

HENRY ADAMS ON THINGS IN GENERAL¹

AS the work of a literary craftsman, *The Education of Henry Adams* needs no special consideration here. Its attractiveness in this respect has already received and will long continue to receive the fullest recognition. Fastidious criticism may deny the perfection of the artistry in some points of detail—may question the fidelity of the craftsman to his chosen theme and may doubt the aesthetic purity of the device by which the profoundest problems of humanity's history and philosophy are presented and discussed in the guise of an individual's education. But the work as a whole will never fail to command the homage due to genius.

As autobiography, the volume is of more importance here. The private life of Henry Adams made, indeed, no contribution to the substance of either history or politics, and public life he had none. Yet his book reveals clearly enough that he was a true Adams, and it is a monument to that family in the fourth generation hardly less significant and noteworthy than those reared in public life by the three earlier generations. Why the fourth generation with all its undoubted talent and opportunity did not attain political distinction like the other three, is a question to which Henry Adams, as well as his elder brother, Charles Francis, devoted speculative attention. Both ascribe an important part in the result to defects in their education. Charles Francis in his *Autobiography* manifests some resentment toward his father for not making the son a better "mixer" and for failing to expel from his character by main force the shyness and self-consciousness that were his undoing. Henry takes upon himself full personal responsibility for his own shortcomings, but with gentle humor points out the repeated instances in which the impersonal forces of history have interposed impassable barriers between him and various forms of usefulness.

That the formal educational advantages of Harvard and a German university were worse than useless in the case of Henry Adams, his own conviction is strong—much stronger probably than will be that of most of those who read his demonstration of it. In 1861, he accompanied his father on a diplomatic mission to Europe, as that father had accompanied the grandfather, and the grandfather had accompanied

¹ *The Education of Henry Adams. An Autobiography.* Boston, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1918.—519 pp.

the great-grandfather. As private secretary to the American minister to Great Britain during the Civil War, Henry Adams had the chance to pursue, as the sole student, a perfect educational course in politics and diplomacy.

The most costly tutors in the world were provided for him at public expense—Lord Palmerston, Lord Russell, Lord Westbury, Lord Selborne, Mr. Gladstone, Lord Granville, and their associates, paid by the British government; William H. Seward, Charles Francis Adams, William Maxwell Evarts, Thurlow Weed, and other considerable professors employed by the American government. . . .

Yet the most important lessons that he supposed he had learned in this imposing course were found forty years afterward to have been a mass of distortion and error. No wonder his retrospect of his life conveys a general impression of failure.

At the end of this period of education in England Henry Adams published a magazine study of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith. This was preceded by a year or two of dawdling along in the conventional life of the best English society, to which the triumph of the North in the Civil War had insured the unrestricted admission of the Adameses. Thus, as he sums up the situation,

Henry Adams found himself, at twenty-eight, still in English society, dragged on one side into English dilettantism, which of all dilettantism he held the most futile; and, on the other, into American antiquarianism, which of all antiquarianism he held the most foolish. This was the result of five years in London. Even then he knew he had made a false start. He had wholly lost his way. If he were ever to amount to anything, he must begin a new education, in a new place, with a new purpose [page 222].

But an unkind fate still pursued him. He sought solace in the fashionable Darwinism of the day and, expecting to reach "some great generalization which would finish one's clamor to be educated", looked into natural selection, natural evolution and natural uniformity. "Unbroken Evolution under uniform conditions pleased every one—except curates and bishops; it was the very best substitute for religion; a safe, conservative, practical, thoroughly Common-Law deity" (page 225). Unhappily some thoughtless person introduced Adams to the *Terebratula* and the *Pteraspis*, and in an instant, for reasons that are obvious to every reader, the hope of a well-fitting, hand-me-down suit of education of Darwinian make disappeared forever.

Returning to America, Adams selected the press for a career and

Washington for his residence. The inauguration of Grant was at hand, and Adams, with a group of talented young newspaper men, was engrossed with the purpose to support the new President in the attack which they were convinced he would have to make on the overgrown and repulsive power of the Senate.

