, Public Law, typed transcript in Dickinson College Library (hereinafter DCL)
of John Young notes, 246. The John Young Papers are at Centre College, Ky.
¹⁵ Charles Nisbet, Lectures on Moral Philosophy, Speer Library, Princeton Theological
Seminary Library, N. J. (hereinafter PTS).
¹⁶ Nisbet to Alexander Addison, June 14, 1793, Library of the University of Pittsburgh
(hereinafter LUP).
¹⁷ Nisbet, Public Law, 242.
¹⁸ See Michael Kraus, “Charles Nisbet and Samuel Stanhope Smith—Two Eighteenth
Century Educators,” The Princeton University Library Chronicle, VI, 1 (November, 1944),
17–36. This contains very interesting letters from Smith to Nisbet answering some of
Nisbet’s questions.
also manifested in constant movement. Americans were "wandering Arabs," constantly roaming westward. They would not be able to improve agriculture and arts, science and religion—and subsequently public men and public spirit—unless they stopped moving and settled down.\textsuperscript{19} Unfortunately, as Nisbet saw it, America's public men, Washington, Adams, Madison, and especially Jefferson—Nisbet attacked them all—were doing nothing to deal with the need for public spirit. The tragedy was heightened for Nisbet because people were actually exploited by demagogues who only made it appear that the individual participated in his government.\textsuperscript{20} Nisbet saw himself, betrayed by sovereign trustees, who he considered as "idiots" and a "plague" to American education, in banishment and a martyr, an educator building the foundation of a humane society of public-spirited citizens.\textsuperscript{21}

Nisbet's second complaint about America was closely related to the first about the want of public men and public spirit. He believed that too much was being made of the sovereignty of the people, and that it was the business of public men to save the sovereign people from themselves, their own passions and narrow interests. But it was the age of the sovereign people and he heard much of the doctrine around Carlisle.\textsuperscript{22} He told William Marshall a people's Bible would begin, "In the Beginning the Sovereign people created Heaven & the Earth: And the Sovereign People spake to Moses, saying, Speak unto the Children of Israel, Thou shalt have no other Sovereign People before me."\textsuperscript{23} For Nisbet it was not an age of reason. It was an age "pregnant with revolutions." And they were made by the sovereign people, fanatic and variable, unwilling to obey even properly constituted authority, unable to determine what was in their own best interest, inconsistent. The French Revolution! The Whiskey Insurrection! The student rebellion! The revolution of blacks in Santa Domingo which sent chills through the sovereign people of

\textsuperscript{19} Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Jan. 26, 1786, LUP.
\textsuperscript{20} Nisbet to Charles Wallace, June 2, 1797, New York Public Library (hereinafter NYPL).
\textsuperscript{21} Nisbet to Lord Buchan, Apr. 20, 1786, Miller, \textit{Memoir}, 142–145; Nisbet to James Paton, Jan. 10, 1787, \textit{ibid.}, 166–175; Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Feb. 23, 1797, LUP.
\textsuperscript{22} Nisbet to James Abercrombie, Mar. 14, 1797, DCL.
\textsuperscript{23} Nisbet to William Marshall, Oct. 3, 1800, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia (hereinafter PHS).
Nisbet watched them all with growing alarm, a Commonwealthman anxious about the revolutionary forces which he himself had helped to encourage if not unleash. Of course the American Revolution had been justifiable; the new spirit was based upon an exaggerated sense of what people thought they could do for themselves. He warned students in the commencement address of September 28, 1790, that in a young republic there were many imperfections and there would be many cries for reform. God, he cautioned, would raise up instruments to remove defects. In the meantime, a “good citizen will always think it his duty to obey the laws of his Country tho’ he may think them very far from Perfection, & will abhor all Mutiny, Violence & Rebellion.”

Nisbet’s letters are full of the turbulence of these years.

Dickinson’s president was alarmed about the French Revolution. He watched it carefully and he complained of the madness of the sovereign people. There was no weather cock, he wrote in 1792, as variable as the mob, as he saw it rave, behead the King and Queen, sink to the terror and finally to Napoleon. This is what could be expected from the sovereign people. Nisbet thought the Revolution was of the Devil, and he repeated to William Young a story he had received from Scotland. A lady had died and gone to hell. She was surprised when she was greeted at the door by Satan himself. Satan explained that he had been reduced to doing all of his own housework because all of his servants had gone to France to help in the cause. “If this dream could be relied on,” Nisbet wrote, “it would seem that Liberty & Equality are very much to the taste of a certain order of fallen Spirits, as well as to their Friends and Adherents in this World.”

