

Royalty, Revolution, and Radishes

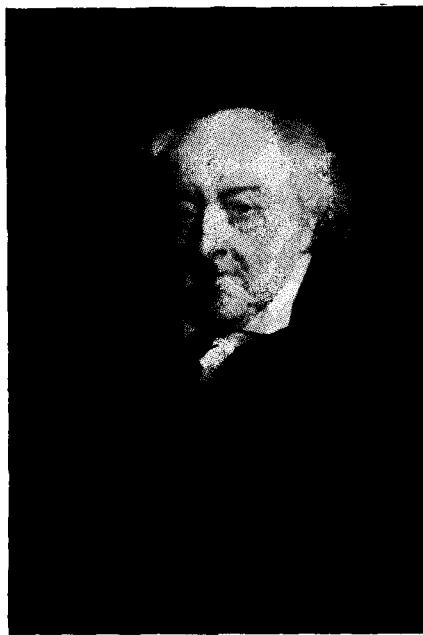
"John Adams," by Page Smith (Doubleday. 2 Vols. 1,170 pp. \$14.50), condenses the voluminous, zestful records kept by two members of a highly articulate family. "War for the Union" is the most recent study by the distinguished historian and professor Allan Nevins.

By ALLAN NEVINS

THIS copious work is a tremendous achievement, and an achievement of a peculiar type. It carries intimacy in biography to a new point and, thanks to the author's thoroughness, does so with sustained success. John and Abigail Adams presented a unique opportunity, and Mr. Smith has made the most of it.

Just how was it unique? Biographies of John Adams we have already had aplenty; all the facts of his and his wife's lives possessing any real significance have long been known; research can present almost nothing new on their activities. But, as Mr. Smith saw, they left a record of unmatched amplitude covering their hour-to-hour thoughts and observations as they moved through fifty years of varied scenes and exciting events. Only a few months ago we had four large volumes of the record in Adams's "Diary and Autobiography," 1755-1804, admirably edited by Lyman Butterfield; and this is but a fragment of the whole. With ever-renewed zest the Adamses set down what they saw, what they heard, what they ate, wore, drank, and rode in, what men and women they liked or disliked, what they read, and what fears, exultations, hopes, or despairs they indulged. So graphic is their statement that it is good in raw form; but it is far better in Mr. Smith's carefully digested narrative.

Quite properly, Mr. Smith holds almost entirely to the point of view of John Adams. Now and then, of course, he departs from the observations of John and his wife to deal with historical events in the background which affected their lives but with which they had no direct connection. However, such excursions are few; we are tied, in general, to the hero and heroine. When the author describes the Boston Massacre, which John Adams did not see though he courageously defended the



—Frick Art Reference Library.

Gilbert Stuart's portrait of John Adams at 90.

British officer involved, or battles of the Revolution in which he had no share, or world events shaping American diplomacy, he has little to impart. The unfailing source of freshness in this book is in the minds of the Adamses. This is subjective, not objective, biography.

It is subjective, too, in the fullest degree. Mr. Smith has spared no pains to make sure that his psychological study of John Adams as he went to the bar, as he entered the Continental Congress, as he undertook his missions to Holland and France, as he became Vice President and President, and as he sank in defeat in 1801, is accurate and complete. He has ransacked every archive and found countless new letters. He has wrung the last drop of meaning out of the documents that C. F. Adams, Sr., and others long ago published.

A biography of this type has limitations and faults as well as merits. It is composed in too great part of minutiae—of the petty details of private life alongside pertinent reflections on public affairs. It has too much on bread and radishes, chairs and tables, headaches and medicines, the transient aspects of fields and rivers, and the commonplaces of men swearing, women dancing, and boys grimacing. John Adams was a kaleidoscope of moods—anger, contempt, bitterness, complacency, restless-

ness, pride, modesty—all breadth and generosity one moment, all narrowness and spleen the next; and the subjective emphasis inevitably makes too much of his whirligig qualities at the expense of his dominant traits of purity, integrity, courage, dignity, and public spirit. We tire a bit of the incessant quotation marks. The author, keeping at Adams's elbow and looking through his eyes, cannot give proper room to the leader as others saw him, and cannot stand aside to assess Adams's role in history with detachment and perspective.

Yet, despite a certain monotony of effect as these eleven hundred pages of quotation and summary sweep on, enclosed always within narrow Adamsian walls, the intimacy of the record does cast a spell on us. We cannot tire of John and Abigail Adams. They were too shrewd in their perceptions, too catholic in their interests, too quick and vivid in their emotions, and too fundamentally honest of heart. Their insight into events and personalities was matched by their skill in painting manners, fashions, architecture, scenery, parades, and assemblages. If we are to be restricted to two pairs of eyes and two minds, we could not find any more lively, candid, and sagacious. And what a panorama quivered before those eyes! The heroism of the Revolution, the grandeur of establishing the Constitution and the new national government, the pomp and glitter of the French and British courts, the squalor of Spain, the homely simplicity of American farms and towns—all this the diaries and letters of John and Abigail unroll before us, distinct in detail and gleaming with color.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 1009

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1009 will be found in the next issue.