With this thought in his mind he [Adams] went to the Capitol to hear the names announced which should reveal the carefully guarded secret of Grant's Cabinet. To the end of his life, he wondered at the suddenness of the revolution which actually, within five minutes, changed his intended future into an absurdity so laughable as to make him ashamed of it. . . . Grant's nominations had the singular effect of making the hearer ashamed, not so much of Grant, as of himself. He had made another total misconception of life—another inconceivable false start [page 262].

And further on Adams explains :

What worried Adams was . . . as usual, his own education. Grant fretted and irritated him, like the *Terebratula*, as a defiance of first principles. He had no right to exist. He should have been extinct for ages. . . . That, two thousand years after Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, a man like Grant should be called—and should actually and truly be—the highest product of the most advanced evolution, made evolution ludicrous.

Education became more perplexing at every phase. No theory was worth the pen that wrote it. America had no use for Adams because he was eighteenth-century, and yet it worshipped Grant because he was archaic and should have lived in a cave and worn skins.

It is clear that the search for an education was no frivolous enterprise in the case of such a character as Adams. With all its charm and whimsy, however, it cannot hold the interest of an ordinary mortal indefinitely, and the reader is not unduly grieved to learn that in 1871 the education of Henry Adams ended and all that was left for him was living his life. The occasion for this sudden transformation was a chance meeting with Clarence King in the wilds of the Uintah Mountains. In King, Adams saw all that he himself had wished and struggled to be ; and in the exchange of philosophies with King, Adams realized that to be like King was denied to Adams, as indeed to everybody else, from the beginning of time. . . So Henry Adams settled down to be an editor and a professor of history. He tells how catastrophe and failure continued to overwhelm him and how Clarence King continued in his career of brilliant and multifarious success. The reader notes, however, that King died before his time, "alone and uncared

for, in a California tavern", leaving little impression upon any save a small circle of intimates, while the other of the two friends did not die till he had given to all men of taste and culture *Mont St. Michel and Chartres* and *The Education of Henry Adams*.

The editorial and professorial stage of Adams's career lasted only a few years and was followed by some four decades of what he represents to have been intellectual futility and drift. In reality they were the period of full fruition for his peculiar powers. His residence in Washington and his intimacy with John Hay are responsible for judgments on the politics and politicians of the time that, like his judgments on English and American leaders of earlier decades, are always interesting, if often unconvincing. Of the older set Earl Russell and Gladstone of the English and Grant and Boutwell of the Americans, are treated with unusual severity, while Charles Sumner comes out of the ordeal with a character that, however unlovely, is by far the best he has ever been credited with by an Adams. Of the younger set of public men Don Cameron receives the tribute that will cause the most surprise to students of history. One will inevitably recall the rage of the madman of Roanoke over the alliance of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay three quarters of a century earlier—"the combination, unheard of till then, of the Puritan with the blackleg." As Henry Adams says: "Never in the range of human possibilities had a Cameron believed in an Adams—or an Adams in a Cameron—but they had curiously enough almost always worked together." The occasion for the particular union of forces in question in 1893 was the desire of Henry Adams and Don Cameron to settle the then critical question of the currency by the adoption of the silver standard. Their policy failed of approval by the government, but the failure left no bitterness in the philosopher, and the chapter in which he describes the episode is characteristically whimsical, involving an account of the panic of 1893, the Chicago Exposition and a wide range of reflections on Venice, Corinth, Ara Coeli and the reactions of a historian's mind to a newly discovered mechanical sequence.

To John Hay and his diplomatic achievements the tribute of Henry Adams is as generous as the familiar story of their intimacy would foretell. Only a shade of the feeling is revealed that, as Adams repeatedly reflects, "a friend in power is a friend lost." When Lamar, whom Adams loved and greatly admired, became Secretary of the Interior, he said: "Of course Mr. Adams knows that anything in my power is at his service." This Adams regarded as a formula for closing the subject; for though he was always willing to serve, it was impossible

for him to seek. Hay seems never to have gone so far as Lamar; and they were obviously right; for they knew what Adams knew, that he had no fitness for public, especially diplomatic, service and that the only reason why he craved the offer of it was a more or less subconscious feeling that the family tradition required it.

