

John Adams and the Founding of the Republic Edited by Richard A. Ryerson. Massachusetts Historical Society Studies in American History and Culture, Number 6. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2001. Pp. x, 294. \$60.00.)

For an eighteenth-century man ambitious for fame, John Adams has achieved far less notice from posterity than other similarly accomplished founders of the American republic. But that may be changing. Consider not only David McCullough's best-selling biography but also *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic*, a collection of essays that began life at a conference sponsored by the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1996. Though it breaks little new ground, this collection refines our understanding of Adams, even as it defines its limits. As with any such volume, the contributors tackle various topics, but if any theme brings them together, it is that of fame. Their essays show that Adams's lack of popularity was partly his own fault, perhaps even his wish. Like many of his peers, Adams longed for fame yet deemed it beneath his dignity to court popularity. On a personal level, Adams doubted the value of fame itself, however much he craved it. Fame ultimately rested on opinion, and opinion was by definition fluid, transient, insubstantial. Hence, the quest for acclaim could be a snare and a delusion.

Certainly, Adams has drawn a mixed verdict from historians. His career as a diplomat has long been controversial. Adams's detractors point to the tension between Adams and Benjamin Franklin that shook the American legation in Paris, and they point to the even worse relationship he had with the French foreign minister, Charles Vergennes. On the other side, Adams's few defenders have long hailed American diplomatic successes during Adams's tenure. Though Adams gave offense to Vergennes with his blunt demand for military aid, the French eventually sent the ships to North America that made victory at Yorktown possible; Adams secured a treaty and a loan from the Dutch; and the Americans could hardly have asked for a better settlement in 1783. The question has

long been what credit Adams deserves for these achievements. Gregg L. Lint turns the scholarship on its ear by asking what possible harm Adams could have done, other than bruise a few egos. Lint might also have explored the impact of the undetected British spy spell in the American legation; arguably, it played a key role in sowing tensions between Adams and Franklin and Adams and Vergennes.

Several essays in this collection suggest that Adams cherished his independence too much truly to worship fame. On the one hand, as C. Bradley Thompson's insightful essay on Adams's political science shows, the idea of fame commanded considerable attention in Adams's political thought. According to Thompson, Adams was a profound political innovator who combined the classical idea of mixed government with the modern ideas of representation and of separation of powers. To uphold liberty under law, governments employed what Adams termed "the language of signs" (p. 251). Among such signs were formal titles and conspicuous displays of wealth and power. Though he realized that such outward signs lacked intrinsic value, Adams's study of human nature resulted in the conviction that in all times and in all places they gained sway over the minds of men. Hence, a well-built constitution harnessed men's love of fame to the public good.

At the same time, Adams's reasoning led him to conclude that the pursuit of fame was beneath him. That most people in most ages were moved by outward show simply proved their superficiality. It is this war between Adams's passion for distinction and his reasoned rejection of fame that makes his point of view hard to pin down. Jack D. Warren, Jr., gives the conventional reading of Adams's attitude toward fame in his treatment of Adams's vice presidency. Warren highlights Adams's carping at George Washington, particularly his sardonic remarks about the president's "talents." These included, Adams told Benjamin Rush many years later, "an handsome face," "a tall stature," "an elegant form," and "a large, imposing fortune" (p. 121). Such were the sources of the great man's renown and the qualities Adams notoriously lacked. Read in light of

Thompson's essay, we can see that Adams's satire was directed at human nature, not at Washington. His complaint was that the people recognized Washington's greatness, which he too admired, only because of his other, extraneous "talents."

There was, then, a basic tension in Adams's politics. Adams the man resented the conclusions of Adams the political thinker. However necessary "the language of signs" was in politics, Adams knew that such signs were fabrications. Because he revered candor, Adams refused to act in accord with this fundamental insight. His conscientious conduct comes through in Joanne B. Freeman's analysis of the election of 1796. In the mid-1790s, Freeman argues, what we would call a "party system" had not yet taken root. Political men tended to owe allegiance to persons rather than to political organizations. Yet, the personal circles that gravitated around particular leaders were in fact "parties," as whigs understood the term. Adams's troubles as a politician derived from his candid analysis of the situation. Refusing to deceive himself that Alexander Hamilton was any less a partisan than Thomas Jefferson or James Madison, he sought to be above party, and his presidency suffered as a result. No one could accuse Adams of maintaining a personal following. Indeed, he found himself so isolated that it is but slight exaggeration to say that his wife was his only trusted counsel. Hence, as Edith B. Gelles skillfully shows, Abigail Adams became the first political First Lady (a term invented in the late nineteenth century)—and the only one before Edith Wilson.

