

The Case for the Prosecution: John Adams and History

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Panel: John Adams's Nation

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But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American War? The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people. A change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations.

John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, Quincy, 13 February 1818.¹

¹ The epigraph's proverbial reputation may derive from its inclusion in Daniel Boorstin's widely-read *American Primer*, where it was printed in full and accompanied by an editorial note by Adams historian Lyman H. Butterfield. Adams's thesis exemplified the ideological turn in American Revolution historiography during the Sixties, as explained by Adams scholar John Ellsworth and pioneered by Bernard Bailyn. Daniel Boorstin ed., *An American Primer*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1966); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); John W. Ellsworth, "John Adams: The American Revolution as a Change of Heart," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 28 (1965), 293-300. All quotations from the source follow the version printed in *Niles' Weekly Register* 14 (7 May 1818): 17-20. The letter was also printed in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 11 April 1818. Most scholars use the version edited by Charles Francis Adams, which differs in punctuation but not in substance from that in *Niles' Weekly Register*. Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1850-56), 10: 282-283. The original manuscript is held by the Maryland Historical Society.

Old Glory

John Adams's most famous letter—oft-quoted yet little analyzed—was written at home in a winter of contentment fondly recalling the glory days of the Revolution. Yet it also spoke poignantly to rising generations of Americans. The octogenarian Adams was performing what he supposed would be one of the last acts in a distinguished and sometimes controversial public career. Handicapped by the infirmities of age, he was reliant upon readers and scribes from within his extended family to reach a public audience.² He enjoined all to discover their shared history. Nostalgia had never blinded Adams to his own shortcomings and now spurred him to remind the children and grandchildren of the revolutionary generation of what in 1775 he called their "revolution principles."³ Americans' intellectual and emotional attachments to Great Britain, the letter to Hezekiah Niles continued, were profoundly altered in the decade before the Declaration of Independence.

² Throughout their retirement John was in "better health" than Abigail, who was afflicted with rheumatism and other debilitating conditions. However, from around 1808, he had been dependent upon her and other women of the household to read to him, managing only "short stretches" on his own. John E. Ferling, *John Adams. A Life* (Knoxville, 1992), 436. The readers (for both John and Abigail) included Abigail's niece, Louisa Smith, and her granddaughter, Susanna Adams Clark. Edith B. Gelles, *Abigail and John: Portrait of a Marriage* (reprint ed., New York, etc., 2010), 282. Abigail likely ceased reading to John when she became frailer in 1816. John continued to write some of his letters but regularly needed assistance from other family members.

³ *Novanglus*, No. 1, 23 January 1775, *Boston Gazette*.

"This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution," he emphasized.⁴ "Revolution principles," which included both impetus and restraint, had bound Americans together when fighting the British and in building a new nation. Whereas the American Union Adams surveyed in 1818, though it had survived a second British war and earlier scuffles with France, was beset by internecine squabbles and scarred by slavery. When writing Niles, Adams had already set his own mind and heart on uniting Americans by helping them write, and thus perpetually remember, the history of their revolution. History, he believed, ought to be the intellectual anchor for the American experiment in republican government.⁵

Adams had long fretted that a thorough history of the American Revolution was elusive. Recent histories he thought bereft of insight. He hankered after an empiricist approach that drew upon both documentary evidence and the oral testimony of participants, himself included, rather than elevate an historical rationalism that posited certainties from reasoning. Adams's epistolary discussions with friends old and new often hinged on the question of whether or not a "true history of the American Revolution"⁶ could ever be written

⁴ John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, Quincy, 13 February 1818, *Niles' Weekly Register* 14 (7 May 1818): 17-20.

⁵ What follows is not an original thesis, but extends and elaborates a point first raised by Lester J. Cappon that didactic historical writing, as conceived by Adams and Jefferson, could help unify the early republic. Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (ed. Chapel Hill, N.C., 1987), 420.

⁶ Adams to Niles, 14 January 1818, *Niles' Weekly Register* 13 (31 January 1818): 316-363.

by generations born after the event. With so many of the revolutionary generation now deceased, taking stories and memories with them, and so much of the historical record either dispersed or destroyed, Adams was obligated to take the task in hand. Occasionally Adams hectored his correspondents, as he did Niles, yet also charmed them with anecdotes revealing he had been both a witness to history and a prime mover in changing its course. For his readers, Adams's belated enthusiasm for historical writing proved didactic; for himself, it proved cathartic.

The Historian

John Adams has been long deemed an unreliable historical witness in the court of historiography. Yet he himself determinedly prosecuted early American historiography by making a case for history crafted with integrity that could somehow capture the drama of his own life and times. Modern historians might flinch at the notion of John Adams the historian. For Adams did not produce any historical monograph, and his major published works were concerned with politics rather than history. Throughout his career he considered history a subordinate discipline to the science of politics, and, as an empiricist, expected history to furnish data in the form of analogies and examples. His three-volume *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* (1787-88) was conceived as a practical resource for American politicians engaged in constituting-making yet displayed little contextual

awareness.⁷ A further, commonplace criticism of Adams is that he lacked a historian's detachment and objectivity.⁸ For his private agenda often intruded upon his writing, excluding inconvenient truth and occluding criticism. His retirement writings in particular were tarnished by petty one-upmanship. Adams never tired of reminding Americans of his historic role as a Founding Father. Yet he seemed unable to live up to the Ciceronian ideals of

⁷ Jefferson to Adams, Paris, 23 February 1787, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 00-00. Adams copied huge chunks of text from secondary sources and political theorists, often without attribution. *The Defence* might exemplify creative plagiarism, but Adams was working at pace to collect materials in Europe and get them to America as quickly as possible. He did not delude himself that he was producing an original treatise on government. Members of the Constitutional Convention had the opportunity to peruse the first volume, which Adams had compiled in London, though it would not have been of much help, in the opinion of historian Gordon S. Wood (see below), a trenchant critic of Adams's constitutional writings. C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 91-125.

