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Angry, Icy, Enlightened Adams

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John Quincy Adams: American Visionary

by Fred Kaplan
Harper, 652 pp., \$29.99

Louisa Catherine: The Other Mrs. Adams

by Margery M. Heffron, edited by David L. Michelmore
Yale University Press, 416 pp., \$40.00

A Traveled First Lady: Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams

edited by Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, with a foreword by Laura Bush
Belknap Press/ Harvard University Press, 388 pp., \$35.00



Diplomatic Reception Rooms, US Department of State, Washington, D.C.

Louisa Catherine and John Quincy Adams: paintings by Charles Robert Leslie, 1816

1.

In February 1778, John Quincy Adams, ten years old, crossed the Atlantic with his father, who had just been appointed to the American diplomatic delegation in Paris. “Johnny...reads and chatters french like a french Boy,” John Adams proudly wrote Abigail a few months after father and son, a family of two, arrived in France. The young John Quincy, groomed from infancy for lofty public responsibilities, was determined to profit from his stay in the French capital. “We are sent into this world for some end,” he instructed his younger brother Charles from Paris. “It is our duty to discover by close study what this end is and when we once discover it to pursue it with unconquerable perseverance.” He would demand ever more of himself as the years went by. “I have indulged too much indolence and inactivity of mind,” he wrote three decades later, “and the year has left no advantageous trace of itself in the annals of my life.”

The persevering young man would become a diplomat, skillfully representing the United States in the courts of the Netherlands, Portugal, Prussia, Sweden, Russia, and Great Britain. And he would play a significant part in American politics. From 1803 until 1808, he was a United States senator from Massachusetts. In 1817, President James Monroe appointed him secretary of state, and from that position he ascended to the presidency, governing the nation from 1825 to 1829. In 1830, he won a seat in the House of Representatives and would serve there until 1848, when he collapsed at his House desk, dying at the age of eighty.

John Quincy Adams was a talented actor in history—though often just a lucky spectator. In 1795, on special assignment in London, the twenty-eight-year-old Adams had an audience with King George III, the “Tyrant” denounced by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. The king was cordial though ill informed about his former colonies. Did “All the Adamses belong to Massachusetts?” His Majesty wondered vaguely. And was young Mr. Adams’s father now governor of Massachusetts? “No, sir; he is Vice President of the United States,” John Quincy replied.

At a dinner at the White House in November 1804, six months after the French Senate proclaimed Napoleon the emperor of France, Senator Adams listened as President Jefferson turned the conversation to the French Revolution, an event

Jefferson had once passionately supported. “It seemed as if every thing in that country for the last twelve or fifteen years had been a DREAM,” said a disabused Jefferson. Now he modestly wished only for a stable constitutional monarchy in France, with a return to the Bourbon dynasty, “*the Old Family.*”

As minister to Russia from 1809 to 1814, Adams hated “the stagnant political atmosphere and the Scythian winters of St. Petersburg.” And yet during his morning strolls near the Fontanka River, he occasionally ran into Tsar Alexander I. In the spring of 1812, with Napoleon massing his Grand Army on Russia’s borders, their riverbank banter took a grave turn. “All the indications suggest war,” said Alexander, sadly remarking that he had “done everything to prevent this struggle, but thus it ends.” Could Napoleon be stopped before St. Petersburg? Adams wondered. “I certainly hope he won’t come this far,” the tsar replied. Three years later, Adams happened to be in Paris as people gathered in the Tuileries Gardens. Joining the crowd, Adams caught a glimpse of Napoleon, the fallen conqueror just returned from exile in Elba. He “stood about five minutes at one of the windows,” Adams noted, “and was hailed with loud and general acclamations of ‘*Vive l’Empereur!*’”

But far more than a witness to history, Adams was America’s foremost diplomat of the era as well as perhaps the greatest secretary of state in American history. He led the American delegation in negotiating the Treaty of Ghent that ended the War of 1812. In 1819, as secretary of state, he scored another diplomatic triumph by concluding with Spain the Transcontinental Treaty that gave Florida to the United States and expanded the nation’s borders to the Pacific Ocean. “I considered the signature of the treaty as the most important event of my life,” he wrote in his diary.