It is probably the speculations of the author on history that constitute the most substantial manifestation of his genius in *The Education of Henry Adams*. The manner of presentation is unsystematic and crotchety, like all the rest of his matter. For he is an Adams, which means that he is eccentric; and one of his most delightful chapters is entitled "Eccentricity", wherein we find a philosophical survey of the field obviously from the inside. But the reader who seeks suggestions about history from a master historian will be richly rewarded for a leisurely ramble through the volume. He will find a variety of ideas about the teaching of the subject, and he will find a broad philosophy of history that must hold the attention, if not win the approval, of every intelligent student.

Adams's reflections upon the place and influence of the study of history in the education of generous youth will be hard reading to many serious-minded persons. To some, indeed, the suggestion would appear prudent that the reading of certain passages in this volume should be prohibited to all history-teachers and history-students under (say) fifty years of age. For example:

A teacher must either teach history as a catalogue, a record, a romance, or as an evolution; and whether he affirms or denies evolution, he falls into all the burning faggots of the pit. He makes of his scholars either priests or atheists, plutocrats or socialists, judges or anarchists, almost in spite of himself. In essence incoherent and immoral, history had either to be taught as such—or falsified [page 300].

And again:

Historians undertake to arrange sequences,—called stories, or histories—assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect. These assumptions, hidden in the depths of dusty libraries, have been astounding, but commonly unconscious and childlike; so much so, that if any captious critic were to bring them to light, historians would probably reply, with one voice, that they had never supposed themselves required to know what they were talking about [page 382].

Finally:

The historian must not try to know what is truth, if he values his honesty; for, if he cares for his truths, he is certain to falsify his facts [page 457].

Such sayings from a man whose name stands high on the roll of American historians are likely to dampen the ardor of enthusiastic young devotees of research, confident of discovering the realities of the past. There will be uncertainty as to whether Adams is sincere or ironical in these passages. In fact he is both. For he is writing as one who has a philosophy of history, and to such a one paradox and the synthesis of contradictories is the very breath of life.

Adams's dynamic theory of history permeates his whole volume and makes its nearest approach to definite formulation in various parts of the last ten chapters. No attempt to give an adequate idea of it can be made here, but certain features may be indicated. Conspicuous is the catastrophic conception of the historical process. Like his distinguished brothers, Brooks and Charles Francis, Henry Adams delights in naming the dates at which the career of humanity has been completely, if often unconsciously, deflected from its course. His favorites for the Christian era are the following: 310, when Constantine came to power in the Roman Empire and proceeded to make a merger of all possible supernatural powers by "admitting Christianity into the Trust of State Religions"; 1500, the era of Christopher Columbus; 1600, when Copernicus and Galileo "broke many professorial necks"; and finally 1900, the chronological center of astounding events—the discovery of the Roentgen Rays and of radium and the diplomatic action of John Hay, who "put Europe aside and set the Washington government at the head of civilization."

That the last item in the marks of distinction for 1900 has today the effect of an anti-climax, Adams would doubtless be the first to admit. It was a product of the heart rather than the head of the historian. Yet his sense of the far-reaching importance of 1900 was very strong. It was the date at which "history broke in halves." By the earlier catastrophies the motion of thought had changed only in speed or direction; "in 1900 the continuity snapped." Radium, discovered in 1898, was the chief factor in the revolution, and the reflections of Adams indicate a certain veiled joy over the perturbation among the physicists caused by the disconcerting qualities of the new element. His own personal reaction to the science of 1900 he represents as wholly catastrophic. Electricity, as exhibited in the Gallery of Machines in the Great Exposition of 1900, dislocated all his preconceptions and left "his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new." In his chapter entitled "The Dynamo and the Virgin", the reader may find a particularly good example of the whimsical charm of his reasoning and his fancy.

