

Henry Adams: Man of Letters

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SLOWLY Henry Adams is becoming a major figure in American literature. When the "Education" appeared posthumously in 1918, its author was a personality shrouded in a mystery which the book did little to dispel. The historians rushed to review what appeared to be his autobiography, and their judgment of it and of its somewhat captious historical speculations has persisted because its author's esthetic purposes were but dimly recognized. Because literature demands a sense of personality and because Adams hid behind the third-personal pronoun, his notion that he was but himself a symbol of force and his story an exploration of the meaning of his time escaped critical attention.

For his generation the fame of Henry Adams rested chiefly on his "History of the United States," and on his blue-blooded ancestry. Because his grandfather and his great-grandfather had been Presidents, it seemed obvious to him that he, like his father, should at least go into diplomacy, but he was not temperamentally fitted for a life of action. Instead, a born scholar, he had turned to the writing of history, and had spent the first half of his life looking for a key to the meaning of experience in public and private documents. When that method failed and the death of his wife taught him that his emotions could be even more trusted than his mind, he became in fact what he had always wanted to be, a man of letters.

But before 1900 he was immersed in his "History,"* and his imagination had not yet torn itself loose from its moorings. It is good to have a new shortened version of this classic study of the administrations of Jefferson and Madison, but little more need be said about it here, except to note that in this abbreviated version Mr. Herbert Agar has reduced the original nine volumes to a third of their length by leaving out all the footnotes and many of the quotations from source material. But the revealing comments by Adams on the scene he is describing have been preserved almost intact; in looking over these volumes, moreover, one is reminded anew that the "History" has more literary art in its pages than most

critics have managed to discover.

Adams as a man of letters and as a literary personality lay hidden for his own generation behind the façade of his "History." It was through the publication of many of his letters that he began to be revealed to us as a truly great literary figure as well as an historian. In the 1930's Worthington C. Ford published two volumes of his letters which not only established Adams as the most accomplished letter writer of his day but brought to light many of the biographical facts which made the "Education" and the "Chartres," products of the fullest development of his literary imagination, intelligible as something more than history. But Mr. Ford respected too conscientiously Henry Adams's reserve, and his books omitted the more personal revelations made in the lighter and more intimate letters to his nieces and to his friends, his "nieces in wishes." Except for a small volume of selected letters to Mabel La Farge, this warmer side of Adams's personality had been hidden until Harold Dean Cater, another historian, collected some 650 letters and an unpublished introduction to the essay on "The Rule of Phase as Applied to History." Few facts are added by this volume,* but many assumptions of the critics are verified or corrected. Yet the book as a whole is more important than are any of its parts. In it, the stature of Henry Adams as man and as artist grows immeasurably with the cumulative effect of his words. He is now alive for us as few American authors have allowed themselves to be.

Because we know Adams now so well, it is somewhat disappointing to discover that Mr. Cater does not use the new material to provide a reappraisal of the author of the "Education." He is content with a narrative introduction and factual notes, helpful in identifying people and confirming dates and places, but in themselves not at all illuminating. The temptation is therefore strong to take this greatest imaginative mind of the American *fin de siècle* away from his historical friends; for Henry Adams was at heart an artist first, an historian second. With our new knowledge of the man himself, it is pos-



—Samuel Laurence [1868].

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sible to make much clearer his esthetic intentions and achievements.

The education of Henry Adams began in 1838 and ended in 1918. According to his own account, it was a failure because life had not yielded up to him its secret. A product of an eighteenth-century world, he felt unprepared for a twentieth; destiny was moving too fast to be comprehended in a single life. From the writing of history to the more personal forms of expression developed late in life in his "Chartres" and "Education," Adams moved restlessly forward in his search for the meaning of experience. To the historian of literature, the pattern is a familiar one. No really great writer ever "succeeded" in his private life; every truly great masterpiece has been "unfinished" in the eyes of its creator. By its very nature, great art asks rather than answers questions. The only mystery in the case of Henry Adams is that we have been so slow in recognizing one of our all-too-few master artists. He is one of the dozen or so major figures in the literary history of the United States.

SUCH a claim cannot rest on the literary excellence of his "History of the United States," nor on his two professedly literary works, the novels "Democracy" and "Esther," which he published anonymously back in the eighties and refused ever to claim as his own. None of these books is unworthy of him, but none rises much above the level of unusually good writing. In his later years, when his imagination finally flowered, he could admit at last "that his great ambition was to complete St. Augustine's 'Confessions,'" but that "the point on

**THE FORMATIVE YEARS: A History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*, by Henry Adams. Condensed and Edited by Herbert Agar. Two Vols. Illustrated by Maps. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1947. 1030 pp. \$10.

**HENRY ADAMS AND HIS FRIENDS: A Collection of His Unpublished Letters. Compiled, with a biographical introduction, by Harold Dean Cater. Illustrated with photographs.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1947. cxix + 797 pp. \$7.50.

which the author failed to please himself, and could get no light from readers or friends, was the usual one of literary form."