⁸ Adams was out of touch with events in America and adrift from progress, Wood argued (rather unfairly) in an influential essay. For Wood, Adams exemplifies the conservative, anti-democratic tendencies of the Founders' generation, adrift from the acquisitive individualism, egalitarianism, social aspiration, and proto-capitalism that would define the republican experiment in the next century. Gordon S. Wood, "The Relevance and Irrelevance of John Adams," in *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969), 567-592.

stoic statesmanship he had long admired (though neither had Cicero). His personal experiences, though they conferred authenticity, inevitably prompted self-aggrandizement.⁹

Adams's preoccupation with posthumous fame was typical of his generation, and was a strong determinant in his psychological schemata, from the ambitious days of youth to the final days of his presidency.¹⁰ In his darkest moments, Adams feared that history would forget him. In retirement, he fretted that the history of his single-term administration, 1797-1801, would be written by enemies intent on committing his triumphs and tribulations to ignominy. While posterity might appreciate that he kept the United States out of foreign wars, no-one, he expected, would bother to understand why he worried and wrote so much about the excesses of democracy and partisanship¹¹

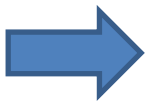
Cantankerousness, conscientiousness, and conviction were a heady brew during John Adams's years in public life and spilled over into his retirement writings. Adams's

⁹ Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York, 1993), 174-181, quotation at 181

¹⁰ On Adams and fame see Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill. N.C., 1976), 17, 28; James M. Farrell, "New England's Cicero: John Adams and the Rhetoric of Conspiracy," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3d ser.. 104 (1992), 55-72.; Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, 57-83

¹¹ For the most part, President Adams was consistent in trying to avoid partisan commitments. Ferling, *John Adams*, 410-413

autobiography does not comprehensively articulate historical context. Its spontaneous reminiscences are unreliable historical records, for Adams frequently mixed up dates and imaginatively reconstructed events.¹² All of this is typical of a genre for which specific events cannot and should not be considered to be verifiable by observable standards of truth. Adams's articulation of the self as a historical actor dominated the narrative. His crude message, regardless of how often particular stories might change, was that he was an agent of history. The autobiography was more a distraction than a serious literary project, however. By the time he abruptly ceased, in 1807, John and Abigail were in their sixth year of retirement. Their Peacefield home was a home from home for their children and their families, and their own servants; numerous grandchildren were in residence at any one time.¹³ Surrounded by posterity, John must have warmed to the prospect of history being written for these generations, either by him or by someone whom he could advise.



In the summer of 1806, Dr. Benjamin Rush, earnestly proposed that Adams write a history of the Revolutionary Era. Rush's role in effecting the Adams-Jefferson reconciliation

¹² Inaccuracies and inconsistencies in Adams's chronology are discussed in Ellsworth, "John Adams: The American Revolution as a Change of Heart," 293-300; Robert E. McGlone, "Deciphering Memory: John Adams and the Authorship of the Declaration of Independence," *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (1998), 411-438.

¹³ Gelles, *Abigail and John*, 267.

is well known today, but he also planted an idea that took a while to grow. Rush envisioned a documentary-based history “written by a man who was the principal Actor in the events which he describes, and who lived in those times.”¹⁴ Adams might automatically have cited exemplars for life and times histories well known to Rush, preeminently *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by the ancient father of history and Athenian general Thucydides (c.460-c.400 BC) or *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (1702-04) by the first earl of Clarendon (1609-87), an apostate parliamentarian and prominent Cavalier. Both exuded authority derived from diligent research and personal experience of the events being scrutinized, while achieving detachment from being written in exile.¹⁵ It was not false modesty that prompted Adams’s protest that he would require a “Volume” to answer Rush

¹⁴ *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 284-285; “Benjamin Rush to John Adams, 11 July 1806, Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5140> [last update: 2015-06-29]).

¹⁵ In the absence of documentary evidence, Thucydides aimed to convey the “overall sense” of what orators said. Adams’s reconstruction of James Otis Jr.’s writs of assistance speech (discussed below, pp. 00-00), was not an invention, however. Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers of History* (London, 2000), 322. Adams possessed the volumes two and three of a three-volume edition of *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (Oxford, 1720-21). John Adams Library, call number Adams 230.7 v.3 pt. 2. BPL.

properly. He entertained “very Serious Ideas of the Duties of an Historian,” he explained, for “no History should be written but under the Oath of Thuanus.”¹⁶

Adams was endorsing the ideal of the then popular historian of the French Renaissance, Jacques Auguste de Thou (1553-1617), known as Thuanus to Anglophones. He was author of the eighteen-volume *Historia Sui Temporis* (1604-09) covering his own tumultuous life and times, and widely praised for its impartial account of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of French Protestants (1572) and the Edict of Nantes (1598) which achieved reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants, and which de Thou, as a leading Catholic magistrate helped to engineer.¹⁷ “Pro veritate historiarum mearum Deum ipsum obtestor” (for historical truth, God is my witness), was the oath of this “great martyr” to religious liberty, as Adams described him. The oath imposed impossible demands in

¹⁶ Adams to Rush, Quincy, 23 July 1806, Founders Online, National Archives

(<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5142> [last update: 2015-06-29]).

