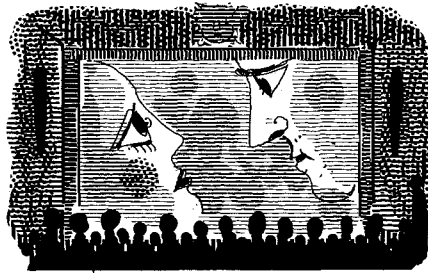


SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



A Monument to Adams

Mausoleums, statues, monuments will never be erected to me.... Panegyric romances will never be written, nor flattering orations spoken, to transmit me to posterity in brilliant colors.

—John Adams to Benjamin Rush
March 23, 1809

JOHN ADAMS, DAVID MCCULLOUGH'S LOOSELY woven, colorful biography of the second president, was published to great acclaim in 2001 and remains one of the best-selling books ever written about the American Revolution. Those same qualities of airiness and color were recently transferred to the small screen in HBO's seven-part miniseries by the same title, now available on DVD. When I say "airiness and color," I mean it as a compliment. To achieve a fresh, vivid representation of that extraordinary period is no mean feat, and both McCullough and HBO deserve credit for pulling it off.

The moving spirit behind *John Adams* was Tom Hanks, whose heavily annotated copy of McCullough's book was, according to screenwriter and co-producer Kirk Ellis, the "bible" for much of the production. But not for all. Filmmakers need images as well as words, and while the written record of the American Revolution is a gold mine, the same cannot be said of the visual one. Photography did not exist, and the artists of the time had little talent or inclination to go beyond neoclassical set pieces or polemical cartoons. And after the Revolution, when living memories began to fade, national pride demanded the creation of official representations, most of which now strike the eye as quaint, tendentious, and sanitized. Yet they are icons, and it's risky to trifle with icons. So unless one reads avidly and has a vivid imagination, one's mental movie of the American Revolution is apt to be, in McCullough's phrase, "a costume pageant."

Pushing the Refresh Button

THE POVERTY OF USABLE IMAGES correlates with a poverty of good feature films about the Revolution. The Internet Movie Data Base lists only 88 about the period (most of them documentaries), as compared to 413 about the Civil War. In recent years, the two most respectable treatments I can think of, *Jefferson in Paris* (1995) and *Amazing Grace* (2006), focus almost entirely on slavery—and on the years after 1776. About the pre-revolutionary struggle, the one that would ultimately judge slavery to be an abomination,

John Adams,
directed by Tom Hooper.
Screenplay by Kirk Ellis.
HBO Films.

the pickings recall Benjamin Franklin's choice for the national bird. Adams won that argument, and we got the eagle. But cinematically speaking, Franklin won: most feature films about the Revolution and the founding are turkeys.

At one end of the scale is Disney's *Johnny Tremain* (1957), adapted from the 1943 children's book by Esther Forbes. The book is too earnest and middlebrow to come off as propaganda, but the same cannot be said of the film. Heavy-handed to start with, it was even more so in the televised version, which was accompanied by clips of Uncle Walt lecturing the masses on freedom. These lectures, which can be seen on the DVD, reach a low point when Walt strolls through a costume storage room, introducing

a half-dozen tired-looking mannequins as "the great freedom fighters of history" (the dude in the suit of armor is Charlemagne). As for the film itself, it's an overproduced Technicolor postcard watchable only by viewers sunk in nostalgia for *Davy Crockett*, *King of the Wild Frontier*.

At the other end of the scale are more recent films that shake off quaintness only to plunge into witless violence. *Revolution* (1985), a forgotten Al Pacino vehicle, purports to show the gritty reality of the Northern Campaign. Unfortunately, this bold departure is accompanied by extreme timidity regarding the causes of the conflict. *Revolution* flopped at the box office and was so trounced by the critics that it nearly ended Pacino's movie career. More successful is Mel Gibson's *The Patriot* (2000), which despite some wonderful moments insists on making the hero a Rambo-like figure haunted by memories of butchery in the Indian wars, who revels a bit too much in butchering British soldiers who revel in butchering Americans. Produced for \$110 million and earning \$215 million worldwide, *The Patriot* paints America's birth with little white or blue, mostly dripping red.

Television has done better, with three exceptional programs: *The Adams Chronicles* (1976), a slightly stilted but comprehensive PBS program tracing John's family unto the fourth generation; *George Washington* (1984), a fine CBS miniseries starring Barry Bostwick; and *The Crossing* (2000), an outstanding A&E movie based on the eponymous novel by Howard Fast. *The Crossing* is about George Washington's fateful decision, after the defeats and retreats of late 1776, to cross back over the ice-filled Delaware River and ambush the Hessian garrison at Trenton. And while it contains some mid-size historical inaccuracies, these are more than compensated for by the superb performances, especially Jeff Daniels as Washington.

