The Adams Papers

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AS readers of this journal are sufficiently aware, *The Adams Papers* are only the latest development in a major trend that had its origin in Julian P. Boyd's plans for a practically complete edition of the papers of Thomas Jefferson and that received its public status from President Truman's enthusiastic reception of Dr. Boyd's first volume and the simultaneous revival of the National Historical Publications Commission. Initial publications of Franklin, Clay, and Calhoun papers, designed to be substantially complete, preceded the first Adams installment; two volumes of the Madison and four of the Hamilton papers have followed it; and still other such publications are to come. Lyman H. Butterfield, long Dr. Boyd's assistant editor, helped to work out the editorial methods for the Jefferson papers, which have proved so satisfactory as to require only minor modifications to adapt them to each later project.

Nevertheless, there is an essential difference between *The Adams Papers* and all the companion projects. Each of the others is concerned with an individual rather than a family; and, although one or more core groups of manuscripts existed, each involved primarily a task of assembly. *The Adams Papers* will document three and to some degree four generations of a family, and the greatest part of the material has been preserved by the family itself. We now have the first installment of a vast editorial enterprise, which Dr. Butterfield believes will run to at least 80 and possibly 100 volumes and the completion of which he does not expect to witness. These first four large and handsome volumes, strongly bound in green cloth stamped in gilt, with well-spaced lines of large type for the text and with a smaller but still easily legible print for the notes, with page margins of a width that disappeared in 1942, on paper of better quality than is now in commercial use, with illustrations of

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historic authenticity clearly reproduced on double-sided plates, delight the eye and testify to the publishers' sense of the importance of their undertaking and the usefulness of the Belknap bequest to the Harvard Press. Although they initiate a project so imposing, the volumes are a self-contained entity; for they include, in 1,526 pages of text aside from introduction and index, all the surviving strictly personal records of the man who made his a historic family —President John Adams. Great as is their intrinsic value, they are even more interesting in their relations to the family whose rise they reflect, to the unique archive from which they are drawn, to a series of earlier documentary publications made under family auspices, and to the whole edition of *The Adams Papers*, the imposing general plan for which Dr. Butterfield here outlines so far as possible at this stage of his and his assistants' immense labors.

Dr. Butterfield here reports the acquisition of 11,000 photocopies from 204 different sources, with more to be processed or procured, but this addendum, large as it seems, is dwarfed by what the four generations have taken pains to preserve. The complete microfilm of the Adams Papers, 1639–1889, runs to 27,464 feet, in 608 reels; and although the number of pages and items remains uncounted there are some 21,000 items in the letter books alone of John, John Quincy, and Charles Francis Adams. *The Adams Papers* must therefore be, save for the diaries of these three, a selective rather than a practically complete edition. They will also wear a difference, which may fade but will hardly disappear, because of the historic circumstances of the family and their archive.

Few American families have displayed over two centuries so much *esprit de corps* as the Adamses of Quincy; others have been clannish enough, but still have regarded themselves as admirable representatives of an upper-class ethos rather than a distinctive breed. None has produced so extraordinary a succession of indefatigable penmen; even the women they married usually contracted the habit of producing diaries, long letters, and other forms of writing. None has had a communal archive—the fireproof Stone Library at Quincy, which Charles Francis Adams built in 1869–70 and to which his sons' papers as well as his and his forebears' were brought, forming one great series around the walls of the large room that so impressed Edward Everett Hale when he visited there in 1888. In a walk about the room, he declared, "you have seen the manuscript history of America."

This contagious enthusiasm has been shared by many recent journals noticing the first volumes of *The Adams Papers*, but a