¹⁷ The complex publishing history of *Historia Sui Temporis* and de Thou’s influence is explained in Sam Kinser, *The Works of Jacques-Auguste De Thou* (The Hague, 1967). Widely praised for his impartiality when writing of the Wars of Religion, de Thou’s “fame as a historical writer disappeared when humanist canons of historiographical excellence were replaced by other standards of readability and truth in the nineteenth century.” But his work retained “importance as a primary source.” Ibid., 2. There is no copy of the *Historia* in Adams’s personal library, but he possessed some of the volumes of *Histoire universelle de Jacques-Auguste de Thou: depuis 1543. jusqu’en 1607. Traduite sur l’édition latine de Londres*, 16 vols. (1734).

attaining historical truth, Adams protested to Rush and others (especially were he to attempt depiction of enemies like Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr.)¹⁸ Thuanus's oath was comparable to the oaths taken by court witnesses to tell the whole truth. But Adams later simplified the historian's credo: "no man ought to commit any thing to writing as history, or as memorials to serve for history, without a strict regard to truth."¹⁹

Adams's Enlightenment prescription for writing a history of the Revolution had three main features: veracity, witness testimony, and documentary evidence. These were Adams's watchwords for writing the history from which he hoped Americans would learn and prosper. While the first identified historical truth with authorial integrity and morality in the civic humanist tradition, the second promised authenticity found in poetic truth plus the drama of Romanticism, and the third anticipated historical truth being found through the source-based methodology of Leopold Ranke. But Adams was not ready to write such a history, he told Rush, though he now gave serious thought to the logistics of writing it. Of his own place in history, he professed, he was happy to let others decide.²⁰ John Adams knew he had been

¹⁸ Adams to James Lloyd, Quincy, 14 February 1815, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 122-123.

¹⁹ John Adams to the *Boston Patriot*, 31 October 1810, Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5573> [last update: 2015-06-29]).

²⁰ Adams to Rush, Quincy, 23 July 1806, Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5142> [last update: 2015-06-29]).

neither a good politician nor an exceptional leader. Because of that he did not expect history to treat him or his statesmanship with respect.

Yet neither did he accord history the respect it deserved. The following summer, the former president's ugly insecurities surfaced in a tirade against historian Mercy Otis Warren,²¹ as he derided Warren's talents as a historian in a pique of petulant misogyny.²² Personal

²¹ Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution Interspersed with Biographical, Political, and Moral Observations*, edited by Lester H. Cohen (Indianapolis, 1994), 2 vols. She described John Adams as a "barrister at law of rising abilities" when he first made "appearance on the theatre of politics" as an ally of her brother James Otis Jr. in the early 1760s. "We shall meet him again in still more dignified stations," she promised readers (1: 73), whom she provided with concise accounts of Adams's support of the Congressional motion for independence (1: 168) and his diplomatic duties in Europe (1: 294; 2: 423-24, 555-63). She praised Adams's "resolute and undaunted deportment" (559) during treaty negotiations with the Netherlands in 1781-82. Referring to his relations with fellow American diplomats, Benjamin Franklin and John Jay, she again probably drew on her own experiences of friendship with John. "Regular in his morals, and reserved in his temper, he appeared rather gloomy in a circle: but he was sensible, shrewd, and sarcastic, among private friends. His genius was not altogether calculated for a court life, amidst the conviviality and gaiety of Parisian taste." (663).

²² The Adamses' side of the dispute is expertly told in Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, 69-75; Edith B. Gelles, *Abigail Adams: A Writing Life* (New York, 2002), 61; Gelles, *Abigail and John*, 268-269. For the Warrens' side see Rosemarie Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Wheeling Ill.,

knowledge was always a dominant factor in Adams's passing judgment on those histories published during his own lifetime. Warren's aside, Adams had little to say about the first generation of nationalistic histories of the Revolution for they had little to say about him.²³ One old friend from the Revolution reinforced Adams's preoccupation with witness-history by "concur[ing]" with his "opinion" that the first histories were "not popular" because they were written by "little known" authors lacking "*personal* knowledge of the facts they related."²⁴ In this category, Adams placed William Gordon.²⁵ Gordon, Chief Justice John

1995), 150-155; Nancy Robin Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation* (Boston, 2008), 217-219, 245-256.

²³ For historiography see Arthur H. Shaffer, *The Politics of History: Writing the History of the American Revolution, 1783-1815* (Chicago, 1975); Lester H. Cohen, "Creating a Usable Future: The Revolutionary Historians and the National Past," in *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits*, edited by Jack P. Greene (New York, 1987), 309-330.

²⁴ Thomas McKean to Adams, Philadelphia, 15 November 1813. *The Works of John Adams*, 10: 81-82. Adams and McKean were probably discussing accounts of the years before the Revolutionary War when both were in the vanguard for independence at the Continental Congress, 1774-76. Adams probably did not have in mind Mrs Warren, sister to Adams's hero James Otis Jr. and personally acquainted with many of Massachusetts's other political leaders.