John Adams surpasses all of these. It is not free of period clichés, especially when David Morse appears as Washington (or rather as an animated waxwork of Washington). And this Bostonian was not fooled by Williamsburg and the Virginia countryside posing as Boston and Massachusetts (also Philadelphia and Trenton, New Jersey). But while there is no lack of picturesque beauty in *John Adams*, there are also some suitably gruesome moments: a brutal tarring and feathering, a corpse barnacled with smallpox, a shipboard amputation, a mastectomy performed without anaesthetic. Overall, this production does something difficult and wonderful: it strives to be as historically accurate as possible, then pushes the “refresh” button to make the old appear new.

The Spirit of '76

WE SEE THIS ESPECIALLY IN THE THIRD episode, in which Adams (Paul Giamatti) and his son John Quincy brave the fierce wintry Atlantic in order to join Franklin’s diplomatic mission to enlist the aid of King Louis XVI of France in the War of Independence. When the Adamses arrive, the scene is not welcoming: the powdered French nobility are charming but condescending, and Franklin (Tom Wilkinson) spends most of his time swanning about the court in a fashion impossible for Adams to approve or emulate. Not only that, but, to Adams’s dismay, Franklin has already struck a deal, making the whole arduous journey for naught. Yet despite these notes of gloom (or perhaps because of them), the episode is pure magic. By some alchemy of acting, direction, music, and location (these and other European scenes were shot in Hungary), the viewer actually feels the *frisson*, the shiver of awe, that France must have inspired in this man who had read everything but never been farther away from home than Philadelphia.

This episode is also when Paul Giamatti comes into his own. In the first two, he seems miscast, straining to twist his funny, rubbery face into Adams’s hawk-like severity and ending up looking...well, funny and rubbery. Over time, though, he wins the battle and becomes one with his challenging subject. This is less a physical transformation than a psychological one: are we watching an actor’s anxiety at struggling to fill the shoes of a great historic figure? Or are we watching that figure’s own distress at always feeling one down, the odd man out in a contest where the prizes always seem to go to taller, more worldly and confident men? After a while, it doesn’t matter. Call it method acting. It works.

Much has been made of McCullough’s rescue of John Adams from obscurity. But curiously, Adams is the main character in 1776, the Tony

award-winning Broadway show that ran from 1969 to 1972 and then was made into a film. In 1997, the show had a successful run as a revival on Broadway. Despite songs (tuneless) and jokes (wan), 1776 is not really a musical comedy. It’s a fairly serious play about the deliberations of the Second Continental Congress leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence. But in deference to its own historical moment, perhaps, it swaddles its gravity in awkward levity. Still, the hero is not Franklin (Howard da Silva) or Jefferson (Ken Howard) but Adams (William Daniels). And allowing for drastic differences in tone, he’s roughly the same youthful Adams seen in the early episodes of the HBO miniseries.

It may seem puzzling that 1776 was a hit, given that it appeared just when the 1960s counterculture was turning sour. One reason, I would guess, is its treatment of John’s relationship with Abigail. Among the many issues boiling at that time, one of the hottest was “women’s liberation,” as it was then called. Laura Linney, who plays Abigail in *John Adams*, told an interviewer that when she was growing up, “the iconic film about the American Revolution” was 1776. This makes sense: not surprisingly for a film created during the sexual (as opposed to the American) revolution, 1776 depicts a randy Franklin flirting with the ladies and a hunky Jefferson “burning” for Martha (Blythe Danner). But it also depicts a faithful Adams not just longing for Abigail (Virginia Vestoff) but also respecting and consulting her as an equal. This was a terrific crowd-pleaser back then, and to judge by *John Adams*, it still is.

Every female character in *John Adams* is well drawn, but the number one scene-stealer is Linney as Abigail. Like Giamatti’s, Linney’s performance ripens with time, reaching a peak of perfection in the latter episodes, when with a single wordless glance she can convey the subtlest possible emotion, and more amazing, the finest degree of judgment. Not for a moment do we doubt that this woman is as engaged with the weighty questions of the day as she is with household cares, and able to dignify both in letters that will stand among the most eloquent documents of the age.

Scratching the Surface

BUT WHAT OF THOSE WEIGHTY QUESTIONS? Herein lies the chief disappointment of *John Adams*: without apology, it skips the entire Constitutional Convention and ensuing debate between Federalists and Anti-Federalists. To those innocent of American history, it might even appear that writing the U.S. Constitution was a breeze, because our hero Adams did all the heavy lifting when he drafted the Massachusetts constitution back in 1779, and

the people of Massachusetts ratified it in 1780.

