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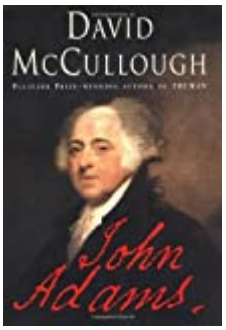

David McCullough. *John Adams.* New York: Simon & Schuster, May 22, 2001. 751 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-81363-9.

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The Adams Phenomenon

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In addition to being a great athlete, my swim coach Cindy is one of the smartest women I know. About ten years ago, Cindy talked me into running with her on alternate mornings–cross training is important, she said–so three mornings a week, Cindy and I hoof it together for about an hour. We also talk for the entire time, sometimes about swimming, sometimes (I confess) about other swimmers, sometimes about our families, our moods, and always about history. On the worst winter mornings, when it is cold and perhaps raining (it is California, after all), we keep ourselves going by arguing about politics. During the last presidential campaign, it was not unusual for runners in the opposite direction to see us shouting at each other in serious conflict over our candidates. Cindy and I vote for different parties, and each of us is passionate. We are an unlikely couple.

Cindy is taller and blond and very athletic. I am short and dark and–never mind. Cindy is entirely gregarious; I have a scholar's penchant for solitude. I have college and graduate degrees; Cindy's trophies are displayed in several large cabinets. When the run is over, we each go off to pursue very different lives. The contrast between us goes on and on, but we care for each other and eagerly look forward to the stimulus of our early morning physical and mental exercise.

Most recently our discussions have become extremely interesting, because, unbeknownst to me, while I was away Cindy purchased and read David McCullough's *John Adams.* This time we discovered something we could truly agree about: Both of us liked this biography, but for different reasons. Cindy, long a fan of Abigail Adams or we simply could not have stayed friends, was intrigued by the subject and the times. She read *John Adams* for its content, though, she complained, it was not an easy read, and it took her several weeks. I found it a difficult read for other reasons; I read with the anxiety of an author whose turf has been invaded by a great writer and careful historian. In short, I felt threatened, where she was free to enjoy the experience of reveling in a story of heroism and patriotism.

It is an understatement to suggest that McCullough's *John Adams* has been THE literary phenomenon of the past summer. The biography is in its third printing, sold

over a million copies and has been number one on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list since its publication in June. David McCullough himself has become as popular a star as actors or athletes. His avuncular and professorial image is a familiar TV presence; his mellifluous voice and eloquent speech are recognizable from many media interviews. Mr. McCullough has been equally as popularized as his subject John Adams. In the familiar discourse, Adams and McCullough are spoken of together. One reason is that this author truly likes his subject. McCullough revels in Adams as a great man, flawed by his ego and sensitivity, but nonetheless one of the huge figures in the American past. He also deeply cares for Abigail, John Adams's brilliant and loyal consort.

The reviews of *John Adams* have been (with one notable exception [1]) not merely laudatory, but exuberantly laudatory. Pauline Maier in the *New York Times Book Review* notes that "John Adams doubted that historians would ever record the history of the Revolution accurately. Now, 175 years after his death, we can at last give Adams the esteem he deserves." Gordon Wood, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, states about McCullough that "his special gift as an artist is his ability to recreate past human beings in all their fullness and all their humanity." George F. Will reported in the *Washington Post* that "McCullough wonderfully tells the life of this brave, sometimes vain and ill-tempered man." Every weekly journal, every newspaper, every literary magazine has highlighted McCullough's achievement. Justly so. But how to account fully for this phenomenon? Sean Wilenz examined this question in the *New Republic* as a revival of public history–lite. [2]

Clearly, many great works of history are produced and published every year that never see this acclaim. My coach Cindy has not heard of them, and chances are, neither have my buddies in history departments. Other books see moderate popularity, but at a more muted tempo. Joseph Ellis's fine *Founding Brothers* has received much praise and good popular reception, probably (in addition to its meritorious scholarship, stylistic elegance, and Pulitzer Prize), because of interest generated by *John Adams*.

Several obvious reasons explain this popularity. David McCullough's reputation as an author of other prize-winning books and as a public historian who has appeared on several TV series goes a long way to account for success. The decision by Simon & Schuster to promote this book in a BIG way also accounts for its success. Probably this is why Cindy bought this book; but she also read it. I think of other best sellers–Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* comes to mind–where even scientifically-educated readers couldn't comprehend the text and gave up by chapter 2. *John Adams* is being read, carefully read, and widely discussed.

What are the merits of this book that set it apart? It is clearly written. It is a comprehensive birth-to-death biography that is balanced in its attention to events. It has color; McCullough describes at length landscapes and cities, wherever John lived, and as they appeared in the late eighteenth century. A host of mini-biographies introduce all of the supporting actors, so that in an almost formulaic stream, Jefferson, Washington, Mercy Otis Warren, Hamilton, and the rest come to life. Complex political and diplomatic events are described in lucid and lofty prose. The man and his times are vivid. McCullough does not shy away from John's faults, but he emphasizes the magnificence of his contributions to the founding of the nation–all of them, literary and material.