"The Education of Henry Adams" and "Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres" are the major works of this scion of America's most nearly royal family. They are two of the most studied and discussed works in our literature, and yet their right to be considered as literature has been ignored if not denied. The social and art historians criticized them first and have continued to exercise a sort of proprietary right over them ever since they were privately printed in the early years of the century. Their faults and their virtues have been presumably settled in these terms. Yet they formed a kind of Bible for the disillusioned generation following the First World War, and thousands have found in them a voice that speaks directly from the soul of the author to that of the reader. They transcend their critics in a most annoying fashion.

PART of the fault is Adams's own because he addressed his challenge first to the historians in a memorable address before the American Historical Association. He told them that the past could not be understood by merely being recorded. Until history could find in science a formula of interpretation, the writing of history would continue to be a vain pursuit. Even he did not know then that not only science but art was needed. No one has seemed to notice that in the preface which he carefully wrote for the "Education," and asked his former student Henry Cabot Lodge to sign, he declared that in conception his two great books formed a single work of art. But the discovery of a scientific formula with which to work was the first need. From the day of his address forward, his energies were devoted to the search for that formula rather than to the writing of history itself according to established premises and rules. Although he does not seem fully to have appreciated the fact, such a quest was as romantic as those of Ahab for Moby Dick or Parsifal for the Holy Grail. As in those cases, it became a search for the symbol of the life force, an effort to wrest the meaning of man from a reluctant nature by sheer violence. The discovery of a new and scientific basis for history would mean the creation of a new religion.

The task of Adams's generation was not the completion of that creation. Rather they were to break down old structures by techniques which science had given them, to define issues, to set up working hypotheses for the

new synthesis. Adams took as his particular task the discovery of an organic esthetic form which could give expression to the significance of his age as he saw it. He proceeded direct from the experience to the expression because he had rejected all models. The result was the single gigantic but incompleated act of the imagination which resulted in the "Chartres" and the "Education."

The final chapters of the "Education" expound briefly the "dynamic" theory of history which Adams had adopted as his tentative instrument, a theory which is more fully expounded in "A Letter to American Teachers of History." The choice of the second law of thermodynamics, the law of dissipation of energy, as the needed formula, was dictated by the stage to which physical science had developed by 1910. If the attempt were made today, Adams might equally well have adopted the law of relativity and developed a science of history in quite other terms. To him the important factor was the relation of the two components, science and history, to each other, not the final truth of the findings of either one. In the later and even more daring essay on the law of phase, he allows his imagination such range as to venture by computation to fix a date for the moment of dissolution. Impatience with the rapid progress of science and the stodgy conservatism of historians provoked heroic measures.

Adams's version of the more fully developed theory of entropy which he adopted for his two major literary works may, for convenience, be stated as two related hypotheses:

(1) Accepting force as ultimate fact, two kinds of force are recognizable in experience: an inner force

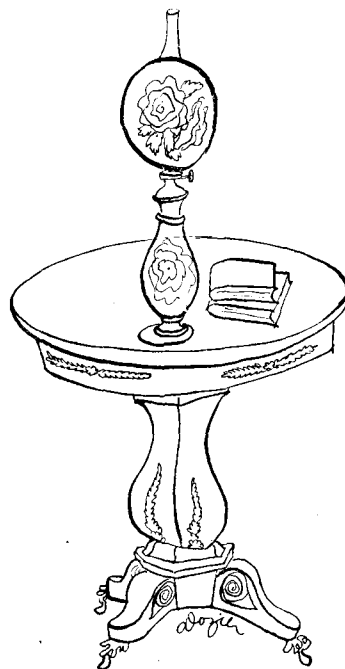
which makes for unity and which man has traditionally known as religion or God, and an outer force which makes for multiplicity and which has come to be known as science or Nature. Absolutely considered, both these forces may be traced to a common center in a mechanistic view of the universe, as in the past both were traced to a theistic center, but in human experience they have always been and probably always will be differentiated and in opposition to each other. This is no more than a restatement in modern terms of the classic theory of metaphysical dualism.

(2) Historically considered, experience shows that man reached the peak of his development in the era of medieval Christianity because he then succeeded through the instrument of the Church in attaining the highest degree of unity; but the discovery of the inductive method of reasoning and its application to physical science in modern times introduced a new "phase" of evolution in which nature supplants man as dynamic center of the universe. Unity was then mortally challenged and the universe began to move toward disintegration by a law of accelerated entropy which should by now be reaching its culmination and which should be followed by complete dissolution or by new and unpredictable forms of life. Thus the historical framework is provided for the application of the theory of dualism.

THESE two hypotheses are complementary when treated in purely intellectual terms, but they present a fundamental inconsistency when viewed in the light of emotion. Adams thus also creates, perhaps unwittingly, a dichotomy between intellect and emotion which supplies the pattern for his art form, but which destroys the validity of his theory as an instrument for the logical explanation of the universe. Art alone could resolve this inconsistency because art records and evaluates rather than accounts for the evidence of experience.