²⁵ William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment, of the Independence of the United States of America Including an Account of the Late War; and of the Thirteen Colonies, from their Origin to that*

Marshall, and physician David Ramsay all produced hack work, he declaimed.²⁶ Nor could American historians stand comparison with pre-Revolution British historians with whom the Adamses corresponded (Catherine Macaulay and James Burgh) or with what John termed “fashionable reading” before the Revolution (Clarendon’s *History of the Rebellion*).²⁷ Thomas Hutchinson’s *History of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay* demanded his respect, however, and even occasional (if usually silent) admiration. Hutchinson had written history from the governor’s standpoint, more institutionally than politically, and at various times proved instructive.²⁸

Period, 4 vols. (London: Printed for the author; and sold by Charles Dilly; and James Buckland, 1788), 1: v
John Adams Library, call number Adams 251.3 v.1.

²⁶ Adams to Jefferson, Quincy, 3 July 1813, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 349; John Marshall, *The Life of George Washington*, 5 vols. (1804-1807; ed. Indianapolis, 2012); wirt David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution* (London, 1790).

²⁷ Adams to Morse, Quincy 5 January 1816, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 202

²⁸ So far Hutchinson’s *History* was published in two volumes (1764, 1767), the third, finished in England, awaited posthumous appearance (in 1828), and in lieu of which Adams relied upon a continuation by George Minot. Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay edited by Lawrence Shaw Mayo and John Hutchinson*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1936); George Minot, *Continuation of the History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, . . . (Boston, 1803). Hutchinson is often remembered for the pathos of the last few years of his life, a Loyalist in England during the Revolution, thoroughly homesick for his own people and

Adams presumed that by virtue of his own experience he was better placed than any published historian to guide Americans through the complexities of pre-Revolution politics. Instead, in 1809, Adams started a sprawling series of letters to the *Boston Patriot* revisiting the troubles of his presidency, and continued until 1812. He diligently explained political controversies, though recrimination again littered the writing. Adams's anger still burned if less brightly during his eighth decade. Age did not mellow John Adams. But the tribulations of the Adams household most certainly did, as Edith B. Gelles and other historians revealed, notably daughter Nabby's treatment for breast cancer in 1811 and her death two years later.²⁹ Politics of the family being what it is, a family audience might restrain him from egregious vanity as much as it could reinforce his judgments about events in the public sphere. He also became receptive to the quiet endeavors initiated by Nabby's physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush, to effect reconciliation with Jefferson.³⁰

place, and dying in exile in 1780. But his *History* is not a pathetic piece of work. A stalwart, conservative book by a secular writer, his three volumes contain, with their large body of accurate facts, a great deal of common-sense wisdom; his judgment was detached, informed, and judicious. Above all, they stored otherwise perishable data.

²⁹ Gelles, *Abigail and John*, 275

³⁰.Adams to Rush, Quincy 25 December 1811, Founders Online, National Archives

(<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5731> [last update: 2015-06-29]); Gelles, *Abigail and*

Historical writing he found unsettling, Adams told Jefferson. Reading Thucydides and Tacitus bored him, he confessed, for he could not elide remembrance of the Revolution days. "When I read them I seem to be only reading the History of my own Times and my own Life," and he was "weary" of "recollecting the History of both," he wrote in 1812.³¹ The ennui may have been a diversionary tactic to avoid arguments that might sully the common ground they both now memorialized.³² Adams seemed resigned to the prospect of historians making demi-gods of Jefferson and Washington and ignoring him.

Jefferson did not ignite Adams's interest in writing the history of their days together. But he reinforced Adams's conviction that it was from his own correspondence and that of other public figures that historians could craft a history of the Revolution that met his exacting standards.³³ Yet Adams's wicked wit dampened the blandishments of geographer Dr. Jedidiah Morse on 4 March 1815. "I know not whether to laugh or cry. I have little faith in history. I read it as I do romance, believing what is probable and rejecting what I must." He seemed doubtful as to anyone's ability to write and read history successfully.³⁴ Leaving

John, 275-276. Also Ferling, *John Adams*, 433 For other accounts that place less or no emphasis on the Adams family's situation see Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 206-248; *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 283-285


³¹ Adams to Jefferson, Quincy, 3 February 1812, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 295

³² Adams to Jefferson, Quincy, 3 February 1812, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 295

³³ Adams to Jefferson, Quincy 3 July 1813, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 349.

³⁴ Adams to Morse, 4 March 1815, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 133-134.

behind the egocentric historicism of his autobiography, however, Adams seemed altogether more confident in his role as witness to history, albeit unreconciled to the possibility that posterity could be denied his testament. With Morse and Jefferson, Adams refocused his attention, moving discussion away from his own his agency in history to that of the historical actor who records agency and the historian who interprets it.



"Who shall write the history of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?" Adams demanded of Jefferson. "Nobody; except merely it's external facts," Jefferson answered. The reply might have drawn a wry smile from Adams. He was thinking primarily of the many unrecorded "secret" debates in the Continental Congresses, to which they had both contributed. He wondered about the practicality of gathering extant transcripts of delegates' speeches and any recollections subsequently committed to paper—their own included.³⁵

³⁵ Adams to Jefferson, Quincy, 30 July 1815, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 451. Adams to Thomas McKean, 30 July 1815. Jefferson to Adams, Monticello, 10-11 August 1815, *ibid.*, 452; *Works of John Adams*, 10: 171. The questions flung at Jefferson and McKean prefaced an enquiry about the practicality of collecting the proceedings of the Continental Congress, which documentation was not available to a recent Italian history of the Revolutionary War, which, as Jefferson later noted, invented delegates' speeches. Carlo Guiseppo Botta, *Storia della guerra Americana* (Paris, 1809; in French translation, Paris, 1812-13). Jefferson to Adams, Monticello, 5 May 1817, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 512.