The French spirit was aggravating the situation in America. It may be, Nisbet admitted to Young, that the “great pox” of liberty had been exported from America to France. Now, however, France was exporting the “small pox” of equality to the United States. The sans-culottes of America were being stimulated

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24 Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Nov. 5, 1790, LUP.
25 Nisbet, Commencement Address, Sept. 28, 1790, copy by student John Foulk in his volume of notes on “Dead Languages,” etc.
26 Nisbet to (recipient unknown), apparently summer of 1792, NYPL.
27 Nisbet to William Young, June 1, 1793, DCL.
28 Nisbet to William Young, Mar. 16, 1793, NYPL.
in this madness for liberty and equality by infidel Thomas Paine, whom Nisbet despised and roundly condemned. Obsessed as he was with the French Revolution as a manifestation of Satanic power, he was not much helped by his fellow townspeople. Carlisle, neglectful of its obligations to its college, was able to send a cargo of flour to France. Moreover, the publisher of The Carlisle Gazette reprinted and circulated Paine’s Rights of Man under Nisbet’s very nose.29

Certainly the sovereign people of western Pennsylvania had been infected with the madness of liberty and equality. They were caught up in an insurrection when they refused in 1794 to pay the tax on whiskey levied by the new government and by the properly elected officials of the people. Pennsylvanians had a radical element in the citizenry. Some of Nisbet’s own Presbyterians were not much given to his noblesse oblige politics, and had helped to pass in 1776 one of the most radical unicameral constitutions among America’s several state governments. Nisbet’s fellow Scotsmen were running true to form, but, according to him, not true to their Presbyterianism.30 Nisbet was right in the middle of the Whiskey Rebellion. President George Washington led a hastily gathered military force to the West to put down the insurrection, and then in a rather leisurely manner spent two weeks in Carlisle at the home of one of Nisbet’s sovereign trustees. Washington was treating the whole thing too casually. Nisbet, who complained that Americans had made so much of an idol of him that everybody was afraid to criticize him,31 had to preach to the chief executive on a Sunday afternoon in August, 1794. The sermon has not survived so we do not know what word he addressed to the President of the United States. However, it is known that Nisbet preached on the “Guilt of Rebellion.” Drawing upon scripture, upon reason and experience, with flashes of satire, he reminded his audience that all men were not equally fit to be legislators and statesmen. Some had been intended by God to work with their hands. Apparently his respect for the President kept

29 Nisbet to William Young, June 9, 1792, DCL.
31 Nisbet to William Young, Jan. 9, 1792, HSP.
him from telling him what he thought about the way he was handling the situation, while his suspicion of the sovereign people of Pennsylvania allowed him to condemn the insurrection roundly. Members of the congregation thought that “such doctrine did not suit this side of the Atlantic” and some of his friends cautioned Nisbet to leave Carlisle for fear he would be tarred and feathered. He did not leave. He did almost cause a riot. The crowd erected a “whiskey and Liberty Pole” which stood lewd and idolatrous on the public square. America’s public men might be intimidated by the sovereign people of Pennsylvania, but Nisbet was not. A shoemaker does not a legislator make, he grumbled to Ashbel Green in October of 1794, in commenting upon the political ambitions of one of the leaders of the whiskey mob.

Just a few years later Nisbet faced another kind of rebellion, a strike of the “sovereign students” of Dickinson College. They did not know what was good for them, according to their president, and in this particular case he turned out to be right. The students did not revolt against curriculum, or food, or dormitory life. They wanted a quick and easy degree. A combination of student power and trustee power overruled Nisbet’s judgment in the matter. Nisbet seems to have been a rather humane administrator. Students were not to be considered “merely as animals,” he wrote to the trustees in urging some physical improvements at the college, “that need only food, a hole to sleep in, but they ought to be considered rational creatures, who need retirement, quiet and conveniency for exercising and improving their faculties. . . .” Nisbet seemed to have been more concerned about the sovereign students than were the sovereign trustees, so reluctant were the latter often in dealing with those they were charged with educating. The students seemed generally fond of their president and professor, though, to be sure, when he turned his barbs on the democratic ferment of the age they would hold up their pens and stop taking notes. They appreciated