To be sure, neither Adams nor Thomas Jefferson participated in the Constitutional Convention, both being overseas during the summer of 1787. According to Ellis, “none of us were interested in making an illustrated history lesson,” so “we settled on a structure in which every scene is witnessed directly by Adams or Abigail.” This was clearly the right decision, although the filmmakers violated it to some degree when they plopped Adams down amid the Boston Massacre and the Battle of Lexington and Concord, neither of which he in fact witnessed. This might be excused as artistic license, but as it happens, these scenes are among the least artistic in the miniseries. Indeed, they smack a little of the old CBS-TV show, *You Are There*, with Giamatti standing in for Walter Cronkite.

Clearly, it would have been egregious to make Adams and Jefferson two flies on the wall at the Constitutional Convention. But no such distortion is necessary, because in spite of their absence from the deliberations, the two men spent months, indeed years, debating such key constitutional questions as the proper size of a republic, the nature of representation, the prospects for instilling civic virtue through education, the dangers of faction and commerce (and their advantages), the trouble with religious establishments. Need I point out that none of these lacks relevance today? And that their relevance hardly stops at the water’s edge?

To be fair, *John Adams* does not ignore these questions. They pop up frequently, in dialogues skillfully adapted from the letters and other writings of the principals, and while few of these dialogues do more than scratch the surface, most are eloquent and dramatically effective. In part this is because, next to Linney, the biggest scene-stealer is Stephen Dillane, about whom it might be said that he plays Thomas Jefferson better than Thomas Jefferson played himself. Many of Jefferson’s contradictory qualities—aristocratic manners and democratic sentiments, reverie and acuity, romanticism and rationalism—are delicately suspended in Dillane’s enigmatic screen presence. And the contrast with Giamatti’s abrasive, dogged Adams could not be more deftly drawn or more delightful to watch.

All the more reason, then, to wish that these exchanges could have lasted longer and taken on more substance. Indeed, our historically challenged viewer might understandably think that the main bone of contention between Adams and Jefferson was France. We see them sparring over Parisian mores and manners, disagreeing sharply over the French Revolution, and finally, the XYZ Affair and the advisability of war. Not surprisingly, given our own times, President John Adams’s persistence in an undeclared “quasi-war” with France and his decision to make

peace rather than escalate that war is roundly vindicated, even though, having alienated both the peace party and the war party, he lost the 1800 election to his estranged vice president.

Holding Their Tongues

IS *JOHN ADAMS* SKEWED TOWARD THE polarized politics of 2008? Maybe a little, but no harm done. The antiwar message is subtle, and so is the treatment of another timely topic: race. For example, in the first episode, when Adams is defending the British soldiers who shot into the crowd at the Boston Massacre, one of the key witnesses is a black man who dares to testify that the soldiers were not ordered to shoot by their officer but rather tricked into it by the crowd. At first, I assumed this scene was concocted to score some anachronistic political point. But I was wrong. There is no evidence that Adams addressed the man as "Mr." (being black, he was called simply "Andrew") or that his testimony was decisive. The scene is a stretch, aimed at making Adams look less like "the King's man" and more like a revolutionary (which at the time he was not). But the man did exist; indeed, he testified more than once.

John Adams makes clear the Adams position on slavery: Abigail calls it a "sin" and wonders if God has sent the smallpox as a punishment; John states unequivocally that he does not own slaves on principle. The contrast with Jefferson is drawn via two brief references to Sally Hemings, the servant who is said to have become his mistress after Martha's death. I say "servant" because Sally and her four siblings were not referred to as "slaves," having been born out of wedlock to Martha's father, John Wayles, and a slave named Betty, herself the daughter of a captured African woman and an English sea captain called Hemings. Rather than ignore this tangled history, *John Adams* sums it up with a poignant contrast: a vicious newspaper attack on Jefferson and his "blackamoor," read aloud at the Adams breakfast table; and a scene in which Sally weeps beside Jefferson's deathbed.

Is it a good thing that, throughout its several hours, *John Adams* contains not a single interpolated speech about the humanity of blacks, the inhumanity of whites, or the terrible price to be paid if the thorn of slavery is allowed to fester in Liberty's flesh? Yes, because while it is stupid to wish the thorn away, it is smart to understand that most Americans, certainly those who comprise the likely audience for *John Adams*, have heard all those speeches before. Indeed, some of the younger members of that audience might be forgiven for thinking that American history

consists wholly of such speeches. And like it or not, exhortation too often repeated loses its power. When we've heard it all before, we can't hear it anymore.