After he retired from politics, Adams turned to history and memoirs in one last bid for fame, but as Herbert Sloan finds in an analysis of Adams's and Jefferson's autobiographical and historical works, it was an exercise in futility. "There was nothing 'normal' about Adams's and Jefferson's decisions to write their memoirs" (p. 266). Why write a history of their own times at all? Presidential memoirs were not standard until well into the twentieth century. They wrote because they wanted both to instruct the public and to vindicate their political records. Sloan argues that

Adams was the more candid author, liberated by political isolation to tell the truth. But it did him little good. Jefferson carefully shaded the truth—and won a far wider audience for his words.

In light of Adams's entire public career, Sloan's analysis may well confuse cause and effect. From his very entrance into public life, as William Pencak points out, Adams praised independence of judgment above all else. Although he disagreed with Timothy Ruggles's decision not to sign the resolutions of the Stamp Act Congress in 1765, Adams respected Ruggles's motives: "it was against his *conscience*" (p. 50). In the 1800s, Adams even had kind words for his former arch-enemy Thomas Hutchinson for living by his convictions, however misguided. John E. Ferling concludes his essay on young Adams and Jefferson with Adams's 1816 comment: "I must be independent. . . . I must think myself independent, as long as I live. The feeling is essential to my existence" (p. 97). It may be that Adams distrusted and in practice spurned fame because it made him dependent on others. Moreover, isolation minimized the moral temptations of political life.

Where did these sentiments come from? Richard D. Brown's strong essay tracing Adams's thoughts on free speech from the 1760s to the 1810s may suggest an answer. Setting the Sedition Act in the broad context of Adams's career, he finds that Adams rejected Blackstone's restrictive understanding of the freedom of the press and consistently upheld the importance of the freedom to think, speak, write, and inquire. By the end of his life he wondered, as did Tocqueville a few years later, whether the formal freedom to publish and to speak actually secured free and open discussion in practice. At the same time, Adams thought there were limits to free speech. But what were those limits? "Implicitly he seems to have regarded truth as essential, but he knew very well that truth was seldom cut-and-dried" (p. 175). Brown may be the first scholar to highlight that problem for Adams. Building on Brown's insight, we can see Adams's dilemma: he was devoted to honesty, yet he knew that truth could be elusive. He could simply have followed his political science and used half-truths to manipulate his fellow men. Instead, Adams preferred open and honest discussion. Precisely

because truth was often ephemeral and, we might add, because the human heart is prone to deceive us, Adams saw value in the public clash of ideas, persons, and interests.

The problem of truth and Adams's solution to it suggest two future directions for Adams scholarship. One is to consider more closely his use of language. "Talent" was not the only term he chose to define in his own fashion. His entire political vocabulary, including such concepts as "aristocrat," "republic," "monarch," and "democracy," will look different once we recognize that Adams gave technical definitions to these terms, which he knew differed from those of his countrymen. We should also take another look at Adams's religion. Throughout his life, Adams claimed to believe in a God who created and sustained the world and who would judge us when we died. It is long past time that scholars took honest John Adams at his word and inquired into the influence of religion on his thought and action.

Jefferson found Adams to be "a bad calculator of the force and probable effect of the motives which govern men" (p. 44). Jefferson had a point. Though he was the most down-to-earth, realistic, and often prescient thinker of his generation, John Adams was also profoundly naive. In public, Jefferson spoke of a more candid world, but he was an effective politician who often concealed his honest thoughts behind a veil of half-truths. In this respect, Adams was the more idealistic of the pair. He actually tried to live out the honesty he upheld in principle. Unfortunately, he only confirmed the pessimistic truths of his political science. *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic* suggests that it may be time for historians to grant Adams the same benefit of their doubts they have long accorded his friend and rival Thomas Jefferson.

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