In the wake of that treaty, on July 4, 1821, Adams made a patriotic address to the citizens of Washington, D.C., emphatically disclaiming American colonial ambitions or interference in the affairs of Europe. The United States, he declared, did not aspire to become “the dictatress of the world.” As for European interference in the Americas, Adams urged Monroe to assert “our expectation and hope that the European Powers will equally abstain from the attempt to spread their principles in the American Hemispheres.” The president’s annual message to Congress in December 1823 threatened that any attempt by Europe to extend its influence in the American sphere would be regarded as “dangerous to our peace and safety,” his sharp words supplied

mainly by Adams, architect of what would become known as the Monroe Doctrine.

In the fall of 1824, history came full circle when Adams and his distinguished French guest the Marquis de Lafayette, who had served under General George Washington during America's War of Independence, sailed up the Potomac to Fort McHenry. Under a tent that Washington had used during the war, the two men stood with a group of veterans that included Charles Carroll of Carrollton, one of the three surviving signers, along with John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, of the Declaration of Independence, and listened as the governor of Maryland showered Lafayette with praise. All were "deeply affected by the scene," Adams wrote in his diary later that evening.

2.

John Quincy Adams was a highly principled, hardworking, and patriotic man of great intelligence and integrity. He was complex and full of contradictions, frigid and hot-tempered, confrontational and thin-skinned, devoted to public service and egocentric. He yearned for acclaim and strove for achievement and high political office. But as Fred Kaplan demonstrates in his engaging, well-crafted, and deeply researched biography that puts particular emphasis on John Quincy's rich life of the mind and draws extensively from his diary—one of the longest and most detailed memoirs in American history—this supremely successful diplomat and shrewd practitioner of realpolitik had a personality quite unsuited for a life in politics. "I am a man of reserved, cold, austere, and forbidding manners," John Quincy wrote with self-awareness in 1819. "My political adversaries say, a gloomy misanthropist, and my personal enemies, an unsocial savage. With a knowledge of the actual defect in my character, I have not the pliability to reform it." As he acknowledged two years later, he had "none of the honey which the profligate proverb says is the true fly-catcher."

Compounding the handicap of his arid disposition was Adams's certainty that his rivals were out to ruin him. Perhaps this was an inherited fear, inasmuch as his father felt persecuted by men who, he wrote, inhabited the "foul regions of Machiavellian politics." John Quincy suspected, for example, that his success in negotiating the Transcontinental Treaty had "stimulated my personal antagonists and rivals" who, he wrote, were eager to infect him "with poison extracted from the laurels of the treaty itself." Later in his life, he

melodramatically remarked that his foes “hunt me like a partridge upon the mountains.”

He even composed—with “a touch of paranoia,” as Kaplan puts it—an enemies list of the thirteen men he most loathed and feared. “From the day I quitted the walls of Harvard,” he railed, they “have used up their faculties in base and dirty tricks to thwart my progress in life and destroy my character.” Only his virtue and sense of honor, he told himself, could sustain him through such martyrdom. “To be forsaken by all mankind,” he concluded, “seems to be the destiny that awaits my last days.”

Yet as he sought the presidency in 1824, Adams proved himself a wily political animal, exploiting his office as secretary of state to position himself as the establishment candidate. He was, indeed, not the people’s choice: in the election, Andrew Jackson won 153,000 votes to Adams’s 114,000. But since none of the four candidates gained an Electoral College majority, the election was thrown to the House of Representatives to decide.

There Adams played a savvy game, blending social diplomacy with hardball and horse-trading to seize the prize. Jackson’s followers were enraged; they charged that Adams had overturned the will of the people by making a “corrupt bargain” with Speaker of the House Henry Clay—in exchange for Clay’s decisive support, Adams promised to appoint him secretary of state. The Jacksonians’ fury helped galvanize the revival of political parties, as they organized to defeat Adams in 1828.