32 For an account of the affair see Miller, Memoir, 227–229. The author thanks Dr. Sellers for details regarding the Carlisle event.
33 Nisbet to Ashbel Green, Oct. 14, 1794, DCL.
34 Nisbet to the Board of Trustees, July 29, 1799, DCL.
35 Nisbet, “State of Dickinson College” to Board of Trustees, Oct. 31, 1791, DCL.
36 Tyler, 41.
his vast erudition and his willingness and ability to share it with them with flashes of insight and wit. But in 1798 the students stayed away from classes and threatened to leave Dickinson unless the whole degree program was restricted to one year. Nisbet called this "literary quackery." It was absurd, he wrote the board, to expect a student to "read Cicero, Juvenal, Lucian, Homer & Xenophon, & to learn Geography, Astronomy, Chronology, History, Oratory, English Grammar, & Natural Philosophy, Arithmetic, plain Geometry, Trigonometry, Navigation & Algebra, Criticism, Logic, Metaphysics, & Moral Philosophy in the space of ten Months," and all of this without taking notes in class. As Nisbet had predicted both the college and the students were hurt by a three-year trial of the easy degree, all because the trustees had been intimidated by the sovereign students who did not know what was good for themselves anyway.

Nisbet kept his wary eye on other violent upheavals. The United Irishmen, for example, were causing troubles in Ireland, and some of them had to immigrate to America because of opposition to their demands. The rebellion of blacks in Santa Domingo in 1791, and rumors of black revolution anywhere concerned Nisbet considerably. Here it was that the claims of sovereign white people clashed with those of sovereign black people, and Nisbet saw the inconsistency of the white sans-culotte of America. Americans talked much about the rights of man and thought of themselves as lovers of liberty. When, however, Americans thought about the 600,000 blacks—Nisbet's number—living among them in slavery and the potential for violence, they stopped "babbling" about the subject. He wrote to William Young in Philadelphia about how much good Paine's *Rights of Man* was going to do among the blacks. He envisioned a war between the lovers of liberty and the lovers of the rights of man. Nisbet was deeply troubled about this American dilemma, unfinished business of the American Revolution. Opposed to slavery, he wrote to William Rogers about the formation of an antislavery society in 1792, and accused slaveholders of being rob-

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37 Nisbet to the Board of Trustees, July 29, 1799, DCL.
38 Dr. Sellers describes how enrollment and income fell off and the students themselves could not find employment. Sellers, 124.
39 See Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Oct. 30, 1797, LUP.
bers and tyrants. But he was not optimistic about doing away with human avarice and he feared a revolt of Negroes in the United States in the near future.40

Sovereign People! Nisbet was suspicious of the sovereign people. Nothing in his American experience reassured him greatly. Who broke into the post office to steal his "Peter Porcupine?" "Peter Porcupine" was the pen name of William Cobbett, a transplanted English journalist whose insulting calumny, scurrilous gusto, and abusive virulence Nisbet found so appealing. Cobbett was saying some of the things in public which Nisbet only felt safe in confiding to his correspondence. Who stole his "Peter Porcupine?" The sovereign people, in the name of liberty and equality!41 What toleration? Nisbet's analysis of the problem was this, as he wrote to Jedidiah Morse at the beginning of the new century:

The Political Errors of our Citizens arise from the same Source as their Errors in Religion, viz, an over-weaning Conceit of themselves, or an extravagant opinion of their own wisdom. Hence, no doctrine is more agreeable to them than that of the Sovereignty of the People, a Sovereignty which each individual arrogates to himself, so that all the Acts and Laws of a Government chosen by themselves appear to them as so many Usurpations of the Rights of the People.42

That brings us to Nisbet's other complaint. He made it early and kept making it. To Alexander Addison he wrote on January 26, 1786, that the "general want of Religion is at the bottom of all other public Grievances." Religion is a "useful Bond of Society," he continued, "a Means of national Prosperity, Without it, this country must become Slaves to some other Power, or exist in a State not worth the conquering." He returned to the matter a few months later when he came to realize how low religious affairs actually were:

The Neglect of the Duties of Religion unhinges Credit, overturns Decency, & destroys the Habits of Order & the Sense of public Spirit. A Congregation of regular & well-instructed People, accustomed to attend public Ordin-

40 See letters of Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Sept. 29, 1791, LUP; Nov. 12, 1791, University of Pittsburgh; Nisbet to Lord Buchan, Jan. 10, 1792, DCL; Nisbet to William Young, June 9, 1792, DCL. This problem was on Nisbet's mind constantly.
41 Nisbet to James Abercrombie, Mar. 14, 1797, DCL.
42 Nisbet to Jedediah Morse, Jan. 4, 1800, HSP.
nances, & to perform the Duties of family Religion, will be industrious, orderly & peaceable, & will soon distinguish themselves by their Riches as well as their good Behaviour. If our Politicians know how much Religion weighs in the Scale of worldly Advantage, which is its least Excellence, they would encourage it from Motives of Policy, & become hypocrites, at least, if not Christians, for the Good of their Country.  

