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# The Flight of Kiwis

Paul C. Nagel: *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family*; Oxford University Press; New York.

by Clyde Wilson

John Adams was descended from a long line of Puritan yeomanry who were among the earliest settlers of Massachusetts. Though his father never achieved anything more than a modest local distinction, John Adams became a key figure in the revolution in New England, leading member of the First and Second Continental Congresses, political philosopher, diplomat, Vice-President, and President. But his greatest accomplishment was his marriage to Abigail Smith, the most remarkable woman in American history, who added Anglican gentry, including the distinguished Quincy line, to the family stock. Of the four children of this remarkable couple who reached maturity, only one achieved distinction. John Quincy Adams recapitulated his father's success as a scholar, legislator, diplomat, Secretary of State, and President. But John Quincy's two brothers, Charles and Thomas Boylston, died young from alcoholism. His sister, Abigail, married William Stephens Smith, one of the most irresponsible and unscrupulous promoters of the day. Smith had all of Aaron Burr's profligacy and ambition, without Burr's charm and courage. He died owing vast sums and left his family destitute.

John Quincy Adams repeated the family pattern in more than his successes. His marriage was the luckiest aspect of his career. His wife was Louisa Johnson, daughter of a Southern family and the most attractive of all the Adamses. Louisa shrunk under the puritanical conceit and censoriousness of her husband—

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which was directed equally at himself, his family, and the world—but she never completely withered away. Though she wasn't to achieve the exemplary republican matronliness of Abigail, her kindness and liveliness were responsible for whatever was attractive in the later generations of Adamses. As is usually the case, the women made up the better part of the family.

Of the three sons of John Quincy and Louisa, John, Jr. died young after failing miserably in business and George Washington was a suicide before age 30, after what was referred to in the 19th century as a career of debauchery. Again, one son redeemed the line. Charles Francis vindicated the high opinion the Adamses held of themselves by his achievements as a congressman and scholar and as the chief architect of Northern diplomatic success in Europe during the Civil War. Of his seven children, four sons are noteworthy: the historians Henry and Brooks; John Quincy, a gentleman farmer who felt only weakly and intermittently the impulse to thrust himself before the public; and Charles Francis, Jr., the only one of the family who saw military service in the Civil War or who took any active part in the postwar building of the American economy.

Paul C. Nagel, in *Descent from Glory*, presents the sad story of the Adams family as a family, from the inside. He narrates with clarity and shows a deft mastery of the immense Adams documentation, certainly the largest of any American family (though, despite the vastness of the record, there are strategic lacunae in regard to each of the black sheep). He approaches the subject in a spirit of sympathetic candor rather than of muckraking, and he significantly adds to our awareness of the 19th-century America that lay beneath political rhetoric.

What strikes us most deeply in this sad account is the old, old lesson of the

vanity of human ambition and the inevitable doom of all dreams of dynasty-building in a republic. What a price the Adamses paid for the ambition that flowed only too naturally from their talents and for those secularized remnants of their Calvinist conscience which left them, in the final analysis, unable to love themselves and even unable to love Creation except on their own unattainable terms! How much happier they would have been had they been able to confine themselves to the family circle and devote their talents to practical, local beneficence or to the vindication of American intellect!

In this admirable study, Nagel does not seek to draw sweeping lessons. He is content to show how the warring devils of ambition and conscience wreaked havoc time and again on those members of the family who were unable or unwilling to adapt to so relentless a view of life. A Puritan conscience can only avoid disaster if it is chastened by practical application or when it is balanced, as it was in the Founders and in the best of English statesmen, by a Cavalier magnanimity and sense of proportion.

Taking the Adamses as exemplary of the New England "aristocracy," history affords few examples of so swift and uncontested a decline. For the first half of the 19th century the heirs of New England and Southern Founders engaged in mortal combat to control the destiny of America. New Englanders devoted themselves with Puritan zeal to the destruction of the Cavalier side of the English inheritance, the Southern gentry, the annihilation of whom was to them the sine qua non of national progress. When the contest was over, New England had an immense share of the political and economic power of America and a near-total monopoly of the cultural power. Yet the fourth generation of Adamses, despite all their advantages and responsibilities,

fastidiously picked up their skirts and retired to carp that things had not turned out as they expected. Henry and Brooks spent their talents blaming their own and their country's degradation on Southerners, Jews, the predetermined forces of history, uncouth new men like Grant (who were but the natural outcome of their own vision)—on everything except themselves. By contrast, the Southerners staked all on their vision, lost, and retired from the field chastened but with their honor intact.