After the bitterness of 1824, it was ironic that President Adams, himself an angry and judgmental man, prone to fuming about his political enemies, sought to perpetuate James Monroe’s “era of good feelings” by holding up an apolitical ideal of harmony that banished the notion of political partisanship. In his inaugural address in 1825, Adams allowed that the Federalist and Republican parties had contributed “spotless integrity” to the new nation. But now, he suggested, parties were irrelevant—in fact, all four candidates for the presidency in 1824 had called themselves Republicans. Instead of the “prejudice and passion” of party strife, the new president promised a government of “talents and virtue.”

Clinging to an anachronistic fantasy of political unity under wise and enlightened patrician governance, Adams neither recognized nor was able to adapt to the era of partisan politics that he himself had unwittingly fostered. He

did not see that the genius of American government lay in its ability to tolerate conflict and sustain political division, and he did not appreciate the creative energy of contrasting visions of the country's future. Political parties had taken on the force of inevitability in the 1820s, but as Kaplan notes, Adams insisted on standing against them, even if it were "an object lesson in the impossible." For Adams, the issue was, Kaplan writes, "one of principle versus political expediency." But that "principle" was neither democratic nor realistic.

President Adams nevertheless had a farsighted and activist nationalist agenda. He sought to expand federal power for the construction of interstate roads and canals and proposed a department to explore and chart the continent's interior and coastlines. He wanted a uniform system of weights and measures and suggested a review of patent laws to assure proper rewards to "human ingenuity." He recommended the establishment of a naval academy and revived George Washington's hopes for a national university to hold up "the torch of human improvement to eyes that seek the light."

At home in science, Adams called for the creation of a national observatory; he noted, with "no feeling of pride as an American," that Europe had more than a hundred "lighthouses of the skies," while in the United States "our unsearching eyes" had not one. And he pressed for American scientists to join their European counterparts in measuring how the strength of gravity varies from point to point on the Earth's surface in order to determine accurately the planet's shape, something still being refined today.

Adams's program was a transformational one, but he disdained the transactional skills with which he might have achieved his goals. He rejected party-building, party leadership and followership, and piously stood opposed to using the tool of political patronage. He had neither talent nor patience for the essence of democratic leadership: connecting with, educating, and empowering ordinary citizens who were beginning to play a decisive part in American government. He did not grasp, as the historian Gordon Wood memorably wrote, that the voice of the people would become "America's nineteenth-century popular substitute for the elitist intellectual leadership of the Revolutionary generation." On the contrary, like the founders who worshiped "the public" but feared "the people," Adams felt only scorn for the idea of dirtying his hands in the increasingly boisterous, personality-driven, sectional, and partisan politics of the 1820s and 1830s.

As embittered Jacksonians questioned his legitimacy as president and as opposition to his expansive view of federal power coalesced, with adversaries mocking his proposals as so many “lighthouses of the skies,” Adams’s hauteur made it difficult for him to mobilize not only potential allies in Congress but powerful figures in his cabinet. Kaplan, however, insists that Adams’s presidency was not a failure; on the contrary, he concludes that its “lack of spectacular achievements characterized its success.” For four years, there were no wars and no threats of war; the American economy prospered; and the government was prudently managed. But a caretaker is not a leader; a manager is not an agent of change.

As political scientist Stephen Skowronek argued in his important study, *The Politics Presidents Make* (1993), Adams, poorly armed with anachronistic patrician means to achieve his progressive ends, was trapped in the “politics of disjunction,” an impossible leadership situation in which the backward-looking focus of a president—whether John Quincy Adams, Herbert Hoover, or Jimmy Carter—may become “a threat to the vitality, if not survival, of the nation.”

Voters indeed viewed Adams as a failure and resoundingly rejected him in 1828 in favor of Andrew Jackson and his new Democratic Party. Like Lincoln, FDR, and Reagan, who all practiced, in Skowronek’s typology, the “politics of reconstruction,” Jackson would lead a decisive break from the outworn political formulas of the past. He heralded a new era of the “common man,” of democratic, party-based politics led by a commanding and popular executive in the White House.