“What do We Mean by the Revolution? The War? That was no part of the Revolution. It was only an Effect and Consequence of it.” It was with Jefferson Adams rehearsed the questions that Hezekiah Niles would make famous and it was with Jefferson in mind that Adams constructed his hypothesis that the revolution took place in the “fifteen Years” before the commencement of military hostilities at Lexington in 1775.³⁶ To Morse, Adams proposed a refinement: that there had been a "revolution" in people's "minds and hearts," and that its origins could be traced to the writs of assistance case of 1761, Morse's birth year.³⁷ He could expect the Connecticut-born Morse to be familiar with Otis's reputation, and in further letters provided Morse with details of the case in which James Otis Jr. had vainly tried to outlaw these particular writs as an instrument of royal authority. Otis's story was part of something much bigger, that Adams yearned to tell Jefferson.

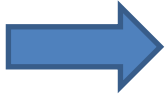
The kind of history he would love to write, Adams teased Morse, would also be full of “intrigue.” He cited the “conversion” to Toryism of his former close friends for which Adams could draw on intimate personal knowledge.³⁸ But though Adams had seriously considered how his own correspondence might expose the political maneuverings of these times, he did

³⁶ Adams to Jefferson, Quincy, 24 August 1815, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 455, also 457.

³⁷ Adams to Morse, 29 November 1815, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 182.

³⁸ Adams to Morse, Quincy, 29 November 1815, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 194-195.

not venture to begin a history of the transformation that Otis had started.³⁹ By 1818, he was less timorous and less repressive.



If I could go back to the age of thirty-five, Mr. Wirt, I would endeavor to become your rival; not in elegance of composition, but in a simple narration of facts, supported by records, histories, and testimonies, of irrefragable authority. . . . I would introduce portraits of a long catalogue of illustrious men, who were agents in the Revolution, in favor of it or against it.

John Adams's challenge to William Wirt (1772-1834), the US attorney general and then one of America's most popular historians, was issued in a letter of 5 January 1818 in which he

³⁹ Adams's correspondence with Morse and Tudor is also discussed in James M. Farrell, "The Writs of Assistance and Public Memory: John Adams and the Legacy of James Otis," *The New England Quarterly* 79 (2006), 533-556, at 540-542. Adams's confidence in the historical value of his own correspondence was reinforced by his reading the "masterly" literary correspondence of the celebrated French *philosophe*, Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, whom Adams had met in Paris. Adams to Jefferson, Quincy, 2 March 1816, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 464; Friedrich Melchior Grimm, et al., *Correspondance Littéraire* (Longchamps, 1813)

discussed Wirt's recent biography of Virginian Patriot, Patrick Henry (1736-99).⁴⁰ "Your Sketches of the life of Mr. Henry have given me a rich entertainment," the letter began. It was an ironic opening, for Adams proceeded to scorch the book's filiopietism. Adams was not averse to creating heroes, especially in the case of Patrick Henry, whose camaraderie at the Continental Congress he warmly recounted for Wirt's benefit. But upon reading his book, Adams confessed (quoting scripture), it was as if he was "convers[ing] with the spirits of just men made perfect."⁴¹ His letter served polite notice of the limits of Patrick Henry's claims to perfection with a quotation in Latin from the Roman poet Horace, warning that heroic eulogies threatened to condemn the unsung to the endless night of obscurity.⁴² Where the

⁴⁰ Adams to William Wirt, 5 January 1818, *Niles' Weekly Register* 14 (13 June 1818), 257–258, and *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 18 June 1818; William Wirt, *Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry*, (Philadelphia, 1817), 486.

⁴¹ Hebrews 12:23.

⁴²

Vixere fortes ante Agamemnona

Multi: sed omnes inlacrimabiles

Urgentur, ignotique longa

Nocte, carent quia vate sacro.

(*Carmina*, Bk 4.9: 25-29).

Virginian's fame rested upon oratory born of facile inspiration demanding Liberty or Death, Adams proceeded to provide a list of illustrious Massachusetts men and women who, before the War of Independence, had countered tyranny with learning. The posthumous fame of these local Patriot leaders, whom John Adams had known personally, was being eclipsed by the American nation's celebration of its founding heroes, like Patrick Henry.⁴³ As ever, John Adams courted hubris and unpopularity—and ridicule with the proposition that he might become the historian who would rescue the diminishing reputations of New England revolutionaries, his included, at some cost to the limelight for those of other regions.

Later that year, Lord Byron rendered this passage for his masterpiece *Don Juan* (canto I, stanza 5) as “Brave men were . . . living before Agamemnon . . . [but] shone not on the poet’s page/And so have been forgotten.”

⁴³ Heading the list were Patriots James Otis Jr., Adams’s one-time mentor, colleague, and ally, and Oxenbridge Thacher, whose untimely death deprived the cause of a great legal mind. Thereafter came Thomas Cushing, the long-time Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives; his cousin Samuel Adams, Boston’s revolutionary leader; the Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, Boston’s most outspoken clergyman; Dr. Joseph Warren, the Adams family physician who died leading the colonists defending Bunker Hill; and James Warren and his wife Mercy, the Adamses’ close friends from Plymouth County. Adams to William Wirt, 5 January 1818, *Niles’ Weekly Register* 14 (13 June 1818), 257–258, and *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 18 June 1818.