The self-emasculation of the Adamses in the fourth generation was the real descent from glory. New England fell swiftly from overwhelming predominance into genteel irrelevance or arrogant nul-

lity. To the extent that the Puritan ideal of America was preserved, it was preserved by simple, clearheaded Midwesterners, sprung of common or immigrant stock, who went to work to redeem the American dream and to preserve the American sense of decency. To the extent that that decency was preserved, it was largely extrapolitical. Politics was accepted as a degraded sphere, tolerable only because it was unimportant. The great dream of republican ethics and virtue that had inspired the Founders was dead, never to be resurrected. This descent from glory was more than the tragedy of one family. It was an American tragedy, the echoes of which still reverberate down the long hall of history. □

justice became less apparent. The tracing of procedure and precedent turned into a labyrinth, so that familiarity with the baffling passageways was essential for survival in a harsh struggle of wits and wills.

Eventually, the sacredly held (though fundamentally secular) ideal of equal justice for all was discovered to be elusive, diffuse, and often profoundly unsatisfying when it was judicially attained or vindicated. However noble this ideal might be in itself, its grim pursuit often engenders, or causes to further proliferate, a dreadful pettiness of spirit. Thus, as was implicit in Tocqueville's description of its ambivalent character, the legal aristocracy was unable to fulfill the highest mission of an aristocracy as Tocqueville envisioned it: to lend greatness of purpose to the activity of society as a whole while leaving its members free and creative. From this unsavory state of affairs there seems no clear avenue of escape. Laboriously contrived means of attaining justice other than through a legal system have proven equally legalistic, even if nonlegal in name, and equally conducive to a narrowing of aspirations—in short, to mediocrity.

Mr. Stewart's *The Partners* is a lucid description of the upper reaches of the legal aristocracy as it exists today. As he recounts eight instances of how various elite American law firms have responded to the challenge of a particular case or problem, Mr. Stewart forgoes broad conclusions. Still, one discerns throughout an unabashed reverence for the ideal of the attorney-aristocrat, the grand expediter of irreproachable professional integrity. The ideal is imperiled, however, for it is clear that Mr. Stewart also harbors an uneasy skepticism of the appropriateness of the character and scope of the activities of such firms.

Mr. Stewart's accounts of such endeavors as the negotiation of the terms under which the frozen assets of Iran would be released in exchange for the freeing of the American hostages, of the

## Labyrinthine Puzzles

**Jerold S. Auerbach:** *Justice Without Law?*; Oxford University Press; New York.

**Eugene B. Goodman:** *All the Justice I Could Afford*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; San Diego, CA.

**Leo Janos:** *Crime of Passion*; G. P. Putnam's Sons; New York.

**James B. Stewart:** *The Partners*; Simon and Schuster; New York.

by T. Mark Kulish

"It is at the bar and the bench," proclaimed Alexis de Tocqueville, "that the American aristocracy is found." Since his theme was the absence of aristocracy in America, Tocqueville could not leave such an extraordinary statement unexplained. The lawyer, Tocqueville acknowledged, was aristocratic only in certain respects. His specialized vocation conferred upon him a strong sense of professional solidarity with his peers,

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and a deeply ingrained habit of orderly thinking. In other respects, he was a creature and beneficiary of the ethos of individual self-interest found throughout the democratic society. Because no firm social latticework remained after the decline of an aristocratic order, serious disputes among individuals with no enduring and definable social ties to each other had to be fought out and settled in a neutral and impersonal arena in accordance with venerable and authoritative rules and procedures.

The striving of persons (and, in time, of corporations posing as juridical persons) for that equal justice under the law, which the free democratic order held before them as its great promise, left lawyers in the position of expeditors of democratic social life. Their skill in performing the tasks implicit in that mandate have often been admirable and at times even breathtaking. Yet as the legal profession expended its energies in more and more grandiose and idiosyncratic ways, its aristocratic qualities were steadily drained of substance. As the fierce representation of clients' interests became more obvious, the service of