3.

“I am impatiently yours,” a rakish John Adams signed a letter to Abigail. When she broached the subject of their advancing years, he playfully scolded her: “But how dare you hint or Lisp a Word about Sixty Years of Age. If I were near, I would soon convince you that I am not above forty.” No such smiling innuendo brightened the relationship between John Quincy Adams and his wife Louisa Catherine. She was chronically depressed, ill, lonely, and insecure; he was icy and severe. “His habits of study,” she wrote, “have unquestionably given a sort of coldness to his manners.”

The Adams family was “a menagerie of wounded animals,” as Joseph Ellis remarked in his luminous book, *First Family: Abigail and John* (2010). John Quincy’s brother Tom was paralyzed by drink and depression; his brother

Charles died young from alcoholism; and their sister Nabby left her pathetic husband to live, along with her children, with her parents before dying of cancer.

Now it was John Quincy's turn to add to the list of casualties, beginning with the two oldest of his three sons, George and John, whom he decided to leave behind—"without the slightest consultation with me," a despairing Louisa cried—with relatives in Massachusetts for the six years he and Louisa spent in Europe on diplomatic missions. Despite this neglect, Adams expected them to rise to the same high standards his own father had set for him. When George and John were at Harvard, so displeased was he with their lackluster studies that he forbade them to come home to Washington for the Christmas holidays. "I could take no satisfaction in seeing you," he wrote brutally to John. "I could feel nothing but sorrow and shame in your presence." The toll: John dead of alcoholism at age thirty-one; George, also alcoholic, dead at age twenty-eight, a probable suicide.

In *Louisa Catherine: The Other Mrs. Adams*, Margery Heffron's insightful and entertaining though unfinished book—the author died before she could carry the story beyond 1824—we enter deeply into the damaged family life of John Quincy and Louisa. Each had a lot to put up with in the other, and for half a century, they both did. At the heart of this marriage was the husband's limited awareness of his wife's existence. Adams's diary records page after page of political debates and visitors to their house, but his references to his wife were little more than a frequent "Mrs. Adams very unwell."

During the first years of their marriage, John Quincy was so engrossed in his Senate work that "he had scarcely time to speak to the family," Louisa grumbled. Their letters to each other often contained expressions of affection—but any warmth between them cooled as soon as they were together. "I already long for your return," Louisa once wrote to her husband when he left Massachusetts for Washington, but she added that "so it is, I can neither live with or without you." Perhaps neither of them was born to be happy, he because of the huge burden he carried as the standard-bearer for the Adams dynasty, and she because of her bottomless sense of insecurity.

Diplomatic postings abroad failed to alter the marital dynamic. In gloriously beautiful St. Petersburg, Louisa resentfully complained about the dark boredom of her marriage; her idea of happiness, she remarked, extended "beyond the pleasure of passing every evening one hour together, the one party sleeping and

the other sinking into absolute silence or gaping for want of something better to do.”

Fortunately there were a few breaks in the dullness and solemnity. One, included in a fine new sampling of Louisa’s writings, *A Traveled First Lady: Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams*, edited by Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, was Louisa’s forty-day trip by road in 1815 from St. Petersburg to Paris, where John Quincy had summoned her. It was a rough voyage, rare and risky for a woman of her status, accompanied only by her young son Charles Francis, a nurse, and two servants. Later she composed a memoir of the experience, not only from pride in this accomplishment, but to encourage women to cast off the “fancied weakness of feminine imbecility.” Yet too often, Heffron suggests, Louisa herself had recourse to such traps of female weakness. Were not many of her bouts of illness, fainting, and exhaustion a reaction to the repression of her independent spirit, a desperate recourse to “feminine imbecility” in her campaign to elicit affection from her remote husband?