What we *can* hear, and what *John Adams* puts to admirable use, is silence. In particular, the grim silence that surrounds the arrival of the newly elected President Adams and his wife at the ugly and depressing construction site in "Washington City" that will someday be the White House. It's winter, cold and rainy, and the half-finished edifice looms over a torn-up landscape animated only by black slaves toiling miserably away with nothing to look forward to but a night huddled under an open tarp. Beyond a necessary syllable or two, John and Abigail do not speak to the slaves. Neither do they speak directly about them when alone in their cavernous new home. This is not because they are indifferent or complacent, it is because, at that moment, all the power invested in the presidency, about which John Adams has written and argued for years, feels useless. When witnessing a catastrophe too somber for words, intelligent people hold their tongue.

The Role of Religion

CONSIDERING HOW MANY TOPICS *JOHN Adams* tackles well, I wish it had tackled religion. Adams and his peers were intensely preoccupied, not only with their own beliefs and doubts, but also with the role of religion in public life—preoccupations that, needless to say, are shared by millions of people in America, as well as by billions of others around the globe. It is also the case that the religious views of the founders are hotly contested, with some touting them as orthodox Christians, others exposing them as closet atheists, and still others dispatching them as deists. I don't blame Ellis and company for not wanting to stir up that hornets' nest. But there is one aspect to the story that could have been included, to great effect.

Dumb to start with, the current shouting match over the founders' religious views gets dumber when all parties assume that the more devout a colonial American was, the more he favored the establishment of religion. This is manifestly not true. As Steven Waldman argues in his valuable new book, *Founding Faith*, "separation of church and state would not exist if not for the efforts of eighteenth-century evangelicals." Waldman focuses on James Madison, son of a Virginia tobacco planter and member of the Church of England, then the legally established religion of the colony. In his youth, Madison witnessed the harassment, imprison-

ment, and violent abuse of his Baptist neighbors for the crime of not being Anglican.

This "diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution" left a deep impression on Madison, and later, during the drafting of the Virginia and U.S. constitutions, he strongly opposed religious establishment, not because he wished to enfeeble faith but because he wished to fortify it. "During almost fifteen centuries the legal establishment of Christianity has been on trial," he wrote in a 1785 memorandum to the Virginia House of Delegates. "What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry, and persecution."

Such arguments appealed not just to Baptists and other evangelicals but also to free-thinkers like Jefferson, who famously remarked (in defense of "the rights of conscience") that "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god." Here is where *John Adams* could have tackled the topic, because one of the richest and most vexed arguments between Adams and Jefferson was not about France, it was about the problem of republican virtue. As a young man Adams jettisoned the Calvinism with which he was raised, and became a Unitarian—although almost certainly not meaning, as social scientist Edward Banfield used to say, that he believed in "one god at most." Adams opposed religious establishments, and yet, Massachusetts being Massachusetts, he lived with one in practice. Unlike the sanguine Jefferson, Adams worried about the consequences of banishing faith altogether from the public square.

John Adams places these sentiments into Adams's mouth from time to time, including during a heated argument with Jefferson over the French Revolution. But it does not place them into a sufficient context for viewers to grasp their salience to the American Revolution—or to the struggle for freedom of conscience more generally.

I do not wish to end on a carping note, however. To its enduring credit, HBO has given us a popular version of our history that, rather than priming the pump of our self-esteem, reminds us of the sacrifices, temptations, and uncertainties that always shadow self-government. In the chastening words of Abigail Adams's good friend, and sometime political enemy, Mercy Otis Warren, here speaking in a manner that John Adams himself would have approved: "From the general equality of fortune which had formerly reigned among them it may be modestly asserted, that most of the inhabitants of America were too proud for monarchy, too poor for nobility, and it is to be feared, too selfish and avaricious for a virtuous republic."

PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



Make the Sudan an Offer It Can't Refuse

BEFORE THE FULL EXTENT OF GENOCIDE COMES TO LIGHT, LITTLE CHANCE exists that a nation in a position to intervene will do so, especially if what is happening is peripheral to its national interests and/or it is engaged in a protracted struggle elsewhere. Genocide is usually beyond the reach of practical intervention because it may be sheltered or accomplished by a military near-peer, or—as in Cambodia 30 years ago or the Congo now—because of the dispersal of individual atrocities over vast and inaccessible terrain. Even when relatively easy, intervention is rare.