According to Nisbet, the religious scene was truly alarming. Nisbet was particularly concerned that there was no support of religion, public or private. He was in favor of the Constitution as written by the Convention in 1787, partially because he did not believe there was another body of men who could do as well and that Americans were indeed fortunate, given the ignorance about public affairs of those who were members of the Constitutional Convention. But he did take them to task for not providing for the public support of religion. As year succeeded year he grew even more concerned about this attitude of public men. “You are quite ignorant of our Congress,” he wrote to Charles Wallace in Edinburgh in 1797, if you suppose that they would make any laws for the Support of Religion. The People would not submit to them, & most of the Members themselves would rather make a Law for the Suppression of all Religion & the introduction of French Atheism, than for the Support of any Religion whatsoever. What our People most boast of, is that they are not bound to believe nor pay for the support of any Religion whatsoever. 

The sovereign people did not support religion voluntarily. Congregations would not pay their pastors even when they had contracted to do so and had funds with which to live up to the agreement. The people liked to talk about their own “Liberty and Independence” but they denied these to their clergy in keeping them “slavish and dependent” upon them. In that sense congregations were no better than sovereign trustees as far as Nisbet was con-

43 Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Jan. 26, 1786, Oct. 21, 1786, LUP.
44 See Nisbet, Lectures on Moral Philosophy, Lecture 166, Apr. 10, 1789, PTS. In a lecture on Apr. 16, 1789, he expressed the opinion that the clergy would soon be voted useless and their support withdrawn. He had attacked the idea that every man was a politician. He expected to see the virus catch on and to see books such as “Every Man his Lawyer,” “Every Man his own Physician,” and certainly one entitled “Every Man his own Clergyman and Confessor.”
45 See letters of Nisbet to Charles Wallace, May 18, June 2, Oct. 31, 1797, NYPL.
Indeed, so fickle were America's sovereign congregations that the Apostle Paul himself could not keep a congregation for six weeks without some kind of miracle. Indeed, so fickle were America's sovereign congregations that the Apostle Paul himself could not keep a congregation for six weeks without some kind of miracle.46

Public men full of what they believed to be public spirit had actually established what Nisbet called "anythingarians" and "nothingarians." Moreover, they were actually encouraging the worse heresy for America's needs—Socinianism. In this connection, Dickinson's public-spirited president kept his eye on the activities of Joseph Priestley, so recently an immigrant to America because the sovereign people would not allow his kind to live in peace in England. Priestley was the kind of heretic who was planning a book to show that the coming of the French Revolution was in preparation for the imminent return of Christ and the coming of the Millennium. To prepare Americans for the last events Priestley would surely spread the true sans-culotte morality of the dagger, the rope, the guillotine, and other instruments of liberty and equality. True public spirit was the result of "affection, a good heart & regular morals." These were the result of sound religion. To expect a happy and flourishing society from civil laws alone, which Nisbet claimed was the fashion, was "ignorance and folly in the extreme," and could be maintained only by those who were not acquainted with human nature—like Socinians.49 "The want of the fear of God," Nisbet wrote to Addison in summarizing an aspect of his political outlook, "destroys the Regard of Man." The implication was clear for him. There was little fear of God throughout the land. God had a controversy with America. He greatly feared that America would not last. "Perhaps it has already seen its best days," he wrote to Charles Wallace in 1797.52 The height of America's impiety Nisbet saw in the plans for the new federal city of Washington. It reminded him of New Jerusalem, he remarked sarcastically to John

46 Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Jan. 26, 1786, LUP.
47 Nisbet to Charles Wallace, Sept. 2, 1790, NYPL.
48 Nisbet to Charles Wallace, Oct. 31, 1797, NYPL.
49 Nisbet to William Young, Aug. 11, 1795, NYPL; Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Jan. 31, 1797, LUP.
50 Nisbet, Lectures on Moral Philosophy, Lecture 159, Apr. 7, 1789, PTS.
51 Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Oct. 21, 1786, LUP.
52 Nisbet to Charles Wallace, Oct. 31, 1797, NYPL.
Witherspoon. The planners saw no need to make provision for a Temple!\footnote{Nisbet to John Witherspoon, Dec. 3, 1793, Miller, \textit{Memoir}, 229–232.}

These remarks drawn from the correspondence of Charles Nisbet do not exhaust his ideas, nor, in fact, do they convey the complete Charles Nisbet. In some letters to his daughter Mary he emerges as a loving Lord Chesterfield advising his daughter about her marriage and even about how she should act during her pregnancies. In others, he shows himself to be an anxious, even agonized, father, trying to keep up with and help his oldest son, who for some unknown reason had become a hopeless drunk. Nisbet's lectures on a variety of subjects, always full of wit, less testy, and more constructive, show how he was trying to make his students public men full of public spirit. This other side of Nisbet needs far better analysis if we are to understand the concerns of an educator who did his work for twenty years in that rather tumultuous period. It should be added that his correspondence is a good barometer of the anxiety some people must have felt about this period and some of the reasons for that troubled mind.

