

## The real education of Henry Adams

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**M**ANY years ago Russell Kirk wrote, "to dislike Henry Adams is easy." What was true then is still true today. Many of those familiar with Adams dismiss him as little more than an erudite crank. Readers tend to view his autobiographical *The Education of Henry Adams* as a brilliant work of literature, but mainly for aesthetic reasons, and his *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* as an amusing intellectual journey through the medieval mind. As for the massive *History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*, it may be the greatest work of history ever written by an American, but it seems too long to be of much use to anyone in this day and age. Beyond literary matters, Adams is probably best known for being one of America's premiere anti-Semites. Reviewing Adams' life and works in the *New Criterion* in 1983, Norman

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*This is the ninth in our occasional series of "Reconsiderations." Previous essays have examined the works of Herbert Croly, Marshall McLuhan, Frederick Douglass, and Bertrand de Jouvenel.*

Podhoretz concluded, "I see little of value that would be lost by allowing him to slip into the obscurity he so often boasted of wishing to achieve." But to permit this to happen is to deny ourselves the benefit of Adams' insight into American politics.

Although he is best remembered as a literary figure, Henry Adams' principal ambition was political. The scion of three generations of statesmen, Adams grew up with an uncommonly strong investment in the American experiment, one that dominated his life and thought. Throughout his life, he cherished the republic of his fathers, even as he saw a new, democratic day rising. By a republic, Adams meant a regime dedicated to liberty under law. America's Founders designed checks and balances, separation of powers, and federalism all to safeguard the law from the grasping hands of power. By contrast, a "democracy" was simply defined as a government by and for the people. All his major writings were reflections upon the problem of preserving republican principles in a democratic age.

The United States, Adams was raised to believe, was a great nation because it secured individual liberties under law, and it did so through the intricate constitutional system that the Founders had created to turn humanity's selfish impulses to good ends. As he considered the nation's development, however, Adams found that the constitutional apparatus was not working as it was supposed to work. To regulate the railroads, the government did away with separations of power. The federal system was moribund. By linking the interests of legislators and the executive branch, the spoils system worked an end-run around checks and balances. In general, Adams found that democratic excess was metastasizing throughout the political system. Yet a disinterested observer who contemplated America would have to conclude that the nation as a whole was functioning rather well.

The simultaneous failure of republicanism and success of democracy puzzled Adams, much as it puzzles us today, and he spent a lifetime grappling with this issue. In the end, he found that American democracy was a triumph of force and practice over ideals and law. Although it worked, no one, including the Americans themselves, was quite sure how or why. But in order to understand Adams' reflections on democracy, we need first to consider the origins of his ideas, how he

distinguished democracy from republicanism, and why he eventually concluded that the republic his fathers had created and served had died.

### The Adams family legacy

Henry Adams was born in 1838 into the most distinguished family in American politics and letters, and he was raised to continue the Adams' tradition of public service. His great-grandfather, John Adams, had been a leading light of the American Revolution, "the Atlas of Independence" according to one of his fellow congressmen of 1776. After the Revolution, John Adams had served ably as a diplomat, and later as America's first vice president and second president. Along the way, he also wrote the massive *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, a book of profound learning and insight into republican politics. His son, John Quincy Adams, was scarcely less distinguished. He spent nearly his entire lifetime in public service, from his youthful trip to Russia in 1782 as a diplomatic translator, to his term as senator from Massachusetts from 1803 to 1808 and his stint as secretary of state in the administration of President Monroe, to his term as president from 1825 to 1829. Only a stroke on the floor of Congress in 1848 ended his long career of public service. John Quincy was also a gifted writer and student of the sciences. He taught rhetoric at Harvard and wrote many highly regarded scientific papers.

Henry Adams' father, Charles Francis Adams, looks like a minor figure only in comparison with his ancestors. He was a Massachusetts legislator, the vice-presidential candidate of the Free-Soil party in 1848, a congressman from his father's old district in the late 1850s, and a central player in the Great Secession Congress of 1860-61. During the Civil War, he served as American ambassador to Great Britain. He also edited his father's and grandfather's works for publication, impressing his third son, Henry, into service on the latter project.

Charles Francis Adams trained Henry and his three brothers to think deeply about the American republic after the fashion of the family. In 1776, the Americans had begun an argument with history. If all past republics had failed, how could theirs succeed? This question was the political equiva-

lent of theodicy. For a theologian, the problem was one of justifying the ways of God to man. If God was good, infinitely good, why was there evil in the world? For the American revolutionary, the question was, if men were capable of living in liberty, why had they always failed to do so in the past? For an Adams, the answer was to be found in studying American history, the histories of past republics, and the best that had been thought and said about them. It was the special task of an Adams to use his learning to help keep the republic working into the future.