Minds and Hearts

By 1818, Adams aspired to become the historian that he was convinced the rising generation needed; a sage guide and enabler committed to factual history.⁴⁴ He dispelled any thoughts of embarking on another book, a medium with which he struggled while excelling as an epistolary essayist. Instead, after admonishing William Wirt, he began another series of letters on historical topics, writing more than thirty between January and October, of which eleven were published, usually in the Massachusetts press first before reprinting in *Niles' Weekly Register*. The commentary was largely spontaneous, and likely involved Adams dictating a letter per week to an amanuensis.

Adams was never alone. William Tudor Sr. had once been Adams's law clerk (1769-72), and thereafter an inconstant friend and ally, but as one of Adams's few surviving comrades from the pre-Revolution days it was wholly fitting that he partner Adams. His chief professional importance to Adams was his part in the foundation of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791.⁴⁵ The last three years of Tudor's life were full of letters to and

⁴⁴ In that spirit he had advised artist John Trumbull to remain true to facts when Trumbull revealed his commission to depict the *Signing the Declaration of Independence* on a metaphorically broad canvas, which flattered to deceive with a slimmed-down Adams center stage in a jaunty-hand-on-hip pose. David G. McCullough, *John Adams* (New York, 2001), 627


⁴⁵ Tudor had been bequeathed \$40,000 by his parents in 1796; but to offset bankruptcy, a few years later he was named Massachusetts secretary of state (1809-10), and in a full circle had his last occupation as a clerk—clerk

from John Adams about history and what they had seen of it. The exchanges sharpened Adams's historian's senses before he wrote his famous letter to Niles on 13 February, which came after a six-month break in his correspondence with Tudor. Adams furnished numerous stories, shared with Tudor his deep knowledge of English law, and handed over transcriptions of obscure sources. By Tudor's enablement of Massachusetts's custody of the past, Adams could find confidence in the future. Through Tudor Adams was consciously passing on knowledge and understanding to a new generation of historians that would include Tudor's son, William Tudor Jr. (1779-1830), James Otis's first biographer, the founder of the *North American Review*, and a scholar and enabler of some distinction

Adams pressed a pseudo-scientific history upon his readers: analysis and interpretation of extensive documentation, critical biography, personal testimony, explorations of ideology, and due consideration to the absence of evidence; he also arranged for the transcription and publication of sources. All the while he drew upon his well of personal knowledge and experience. His private agenda was never out of view, but to some degree has been misunderstood by modern historians.

of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts—until his death on 5 Jul. 1819. The first meeting of the Massachusetts Historical Society was in his house, he was its first treasurer, he saw it had meeting-rooms, he sought state aid for it, he collected its members' dues, he bought its furniture, and he edited its publications. *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, ADD Vol. and pp.

Hezekiah Niles, the influential Baltimore editor, guaranteed John Adams a national readership for what he had to say on American history. Niles also helped Adams reacquaint himself with the revolution years. Adams took to supplying Niles with original manuscripts and transcripts. Adams guaranteed the substance Niles's readership craved. Co-opting Adams when at his most belligerent and candid was indubitably good for Niles's business; eliciting his co-operation when Adams was at his most serene proved good for history.



Adams's open letter to Hezekiah Niles of 13 February 1818 was published in the *Weekly Register* on 7 May, a few weeks after it was published in the Massachusetts newspapers.⁴⁶ In the best tradition of political journalism (then and now), Adams delivered his first great message at the outset.

The American Revolution was not a common event. Its effects and consequences have already been awful over a great part of the globe. And when and where are they to cease?

Pausing with a paragraph end, Adams left it to Niles and his readers to admit themselves they were unable to answer his question. He then convicted them of facile use of common terminology, demanding definition of what is meant by "Revolution," and offering assistance to consider how American "minds and hearts" were changed in respect of "religious

⁴⁶ Adams to Hezekiah Niles, Quincy, 13 February 1818, *Salem Gazette* and *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 17 March 1818; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 11 April 1818; *Niles' Weekly Register* 14 (7 May 1818), 17-20.

sentiments " and "duties and obligations." The one person for whom Adams might speak with certainty in those histories was himself. Nevertheless, Adams's formulation compels respect.

His second great message fixed the primacy of "ideology" as an agent in history.⁴⁷ What took place in the "minds and hearts" of the people set aside the easier determinants of what people did. If anything historians of previous revolutions wrote as though minds and hearts had nothing to do with it, that the people did things with no noticeable thought save response to crowd-manipulators. However much an elitist Adams revealed himself to be in his writings and throughout his career, in his eighties he identified himself with an entire people, declaring their loyalties to be his own, and credited himself and the people with a revolution in "sentiments" not otherwise certain until later.