Despite almost a million and a half bombing sorties flown against Germany during the Second World War, many of which targeted road and rail, the United States and Britain failed for lack of trying to destroy the system of transport that fed the gas chambers and crematoria. Thirty-five years later, America failed despite its unquestioned naval supremacy to protect the Vietnamese Boat People. That we and our two allies capable of projecting power, France and Britain, are now distracted and divided by the wars in the Middle East, is unfortunate for Darfur.

The genocide there is thus an unattended stepchild left to well-meaning philanthropies and governments that further sap the possibility of decisive action by proposing delicate measures of relief and equally fragile diplomacy. Blankets are necessary, but they will not stop the razing of villages. Even should China be embarrassed, it might not be sufficiently so to protest roughly to the Sudan, which on account of China's embarrassment is not guaranteed to terminate its air raids or its support of the Janjaweed.

As the Sudan brazenly defies, if not the world's will, then, its wishes, and the death toll closes upon half a million, the pity is that the people of Darfur can in fact be saved. In concert with our allies or entirely alone, we have the military potential to accomplish this at little or no cost to anyone except the Sudanese government, which itself would pay only in the currency of unrealized aggrandizement.

The multinational troops in Darfur have neither the training nor the organization nor the mobility adequately to defend the population. Seventy-eight countries, each with its own problems, procedures, and rules of engagement, are represented in what is less a rescue mission than a camping trip to the Tower of Babel. A possibly influential force is developing in Chad, where the E.U., soon to be supplemented by Russian helicopters, will deploy weakly to defend a line drawn across largely empty desert. But, for the sake of those who face slaughter on the other side, why not cross that line? Nations hesitate to violate sovereignty because doing so is a matter of immense consequence and gravity. Then again, so is genocide.

Darfur is physically distant from the Sudan's heartland and sources of military power. Every inch of the 600 miles of barren territory between Khartoum and the killing grounds is an opportunity for a reprieve commanded by American air power—with not a boot on the ground. The Sudanese military in Darfur can be trapped without sustenance, to wither or retreat as reinforcements are kept out. And the Janjaweed can be denied support by severing the few extenuated routes of supply.

The first requirement of a cordon sanitaire, however, would be to cut all air links, which would require carrier air strikes to destroy the Suda-

nese air force's 51 combat aircraft, 25 transports, and 44 helicopters; its fuel, munitions, and maintenance facilities; and the few runways capable of supporting heavy transports and fighters. Were Chad to approve a small expeditionary force of U.S. A-10s, which it probably would, just a few of these could closely suppress remnant Sudanese armor and check any force of the Janjaweed sufficiently concentrated to overcome local means of self-defense.

MOREOVER, NONE OF THIS WOULD PROVE NECESSARY WERE THE United States willing to go further yet and threaten or accomplish the destruction of the Sudanese regime's means of power over a country pulled apart centrifugally by multiple secessions. One needn't be squeamish about such a proposition. It pertains to a government that has long massacred hundreds of thousands of its "own" people in its South and West, supported international terrorism, and menaced most of its neighbors. The precise targeting of a substantial portion of its 1,200 armored vehicles and 1,100 artillery pieces, its telecom exchanges, microwave towers, uplinks and downlinks, its dozen small naval vessels, its aircraft, runways, munitions, military headquarters, logistical stores, security ministries, and presidential residences would be only a few days' work for long-range bombers dispatched from remote bases, and the planes of two carrier task forces hastened to the Red Sea.

Which would the regime in the Sudan prefer? To be annihilated, or to discontinue its campaign of mass murder? Taking into account the air defenses, distances, and the ranges, numbers, and capacities of our (and perhaps French and British) aircraft, this is a choice to which the Sudan can be brought. Given its record, few nations would come to its aid with other than a pro forma whimper, and given the geography and the air and naval balance, no nation could. Though repressive dictatorships might protest, and China determine to hurry the formation of the blue-water navy it is already building, little else would change except for the better.

This is especially so because only in the worst case would a military strike actually be necessary. One of the chief attractions of such an initiative is that, if properly directed, it could, one way or another, military strike or not, accomplish its aims. They are, first, to stop the mass killings and displacements; and, second, to pressure the Sudan into negotiating settlements in good faith, which it need not do as long as it retains its habitual option of simply murdering the populations it finds troublesome.

The threat itself would likely be enough. If not, then to carry it out in the present circumstances would be honorable, right, and overdue. For these are human lives that in Darfur are senselessly extinguished. There is no soul anywhere more valuable than any of theirs, no child more worth saving than any of theirs. We are able to do so, as we can stand our carriers and pilots at the ready. And why would we not? A whole people, no matter how wretched or obscure, must certainly be worth three-days' ammunition.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in the New York Times.