PE PM TBMO EN KT
XPGQ BAU ANE QBRHQEO;
PE PM UPDDPGRVE EN
KT ZNNX BAU ANE
HXRWKVT.

GNADRGPRM.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1008

Philosophers are the pioneers of revolution.

—ROBERT HARPER.

Rage Against the Night

"The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair" (Harcourt, Brace & World. 342 pp. \$6.95), tells how the author became a Socialist, a teacher, a muckraker, and reformer. Howard Fast's new novel, "Power," is the story of a labor leader of our time.

By HOWARD FAST

IN THE final pages of his autobiography Upton Sinclair lists what he feels he has accomplished in a long and active lifetime. Always a methodical man, he specifies practical achievements, such as, among others, the reform of the meat packing industry, the organization of the Civil Liberties Union, his campaign for Governor—but he fails somehow to recall that there were half a dozen generations of youngsters who sat at his knee, and chewed his particular bread of social justice.

He might have said, "I was a teacher." As he wears it—and wear it he does—it is a proud and enduring label; and, marked by it, he is a part of a group of wise and saintly immortals, stretching back through 3,000 years of history, and bringing to men that essence of decency, ethics, art, science, and phi-

losophy which is gathered under the single word *civilization*.

As with so many other Americans, Upton Sinclair's life is endlessly entwined with my own. I have not read all of his books; who has? But I picked up "Roman Holiday" in the public library thirty years ago, and then read "The Jungle" and "Boston" and "Oil," and bought "The Cry for Justice" (it is still a constantly used part of my library) and "King Coal" and "The Brass Check," and so many others.

Though never under the illusion that I was reading graceful prose or well-turned sentences, I found that in plenty elsewhere; here was a man who fought to write, whose usage was frequently wooden, whose style was generally graceless, but who wrote about things no one else wrote of, with lucidity and truth—and most often with incredible innocence and a total lack of sophistication. Even in those days, three decades ago, I would become irritated and impatient with the man's insufferable simplicity, his confidence in the ultimate triumph of good over evil, and his faith in the oppressed. But, impatient or not, I learned, and millions learned with me. I learned what no schools taught—a philosophy of social

justice. You read a book by Upton Sinclair then, and you were never quite the same as before.

Now, in a wry and humorous and completely fascinating autobiography, this man, who seems to be as long-lived as the redwoods of his beloved California, tells how he became a Socialist, a muckraker and reformer—and, above all, a teacher to millions. The single son of an old and genteel but impoverished Virginia family, he talks frankly and innocently about the events and the people that went into his making; his childhood, first in the South and then in the slums of New York, his education at City College and Columbia, his struggle to become a writer, his bitter and unhappy first marriage, his enduring and fruitful second marriage, his work, his achievements, his hopes, and, of course, his disappointments. His life is a history of the eighty-four years he has lived; and the people he knew and writes about were makers of history and art during that time.

This book is neither an apology nor an explanation. For Mr. Sinclair, the eighty-odd books he has written and published are explanation enough. His sweetness and goodness shine through the anecdotes and memories—and that perhaps is the reason the autobiography does not measure up to the man. His books throbbed with anger, with pity for man's suffering and rage at man's inhumanity to man; but his autobiography is light and gentle, without malice and, for the most part, without anger—perhaps because so many whom he writes about are dead, so many forgotten. That, of course, is his own choice and privilege, but one could wish otherwise.

In any case, it is good reading, good for us whose lives were meshed with his, and good, I think, for a youthful generation who will be reminded that this nervous and affluent society once produced its own breed of radicals, dissenters, and saints. They will find a quaint and curious idealism, and they will also come to know a man who is greater and wiser than most of those in America whose greatness and wisdom are endlessly celebrated.

That he had lesser qualities as well makes Upton Sinclair human and fallible, and in this story of his life he makes no effort to conceal his streak of priggishness, his hatred for hard liquor, his attitudes toward sex, the food and health fads that thread through his life. These and other curiosities were of his time, his education, and his being; I feel that they flesh out the man without lessening him.

Let us hope there will be more books by him—and that the years will honor him as much as any man.

GRAPHICS: Art lovers in general and print lovers in particular will welcome "Prints," by Carl Zigrosser (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$12.50). The book's thirteen illustrated articles (188 plates including four in color) range from Dürer to Kandinsky. Below, l. to r., Willem Buytewech's "Lucelle and Ascagnes," 1616, and Thomas Shotter Boys's "The Strand," 1842.

—Metropolitan Museum of Art.