The dichotomy of "minds and hearts" is discordant to modern ears more familiar with "hearts and minds." While the distinction between intellect and emotion was intended, harmony was also implied. Eighteenth-century readers, such as Jefferson, might have

⁴⁷ Speaking of the French revolutionary experiment in republicanism, he informed Jefferson that "Napoleon has lately invented a word, which perfectly expressed my opinion at that time and ever since. He calls the project *ideology* . . ." Adams to Jefferson, Quincy, 13 July 1813. *Works of John Adams*, 10: 52. The "originator" of the term was French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy, author of *Eléments d' Idéologie*, 5 vols. (1817–1818). Adams was referring to Napoleon's excoriation of the term in 1813 when it was appropriated by his growing body of liberal European critics, for which see David McLellan, *Ideology*, 2nd ed. (Buckingham, Eng., 1996), 5.

supposed Adams was giving primacy to reason over passion;⁴⁸ his nineteenth-century readers, more attuned to sensibility and Romanticism, would not, preferring to see a "holistic" conceptualization of the self.⁴⁹ But if John's syntax accorded primacy to intellect in the making of the Revolution, it was nevertheless a revolution intended for the people to become intellectuals and bring emotion to bear on intellectual endeavor.

Adams directed attention to the most intimate part of intellect and emotion: "religious sentiments." By "religious sentiments" Adams did not mean religious opinions as publicly expressed either in Sunday worship or at family prayers, but individual human religious conclusions, convictions, and conversions. Adams's honesty is not at question, especially if his revolutionary masterpiece *Novanglus* is considered a brief or testament to Adams's own change in sentiment on the eve of war. The balance of proof would seem to say that as soon

⁴⁸ See Jefferson's celebrated dialogue between the Head and the Heart, presented as two friends, in his intimate letter to Maria Cosway of 12 October 1786. Jefferson did not discuss with the Adamses his actual relationship with Cosway, according to Cappon. The dialogue climaxes with Heart admonishing the Head to "leave me to decide when and where friendships are to be contracted." While Adams's dichotomy accorded primacy to reason Jefferson's dialogue celebrated passion in sustaining the *rage militaire* of 1776. "If our country, when pressed with wrongs at the point of the bayonet, had been governed by it's heads instead of it's hearts, where should we have been now? hanging on a gallows." "From Thomas Jefferson to Maria Cosway, 12 October 1786," Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-10-02-0309> [last update: 2015-06-29]). Source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 10, 22 June–31 December 1786, ed. Julian P. Boyd. Princeton, 1954, pp. 443–455.

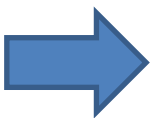
⁴⁹ Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009), 5

as the war began at Lexington on 19 April 1775, if not before, John Adams and his family ceased praying for King George III. It was not a repudiation of the king or monarchy exhibited in the republican fervor of Tom Paine's *Common Sense* published early the following year, but recognition that prayers for the king and royal family might assume agreement before God with American policies really urged by King George. To drop the king from prayers, however logical the decision, was a revolutionary action, as he explained to Niles.

While the king, and all in authority under him, were believed to govern in justice and mercy according to the laws and constitution derived to them from the God of nature and transmitted to them by their ancestors—they thought themselves bound to pray for the king and queen and all the royal family, and all in authority under them; as ministers ordained of God for their good. But when they saw those powers renouncing all the principles of authority, and bent upon the destruction of all the securities of their lives, liberties, and properties, they thought it their duty to pray for the Continental Congress and all the thirteen State congresses, &c.

For John Adams, the American Revolution meant new instructions to God. But, he continued grimly, "there were others who thought less about religion and conscience," and were educated to conclude that "allegiance" to the king already "was dissolved." He meant his old comrade-in-arms Thomas Jefferson and others for whom the Lockean contract of government no longer applied on account of the king's failings.

Yet there was "another alteration . . . common to all" Adams highlighted.

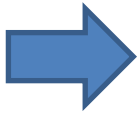


The people of America had been educated in an habitual affection for England as their mother country; and while they thought her a kind and tender parent, (erroneously enough, however, for she never was such a mother), no affection could be more sincere. But when they found her a cruel beldam, willing like Lady Macbeth, to “dash their brains out,” it is no wonder if their filial affections ceased, and were changed into indignation and horror.

The nod to the American revolutionaries' (especially Jefferson's) Scotophobic sentiments was diverted by the image of revolutionary Americans being added to the number of Lady Macbeth's doomed children. Where British propaganda once considered the British as benevolent parents, Americans in 1775 viewed them, as Adams told his readers, as child murderers—as well they might be when arms were borne.

The "*real American Revolution*," Adams reminded his readers, was the "*radical change in principles*" that John Adams witnessed. The assertion, because it was delivered by Adams, has sat uncomfortably with historians ever since. Yet Adams never demanded that Americans take his word for it, and urged them to undertake the "laborious, but certainly interesting and amusing task" of gathering and analyzing the evidence. History is discovery. On that point historians have been in agreement.

"Heroes"



Adams's third great message on the Revolution's origins was prompted by hero-worship. For in earlier letters Tudor Sr., Adams had made a convincing case for his own hero, James Otis Jr., as a seminal influence on revolutionary ideology, and a man whose intellect and scholarship far outstripped Patrick Henry's or any other revolutionary's. When Tudor

asked him to summon up James Otis's oratory from the early 1760s, Adams warmed to the challenge. The Loyalist and renowned artist, John Singleton Copley, he opined, ought to have commemorated the "scene" in the Boston Council Chamber in February 1761 when his two early heroes James Otis and Oxenbridge Thacher contested the legality of the writs of assistance. The elderly Adams summarized the legal arguments as best he might, but strove also to convey the drama of the moment. At this moment of glorious failure, Adams famously recalled, "the child independence was born."⁵⁰

Historians are apt to scorn the reliability of Adams's published account,⁵¹ but in commemorating the birth of the revolutionary movement, Adams revealed himself as a midwife to the writing of history. He was flattered by the opportunity to commemorate a historical event of which he was now the only surviving witness, yet also proceeded to wrestle with an acute problem. How can actors in historical events write the history of those same events? His solution was disarmingly simple. First, he reconstructed Otis's speech without asserting that it should be considered the authoritative version let alone a verbatim

⁵⁰ Contemporary printed versions of Adams's letter to William Tudor were wrongly dated Quincy, 29 March 1818, instead of 1817, as noted by Adams's editors. *Niles' Weekly Register* 14 (25 April 1818), 137-140.