Adams's creation of an arbitrary cosmology for his purposes suggests Milton's similar acceptance of the Ptolemaic system at a time when his own reason might have dictated the Copernican. His acceptance of a modified Newtonian mechanism is a necessary premise to his artistic construction, and its degree of logical soundness has no bearing on its esthetic validity. It was many years before Miltonic criticism could free itself from this difficulty and accept "Paradise Lost" as a great epic poem

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Homogenized Lincolnia

THE LINCOLN READER. Edited by Paul M. Angle. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press. 1947. 539 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by GEORGE FORT MILTON

MR. ANGLE'S latest contribution to Lincoln literature should be welcomed both by the Lincoln legion, perhaps the country's most pertinacious booklovers, and by an even wider general readership than its choice by the Book-of-the-Month Club has assured. Furthermore, it deserves attentive reading, inasmuch as it illuminates significant segments of the Emancipator's career, some of which suggest the analogy between the problems Lincoln bequeathed Vice President Andrew Johnson and those Mr. Roosevelt's death dumped in President Truman's lap.

The publishers go a little out of bounds, however, when they blurb the book as "the *only* complete and authentic retelling of the saga of the life and times of Lincoln in one volume." There is, of course, no question of its authenticity, for Paul Angle is a noted authority on Lincoln, whom many deem as outstanding a Lincoln scholar as Professor James G. Randall. Nor is there any question that he has made a reasonably representative selection from sixty-five among the innumerable sources on the Lincoln period, selections that repay reading.

Nonetheless, this is a "reader," not a biography or a history, and even a reader done with the artistry and scholarship Editor Angle has so patiently devoted to this one is, of necessity, a hodge-podge, with the defects of the qualities of its mosaic form. Unity, coherence, and emphasis are the very essence of cogent communication; and while a man as learned in Lincoln lore as Mr. Angle has little difficulty in imposing the emphasis he wishes his selections to convey,

the very variety of literary styles among the three-score-and-five sources he drew upon makes coherence difficult and unity almost impossible.

That this is the case is not Mr. Angle's fault. As a matter of fact, he invented or adapted a method of "homogenizing" his selections that to a fair degree disguises the volume's conglomerate character. This is through devoting each of the twenty-four chapters to a single rung of Lincoln's long climb up the ladder to immortality. As a result, each is at least tangent to unity of subject-matter, although there are many gaps within single chapters when the mor-tise work is incomplete.

The Emancipation chapter exemplifies Mr. Angle's method. A prologue in italics summarizes Lincoln's First Inaugural statement of his then attitude toward slavery; mentions his timely rebukes to Fremont and Hunter and his famous letter to Greeley; suggests why he concluded in June 1862 that freeing some slaves in the South would aid the Union cause. Then comes a brief identification of the source of the first selection, the identifier being set in a different type size and style from the text being introduced.

Superintendent of Military Telegraph Eckert, whose office the President haunted for news and solace, recounts that shortly after the Seven Days' Battle Lincoln asked him for some foolscap "to write something special," and how he would write a line or two and then ponder. Angle then bridges to Welles's diary entry June 13 that the President had confided to Seward and himself the conclusion that Emancipation was necessary for military success. The Cabinet's reaction to the proclamation draft is taken from the account Francis B. Carpenter elicited from Lincoln the next year during the painting of

the signature of the immortal document.

An excerpt from Lincoln's yes-and-no pre-Antietam remarks to a religious delegation soliciting a proclamation is inserted to show his caution in publicizing a still "iffy" proposition. Then comes Chase's account of the post-Antietam Cabinet where Seward's sage, strengthening suggestions were adopted. Nicolay and Hay contribute the final scene: the White House on New Year's Day 1863, when Lincoln signed the second and final proclamation that slaves in Confederate-held territory were thenceforward "forever free."

Each of these hunks of history is interesting or important or both. The chapter should communicate to the peruser a considerable understanding of the conflict of psychic, political, and strategical forces Lincoln faced in making his decision. But it is not a "complete" retelling of the Emancipation Proclamation saga. The other twenty-three chapters exhibit similar qualities and defects.

Mr. Angle is temperate in most of his comments on the motives of the men Lincoln fought in his long struggle for power. Yet in introducing the chapter on the Great Debates, he indicts the 1858 Stephen A. Douglas as "a morally insensitive politician"! This accusation seems to me a needless and unjustified slur against a statesman as devoted to saving the Union as Lincoln himself.

Dispassionately weighing the arguments from Ottawa to Alton, Professor Randall properly points out that Douglas didn't take one position and Lincoln an opposite one. Although each sought to impale the other on barbed questions, actually they differed only on the prohibition of slavery in all the national territories. Even here, he says, "The difference was not vital in its practical effect upon results. . . . Lincoln's demand of Congressional prohibition for slavery would produce freedom, but so also would Douglas's principle of popular sovereignty honestly applied." He adds that Douglas suffered because of "his own forthright courage in expounding an interpretation of popular sovereignty which would favor freedom where people wished it." This certainly does not suggest the Little Giant was "morally insensitive."

The epilogue from Lord Charnwood which concludes the reader is full of charm. I cannot help regretting, however, that Mr. Angle did not avail himself of President Wilson's magnificent passages at the Hodgenville dedication, the finest estimate I know of the change and growth of this child of the cabin who kept the Union whole.