For all of his pungent insights into what was going on around him, Nisbet did not fully grasp the dynamics of the situation in which he was involved in America. What he observed was a lack of public men and public spirit and the arrogant pretensions of the sovereign people. Gordon Wood points out in his stimulating book, \textit{The Creation of the American Republic}, that America's political leaders saw many of these things and were trying to deal with them.\footnote{Gordon Wood, \textit{The Creation of the American Republic} (Chapel Hill, 1969).} Nisbet's approach to politics was patrician and paternalistic, and for the public good he believed that the best men should be in positions of power. Nisbet's contemporaries had a somewhat more modest view of the best people, and knew that the best people might not always be in control of public affairs. Nisbet believed that the sovereign people were fickle, that they did not know what was really for the public good, that they often cried out for liberty and equality but were basically intolerant. Nisbet's contemporaries also gaged the democratic ferment of the times. According to Wood, however, there was some agreement among them that in shaping a
government of men over men which would be humane, they had to make all power dependent, directly or indirectly, on the people. Some of them shared Nisbet’s concerns undoubtedly. But they realized that they had to develop those instruments of power which would mitigate the worse aspects of the democratic ferment, including the possibility that the people might not always elect persons of learning and virtue to public office. Nisbet, it should be noted, was much wiser in dealing with these problems of political theory and policy in his lectures on Moral Philosophy and on Public Law than he was in his off-the-cuff correspondence. In the same way, Nisbet did not sense what was happening in the slowly developing party system which was evolving to help the sovereign people deal with the problem of nominating and electing their officials. Party spirit Nisbet condemned as detrimental to public spirit. Drawn to John Adams, although very critical of some of his ideas, he opposed Jefferson in the 1796 election. When Jefferson lost, Nisbet wrote a friend that he was waiting to hear if the loser had set up guillotines, in acceptable sans-culotte fashion, to punish those who had voted against him. And when Jefferson was finally elected and oxen were being sacrificed for the holy occasion in 1800, Nisbet asked God to give him strength to bear the democrat’s tyranny. What he did not see—indeed many of his contemporaries were unable to see it—was what a remarkable thing had come to pass with the peaceful transfer of power from an Adams to a Jefferson.

At another point Nisbet may have been on firmer ground. Wood argues that the Revolutionary generation in shaping the constitutional government, prided itself in eliminating the necessity for virtue. They had started with the assumption that every man would draw to his own interest and they formed a structure which calculated this point. Nisbet’s point, therefore, about public men and public spirit based on virtue and sound religion was superfluous. Nisbet’s argument was in somewhat of a different manner. As a Calvinist he did not have to be told about man’s depravity. Because he shared that assumption he argued that a government would

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55 Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Oct. 26, 1796, LUP; Nisbet to William Marshall, Dec. 23, 1799, PHS.
never be effective unless it was supported by constitutional morality, be the checks and balances on human nature ever so cleverly arranged on parchment. Nisbet disputed Adams when the latter argued that the Revolutionary generation was moved by vested interest alone. Nisbet may have been too euphoric in his conception of the American Revolution which he had supported, but he insisted that honor, virtue, benevolence to mankind was mixed with interest in the cause. It was for the purpose of humanizing life, or, to put it in Nisbet’s words about Adams, it was for the purpose of “supporting the rights of man and preventing the human character from being debased....” It was to produce a constitutional morality, public men with public spirit, that Nisbet kept to his classroom and pulpit for so many years. “The great end of education,” he said in one of his lectures to the students with the problem of mutiny, rebellion, and violence of the sovereign people in mind,

is to subdue the brutal and blind principles of our nature and to make men capable of being influenced and governed by moral and internal motives. A sense of the dignity of human nature, a respect to conscience and to the opinions of men, are the chief restraints from evil actions and such as have not gotten above these can no longer be said to be the subjects of moral government, but have as much need of restraint as children or madmen.57

We may not share all of Charles Nisbet’s opinions about his generation nor his ideas of noblesse oblige in eighteenth-century America. But as we remember this forgotten man in the season of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, we shall have to discuss with him the importance of public spirit and public responsibility and what it takes to make life human. That may be worthwhile in a celebration which promises so far to be a lot of rockets-red-glare signifying very little.

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57 Flower, 4.