The central feature of his theory of history is man, a creature endowed with mind, floating aimlessly about in a "supersensual chaos." Man becomes aware from time to time of the power and direction of forces operating to control him, and the forces that make up his being react against this control. The task of the historian is merely to record the varying phases of the struggle. What Adams particularly emphasizes is that in the twentieth-century, science, art and philosophy all agree that the supersensual is multiplicity, diversity, complexity, anarchy, chaos; whereas the assumption of centuries before had been that beyond the human ken lay unity, continuity, purpose, order, law, truth, God. "To Thomas Aquinas, the universe was still a person; to Spinoza, a substance; to Kant, Truth was the essence of the "I", an innate conviction, a categorical imperative; to Poincaré, it was a convenience; and to Karl Pearson, a medium of exchange" (page 456). To Henry Adams there was no Universe at all, but a Multiverse—and all because "in 1898 Mme. Curie threw on his desk the metaphysical bomb she called radium".

The probable consequences of Mme. Curie's epochal act are employed by Adams to set before his readers grounds that might put them in a miserable state of apprehension. Man's social and intellectual readjustment to a new force injected into his consciousness from the chaos without has been always a painful and usually a slow process. The rapidity of the adjustment is in a certain ratio to the strength of the new force, as Adams gravely demonstrates by mathematical formulas. In like ratio is the demand upon the power and adaptability of the human mind. But in all history there has been no force made known to man at all comparable to that of radium. Hence, Adams foresees for the twentieth century a speeding-up of the adjusting process on so prodigious a scale as to threaten a dissipation of the human mind, like the comet that strikes the earth.

Thus, the catalogue of catastrophies in history culminates in 1900. Adams's treatment of the series is entertaining and suggestive, but the prediction at the end need give no alarm. To the preoccupied dreamer by the wayside the sudden cut-out of the muffler of a quietly approaching automobile gives a shock as of a great disaster, but his startled gaze rests on a car moving steadily and again quietly along, with perhaps the suggestion of a smile on the face of the chauffeur. It was much the same when the Spirit that rules over supersensual chaos passed the years that Henry Adams found catastrophic.

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REVIEWS

The Development of the United States from Colonies to a World Power. By MAX FARRAND. Boston, Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1918.—xi, 354 pp.

The day has long passed when anxious elders cautioned the young European about to essay his fortunes in the new world not to go unarmed against the redskins who might attack him on the road from Philadelphia to Baltimore, or when a London clubman could clinch his argument for the Southern cause by placing a triumphant index-finger on the Isthmus of Panama in the atlas and asking with withering emphasis whether it was either wise or just to attempt to hold together lands which God had so manifestly designed to separate. The closer acquaintance between Europe and ourselves, begun a score of years ago, has been hurried into an intimacy by the events of the Great War. And as our fortunes have thus rapidly grown together, there has been an increasing desire both on Europe's part to obtain and on our part to furnish still more accurate knowledge of our political and social institutions and of the spirit of our democracy which has produced and preserved them.

A conspicuous result of this new curiosity on the part of the old world about the new is Professor Farrand's book on the development of our country from the earliest colonial days down to the Great War. The work is well done. The very achievement of condensing into a single volume of far fewer than a hundred thousand words the history of three centuries, without slighting any of the factors that were really vital in the evolution of our democracy and without giving the reader the impression of sketchiness or provisionalism in the text, is itself a task which only those who have undertaken it can appreciate. Professor Farrand is to be congratulated on the skill shown in the selection, the arrangement and the vivid presentation of his material.

The book is dedicated "To the Allies, in the Hope of a Better Understanding." But as it is written in English, and as England is the only one of the Allies with whom we have had chronic misunderstandings, it is virtually a contribution to the still closer *entente* between us and our kin across the sea. The treatment, therefore, of the relations between England and America attracts our special attention.