distinction ought to be made. From 1770, when John Adams became a public figure by undertaking the legal defense of the British soldiers charged with the massacre of peace-loving (if rock-throwing) Bostonians, until 1829, when John Quincy declined to ride in the General's triumphal car, the Adamses and their records were indeed at the heart of the history of America. When John Adams withdrew, ungracefully enough, from the public scene, his eldest son came to the fore so rapidly as to leave only the most trifling of gaps; J. Q. changed parties in the process but impotent Federalist rage could not stamp him a turncoat. J. Q., exiled from the White House, was back in the House of Representatives and fighting like a Trojan within two years. Nevertheless, this second repudiation of an Adams as President, if it made no indelible mark on J. Q.'s basic Christian humility, proved traumatic for the family as a whole. "The greatest Iceberg in the Northern hemisphere," as a leading Massachusetts jurist called Charles Francis, did not approve of his father's descent to the House, and his own approach to the political arena became extremely tangential. The second factor in the Great Divide of the Adams family C. F. presently supplied by wooing and wedding Abigail Brooks of Medford, who brought a fortune into a family that had hitherto lived modestly on the earnings of its talents and the rents of its Quincy farms. Although the family rallied massively to the Union in the Civil War, its members increasingly displayed, by word or act, a radical distaste for or disapproval of American society as it had become or was becoming—an attitude the Brooks inheritance enabled them to support without material inconvenience. The two clerklier of the sons of C. F., Henry and Brooks, brought forth elaborate diagnoses of national degeneracy, which they tended to broaden and apply to Western civilization in general.

Another aspect of this same pessimism, it is not very hazardous to assert, was exhibited in the fate of the family archive after the death of its great archivist and editor, Charles Francis Adams, in 1886. In 1902 it was transferred from Quincy to a double-locked room in the new building of the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston. For a period of years the Adams brothers retained an editor and historian who had their confidence, the late Worthington Chauncey Ford, and he alone had access to and made publications from the papers between 1908 and 1920. After the death of Charles Francis II in 1915 and of Henry in 1918, Brooks alone survived. He and after his death two members of the fifth generation in effect kept the Adams papers in cold storage for some

three decades. If this was, as seems hard to dispute, a symptom of that alienation which our psychiatrists, personal and social, tell us has become so general and so pathologic a feature of American life today, there is cause for hope. The Adamses had it first; and, since they have cured themselves, their country may profit from their example. In the latter 1940's Prof. Samuel F. Bemis was permitted to use the archive for his authoritative study of John Quincy Adams as a founder of American foreign policy, and in 1952 came the great reversal. Two members of the sixth generation met in the Stone Library with representatives of an impressive array of public and learned bodies and sought ways and means of making the family archive a national possession. A complete microfilm edition was entered upon directly, and within two years the Harvard Press had suggested a letterpress edition, and Time, Inc., had pledged funds for a ten-year editorial operation. In November 1954 Dr. Butterfield removed from Williamsburg to Boston, enlisted a staff, and "launched his open boat" on the uncharted ocean of the Adams archive. An item-by-item inventory soon provided charts enough for practical navigation, and thereafter the standard methods worked out at Princeton could be applied.

Dr. Butterfield is now able to sketch the general scheme of his monumental edition. There will be three main divisions. Series 1 will contain the diaries and autobiographies of the three statesmen, in full, so as not "simply [to] leave the job to be done over again later." Series 2 will be a selection from the interfamily correspondence, 1762–1889, emphasizing the gossip of its literate womenfolk and breaking off, as does the entire edition (and the microfilm before it), with the death of Mrs. Charles Francis in the latter year. Series 3 will be a selection from the correspondence, public papers, speeches, and so forth, of each of the three statesmen. The present four volumes are therefore formally a third of Series 1 (or a fourth, if a volume in that series should be devoted to the personal records of Mrs. J. Q.); but quantitatively they are vastly less, since John Adams was no such indefatigable diarist as his son and grandson. Dr. Butterfield estimates a minimum of 40 and a maximum of 47 volumes for the diaries, and another 17 to 20 for the family correspondence. This gives us a total of from 57 to 67 volumes for the first two series. For the third we have only such inference as may be drawn from the editor's estimated total for the whole edition: at least 80 and possibly 100. It is conceivable that he or his successors will be able to present the correspondence of the three statesmen in 43 volumes, or about 14 each (although it took W. C.

Ford 7 volumes to get J. Q. through June 1823, letters sent only), but it will certainly not be done in 13, or about 4 each. Among the good things to be looked for, entirely or largely unknown, are the courtship letters of John and Abigail Adams; the other half of J. Q.'s diary; the long journal-letters which Mrs. J. Q. sent home to Quincy from *partibus infidelium*, 1809–26; the lively letters from J. Q. II to his father and brothers (J. Q. II, 1833–94, was a gifted but nonrecordkeeping Adams and can only be known thus); C. F.'s long diary; and his complete record of the Geneva arbitration of 1871–72.