Louisa Adams was highly intelligent, well educated, and well read. She was a talented writer, as her diary and letters—most notably the correspondence she maintained with her father-in-law, after the death of his wife Abigail—reveal. She was also ambitious; but, with few outlets for personal aspirations, she channeled that ambition through her husband. From early on in their marriage, she spurred John Quincy to seek political power, reminding him, as Heffron writes, of what “both regarded as his destiny—as well as his duty.”

When Adams became secretary of state, then the stepping stone to the presidency, Louisa poured her talent and energy into courting the power brokers of the day and overcoming her husband’s image of coldness and arrogance. According to Heffron, she seized “leadership of society” in Washington from Elizabeth Monroe and hosted innumerable soirees, tea parties, and balls. After one ball that was “more than commonly animated,” she rejoiced to her father-in-law that her husband “was so pleased with my success, that [afterwards] he joined in a reel with the boys and myself.”

After such pleasant events, though, Louisa’s mood typically plummeted. She would complain of being “dragged into public notice,” a penalty she “must pay for being the Wife of a man of superior talents.” Time and again, throughout Adams’s presidency and after it, the charming hostess would withdraw from social life, claiming illness and fatigue. Eventually the independent woman she

once was, Heffron writes, became drowned in her resentment over the toll her husband's political life had taken on her and her family.

While Louisa sank into what Joseph Ellis called the "human debris" of the Adams tribe, John Quincy Adams rose like a phoenix after his loss of the presidency to Andrew Jackson, going on to serve nine terms in Congress. He was first elected in 1830, at the urging of the people in his Massachusetts district. "My election as President of the United States was not half so gratifying to my inmost soul," he wrote, pleased at the summons to serve once again.

Though launched anew upon what he called "the faithless wave of politics," Adams had a guiding star, a clear path forward: the battle against American slavery. In 1831 and again in 1832, he dined with an impressive young Frenchman who queried him about the culture of democracy in America. "Do you look on slavery as a great plague for the United States?" asked Alexis de Tocqueville. "Yes, certainly," Adams replied. "That is the root of almost all the troubles of the present and fears for the future."

Ending slavery became Adams's great mission. But because he understood that slavery was the one issue that could tear apart the union, he decided that, instead of taking it on frontally, he would attack it on the flanks. He aggressively defended the right of abolitionists to petition Congress and denounced the "gag resolution" that mandated the tabling of all petitions and propositions relating in any way to slavery, and he opposed Texas's admission to the union as a slave territory. Invoking the immortal values of the Declaration of Independence, taunting his foes, barely surviving a censure resolution, he became known to sympathizers, as Robert Remini noted in his excellent short biography of Adams, as "Old Man Eloquent" and to southerners as "the Madman from Massachusetts."

In 1847, Abraham Lincoln, a freshman congressman from Illinois, took his seat alongside Adams in the House of Representatives. John Quincy, whose mother had taken him more than seventy years before to watch the Battle of Bunker Hill from atop Penn's Hill in Quincy, was a living link between the revolutionary generation that created a republic tragically flawed by its compromise with slavery and Abraham Lincoln, who would end slavery and rescue the republic from its own undoing.

Ultimately, Adams believed that freedom hinged on education and that knowledge and science would triumph over enslavement in any form. In the fall of 1843, eighteen years after proclaiming the importance of scientific progress and calling for the construction of an astronomical observatory in America, the seventy-six-year-old John Quincy made the long trek from Massachusetts to Cincinnati—via stagecoach to Buffalo, steamer across Lake Erie, and boat down the Ohio Canal—to lay the cornerstone for a new observatory.

Congratulating the citizens of Cincinnati for advancing “the science of Astronomy,” he held forth for several hours about the solar system, eclipses, stars, and the expansion of the mind through scientific research. The founders of the American republic, he said in conclusion, spoke

of the laws of Nature, and in the name of Nature’s *God*; and by that sacred adjuration, they pledged us, their children, to labor with united and concerted energy, from the cradle to the grave, to purge the earth of all slavery...and to set [man] free...for the improvement of his own condition.

Adams’s lifelong pursuit was enlightenment, and one of his final bequests to his country was a “lighthouse of the skies.”

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