Some of this comes at the expense of John's detractors. Jefferson does not do well in this story. He comes out as materialistic (shopping his way through Europe) and mean (sabotaging John's second term). Hamilton, likewise. Washington was so glorified in his time that even history cannot dethrone him. Adams felt this way about the General, as he called him, until jealousy overcame him when, during his presidency, the popularity of the first president continued to hover over the office.

Another reason for the popularity of this biography is that McCullough does a pitch-perfect interpretation of Adams, and his John Adams is mostly lovable. McCullough portrays John, not just as I know him, but as other Adams scholars with whom I have spoken know him. None has criticized McCullough's reading of Adams's character or his contributions. The story starts with a vivid and bleak picture, two men on horses, riding through a blustery snow storm on a freezing New England landscape, one of them talking–and talking and talking. That's how we meet Adams as McCullough has captured him: The courageous and lonely traveler on a torturously difficult path, the mind and the mouth never at rest.

Clearly, it's an appealing portrait of a political figure in an era when there's not a great deal to admire in the stature of our politicians. Adams was honest as he was blunt. He was loyal. He was brave, confronting danger both in his ideology and his person. He's not an Adonis figure; no sartorial swagger moved John. The times in which he lived and acted were dangerous–not only

because of revolution and nation-building, but also because there were epidemics and accidents. McCullough matches de Mille in his panoramic portrayal. The central figure of this spectacle is both great, flawed and lovable, because he is so blatantly passionate. There are no figures to match him in contemporary politics, so it's nice to look back longingly to a time when they existed.

And perhaps because our times are so complex and out of our control, it is nice to recall as well that there were dangerous times in our past, more dangerous probably where great people were needed and rose to the occasion. Perhaps we are not so jaded as to think it couldn't happen again. Cindy, however, is skeptical over the contemporary scene and enjoys the nostalgia of a greater era, when there were greater leaders.

Something else is at work. The phenomenon demonstrates a surprising attribute of our culture. There is a market for history and biography. People are not only purchasing, but reading. Wilenz laments the declining rigor of popular historical writing. I don't. McCullough has done his work, and he cannot be faulted either by the accurate use of his sources or his faithfulness to all the details of the story. No historian has done a better job of narrating John's story in clear prose without the jargon or political overtones. What's missing for scholars, as Gordon Wood points out, is analysis and fulsome citations–just what's not lacking in the kind of history that the British are good at producing. The market for popular history in England has been long-lived and it's something that happens on occasion in this country, with a Tuchman, an Ambrose, or a Foote. When the American Maccaulys, Trevelians, Longfords, and Frasers appear, there is in this country an audience.

So what has bothered me about this biography? Several things, but it's nit-picking.

However, much has been made of McCullough's highlighting of Abigail Adams in this story of her husband. When queried in interviews, McCullough can't say enough to praise her–and even when not asked. Indeed, Abigail's letters are woven into the fabric of John's life, as well they should be, but Abigail herself isn't. Probably the greatest woman stylist of her time, certainly a towering figure in her own right as a political commentator, and the only comprehensive source of information about women's station during the Revolutionary and Federalist eras, McCullough's Abigail writes brilliant and loyal letters to her husband; she behaves appropriately, as would be expected of an exemplary subordinate wife. McCullough's Abigail does not exhibit agency; she responds to people and events, but she doesn't initiate action. He fails to deal with Abigail's proto-feminism; he glosses her statements about the inferior status of women. Admiring her as he does, he skims over Abigail's role as manager of family affairs, both economic and social, over the quarter century that she spent mostly apart from her husband. McCullough's Abigail complains a lot about loneliness, danger, material hardship, and health. Abigail did that, but she also ran the farm as well as a small business to support her family during the Revolution. She cared for and educated her brilliant offspring; she was a republican mother before there was a republic. She grew in erudition, reading broadly in John's library during his absence, and in outlook. She became not only wise, but an influential confidante to her husband during his presidential years. And she shaped the office of First Lady during her tenure. McCullough says that Abigail was wonderful, but demonstrates that John was great. She becomes in this version, not unlike Page Smith's interpretation of her, what I have elsewhere called "The Little Lady behind the Great Man."[3] It's a difference of perspective, and it only slightly bothers me.

In all, I am pleased that Jonathan Sassi provided me the opportunity to read *John Adams* carefully, so that I could think about both the author, the subject, and the phenomenon. And it has given me a topic for pleasurable discussion with Cindy.

Notes

[1]. Richard Rosenfeld, *Harpers Magazine*, September 2001.

[2]. *New York Times Book Review*, May 27, 2001, 9-10; *New York Review of Books*, June 21, 2001, 33-37; *Washington Post*, June 24, 2001, B7; *New Republic*, July 2, 2001, 35-40.

[3]. Page Smith, *John Adams* (New York, 1963); Gelles, "The Abigail Industry," in *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington, 1996).

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