The present volumes include the materials from which C. F. filled volumes 2 and 3 of his 10-volume edition of *The Works of John Adams* (1850–56); and he was, as Dr. Butterfield testifies, an honest, industrious, and careful editor. Nevertheless, he quite injudiciously attempted a conflation of two entirely different elements —the contemporary diary and the relatively late autobiography— and he largely denatured both. He was, furthermore, a complete Victorian and felt that man, and especially an Adams, ought to be pure intellect so far as our muddy vesture of decay permits. An amusing consequence of the latter sentiment can be noted by comparing the early pages of the diary in each edition. Since his grandfather recorded little but routine, and that mostly the weather at Worcester, and emitted no great thoughts between January 14 and February 14, 1756, C. F. simply dropped 27 out of 32 entries and abridged the other 5. On Sunday, February 15, as preliminary to a great thought on unpastoral bishops, C. F. lets Schoolmaster John say that he stayed at home reading Gordon and Trenchard's *The Independent Whig*. But he has suppressed Saturday's entry: "This afternoon took a Vomit of Tartar Emet. and Turbith mineral, that worked 7 Times, and wrecked me much." Having been too squeamish to show that his great forebear had a sufficient excuse for abstaining from morning service, C. F. took the further precaution of removing the "A. M." that preceded John Adams' Sunday entry —oh, what a tangled web we weave! A trifle, but it suffices to show how Dr. Butterfield has at last given us the diaries in their true form of 51 separate and various manuscript pieces, as he has also the "disorderly and fitful" autobiography, which John Adams put together in three parts and four fits: 1802, 1804–5, 1806, and 1807; the autobiography stops with the year 1780, as the diaries do in 1804. Dr. Butterfield shows that Part One of the autobiography is an independent creation, Adams having forgotten about or mislaid his diaries, but that the subsequent parts draw heavily upon

the diaries, often elaborating them with matter that may be illuminating but may also be the work of a treacherous and egocentric memory—let the user beware!

But Dr. Butterfield's greatest achievement in these volumes is to give us what is, so far as this writer's experience goes, the first rounded, realistic, and lifelike character of our second President. It is summarized in one long sentence of the introduction[1] that must be quoted:

> But the information in the Diary is secondary to its picture of a remarkable human being—self-important, impetuous, pugnacious, tormented by self-doubts and yet stubborn to the point of mulishness, vain, jealous, and suspicious almost to the point of paranoia; and yet at the same time deeply affectionate and warm-hearted, "as sociable as any Marblehead man" [Captain Samuel Tucker, U. S. N.], irrepressibly humorous, passionately devoted all his life to the welfare of his country, and as courageous a statesman and diplomat as his country has ever had.

As a last word the writer must confess that in a long and sinful life he has made a hobby of collecting small slips of pen or mind—misprints, minor errors of fact, and the like—in the work of distinguished scholars. He has searched minutely in these four volumes—and has come up with exactly nothing.

[1] Vol. 1, p. lxiv.

"... *on his own responsibility, and for reasons ... satisfactory*"

So much has been said of late upon the duties of editors in publishing the papers committed to their care, that a few words may be necessary to explain the principles upon which this work has been conducted. In all cases the best copy obtainable has been closely adhered to, saving only the correction of obvious errors of haste, or inadvertence, or negligence. Yet as a considerable number of the letters have been taken, not from the originals, of which it is not known even that they are yet extant, but from the copy-book containing the rough drafts, it is by no means improbable that in case of a possibility of collation with the real letters, many discrepancies not to say interpolations and even erasures will be discovered. Should such instances be brought to light, it is proper that this explanation should stand on record, to guard against charges of alteration which already have been preferred against other editors, on grounds not altogether dissimilar. Against such variations it would have been impossible to provide without materially curtailing the valuable materials for the work. For all others, the Editor has acted on his own responsibility, and for reasons which appear to him satisfactory.

— CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS, *The Works of John Adams ...*, 1:vii (Boston, 1856).