⁵¹ The best and most detailed accounts of the writs cases are Maurice Henry Smith, *The Writs of Assistance Case* (Berkeley, Calif., 1978), with commentary upon Adams's depiction of the "scene" at 267-268; Daniel R. Coquillette and Neil Longley York, eds., *Portrait of a Patriot: The Major and Political Legal Papers of Josiah Quincy Jr.: Vol. 4. the Law Reports, Part One (1761-1765)* (Boston, 2009), 196-206.

rendition; it was a representation, a "striking picture of the spirit of the times" and of an "ardent patriot and well-read lawyer." He fully intended to "insert more" material if and when the opportunity arose.⁵² He did not try to conceal what he could not verify (unaware that Wirt had part-fabricated Patrick Henry's stirring speeches).⁵³ Quotation marks were reserved for sources that Adams cited.⁵⁴ Second, having asked Tudor to picture the scene, Adams proudly dramatized the moment in order to convey its historical significance. The scene was crafted from memory with all the skill he could muster, and helped to imprint in the public mind and historical consciousness the image of James Otis at his most eloquent and brilliant, inspiring a generation of Americans to question then challenge British rule. The text of Otis's speech was not an invention, as many historians have assumed when discrediting Adams's account. Adams did not rely on memory alone for Otis's speech and his history of the writs of assistance case. In fact, as James M. Farrell has discovered, Adams carefully followed an abstract of his trial notes made soon after the conclusion of this first hearing and published in a local newspaper in 1773.⁵⁵ All of this "proves that Adams was a

⁵² Adams to William Tudor, Quincy, 29 March [1817]. *Niles' Weekly Register* 14 (25 April 1818), 137-140.

⁵³ On Wirt see Ray Raphael, *Founding Myths Stories that Hide our Patriotic Past* (New York, 2007), 147-153.

⁵⁴ Otis's speech was omitted in the versions printed in *Works of John Adams*, 10: 244-249; *Novanglus, and Massachusetts*, 244-247

⁵⁵ James M. Farrell, "The Child Independence is Born: James Otis and Writs of Assistance," in *Rhetoric, Independence and Nationhood*, edited by Stephen E. Lucas (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 2014:

reliable witness in testifying to the Revolutionary character of Otis's remarks. . . . John Adams was right."⁵⁶

John Adams fourth and greatest message was that the revolution in people's minds and hearts that climaxed in 1775 began in 1761. In retrospect, the writs case was the defining moment of Otis's career, and the beginning of Adams revolutionary journey too. Otis dazzled Adams with intellect. Otis's revolution did not threaten to consume its children, and Adams anticipated Carlyle's prescription of 1840 that to effect historical transformations without

open access pre-publication version at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository). See also Farrell, "The Writs of Assistance and Public Memory" 533-556. Adams did not consult the original manuscript, which he no longer possessed, but the transcript published in George Minot's 1803 *Continuation* (including two passages not originally authored by Adams but added in 1773 by his law clerk Jonathan Williams Austin). See Farrell, "The Child Independence is Born," 29-30.

⁵⁶ Farrell's careful analysis of the extant variants of Adams's letter to Tudor, Adams's abstract of the trial notes, and other sources "shows that Otis made the arguments Adams attributed to him and proves that Otis's opposition to writs of assistance was based on a constitutional theory, and was cast in a language, that would form the substance and rhetoric of American colonial protest for the next decade and a half." Farrell, "The Child Independence is Born," 51. With regard to Adams's account of Otis's speech, Farrell concludes that "tracing the textual evolution of Otis's discourse has yielded an artifact that is more authentic and accurate than any published since the speech was delivered." Adams's account is "an iconic representation of his courageous and penetrating performance." *Ibid.*, 58-59.

wholesale killing "Brick must lie on brick as it may and can."⁵⁷ For John Adams, Otis threw the first brick against British rule. If John Adams the historian was right, then his old friend and chief detractor Thomas Jefferson was surely wrong.

Epilogue

John Adams would help Americans write the history of their Revolution by proffering emotional and intellectual encouragement. His talent for imaginative reconstruction paid homage to Romanticism, but combined with a scholar's patience for sifting hard evidence proffered an engaging deductive model. The methodological empiricism that Adams lauded consigned providence and hagiography to the historiographical dustbin; the emphasis upon ideology served notice of historicism; the much-mooted didacticism of the endeavor bespoke the demands of nationalism and identity. The testimony of living witnesses, however, demanded immediate attention. Adams's letters to Tudor and Niles constitute a veritable manifesto for a new history of the American Revolution.⁵⁸ His readers would have anticipated further pronouncements.

⁵⁷ Thomas Carlyle and Henry David Gray, *Thomas Carlyle's on Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (New York, 1906), 191

⁵⁸ See especially Adams letters to Tudor between 11 Mar. and 18 Sept. 1818 in *Works of John Adams*, 10: 295-359.