As a young man, Henry Adams took this task with dread seriousness. While serving as his father's secretary in London during the Civil War, Adams began his studies in earnest, often reading by candlelight until two in the morning. In 1863, he wrote his brother Charles, who was then in the field with the Union Army:

I jump from International Law to our foreign history, and am led by that to study the philosophic standing of our republic, which brings me to reflection over the advance of the democratic principle in European civilization, and so I go on till some new question of law starts me again on the circle. But I have learned to think De Tocqueville my model, and I study his life and works as the Gospel of my private religion.

When he said that he studied the "philosophic standing" of the American republic, he meant something specific. A complete understanding of the American experiment required a consideration of the other options. What distinguished a republic from other governments? Why, exactly, was it better? What made it a more just regime?

To answer these questions, Adams found Alexis de Tocqueville an invaluable aid. Tocqueville contrasted the failure of the French with the success of the American republic, which was based on "principles of order, or the balance of powers, of true liberty, of deep and sincere respect for right." Henry learned these same lessons of law and constitution-making from the work of his great-grandfather John Adams. During his service as a diplomat in France in the 1780s, John Adams became acquainted with the men who wanted to reform the French regime, and he dreaded the consequences of their efforts. Even before Edmund Burke rose to condemn

the French revolutionaries, John Adams had taken up his pen against them. Unlike Burke, Adams did not begrudge them their principles. Instead, he chastised them for their ignorance of how laws, constitutions, and institutions worked. The French revolutionaries, he said, understood neither the general principles of constitution-making, nor the need to tailor a constitution to the special circumstances of each society. He wrote his cousin Samuel Adams in 1790, "Every thing will be pulled down. So much seems certain. But what will be built up? Are there any principles of political architecture?... Locke taught them principles of liberty. But I doubt whether they have not yet to learn the principles of government."

In fact, the effort to create constitutional governments under law was America's unique challenge to history. All past regimes had been built upon the assumption that a government needed to have full sovereign power over its subjects in order to maintain the peace. As William Blackstone wrote in 1765, the year of the Stamp Act, "There is and must be in all forms of government, ... an irresistible, absolute, uncontrolled authority, in which the *jura summi imperii*, or the rights of sovereignty, reside." But, as Henry Adams was to put it, "The men who made the Constitution intended to make by its means a distinct issue with antiquity." They sought to do what Blackstone said could not be done. "America ... asserted that the principle was not true; that no such power need exist in a government; that in the American government none should be allowed to exist, because absolute power in any form was inconsistent with freedom." Throughout his life, Henry Adams sought to preserve this understanding of the American regime.

### The young reformer

The young Henry Adams presents us with a decidedly different figure than the curmudgeonly old man of historical accounts. He was brash, idealistic, and determined to serve his country. When he returned from Europe after the Civil War, Adams worried that the nation was in great danger. The United States had emerged from its great ordeal as a renewed union, with an expanded industrial base and a rapidly growing population. Its prospects seemed boundless. Despite this, Adams feared that the "American Israel," as the sermons of the 1770s

put it, the special nation that the Founders had created to serve as an example to the world, was faltering. The railroads and the industrial corporations were straining the institutional and legal resources of the state. In politics, the rise of mass democracy on one hand, and the apotheosis of the spoils system on the other, were undermining the primacy of law. Reconstruction threatened the federal system. Adams feared that the United States was abandoning its unique Constitution, and his concerns spurred him into political action.

To find that Henry Adams worried about the federal system may surprise some readers. After all, the Adamses were Yankees and generally approved of a more powerful central government. Yet John and John Quincy Adams nonetheless believed that the states provided a useful check on the concentration of power in Washington. Henry Adams made that point subtly in his biography of John Randolph, one of his family's old enemies. Adams' *Randolph* drips with venom, and for that reason readers may mistake it for an attack on all of Randolph's political ideas. In truth, Adams blamed Randolph for ruining federalism by associating it with slavery. "For a generation like our own, in whose ears the term States' rights has become hateful," Adams wrote, "owing to its perversion in the interests of Negro slavery, and in whose eyes the comfortable doctrines of unlimited national sovereignty shine with the glory of a moral principle sanctified by the blood of innumerable martyrs, these narrow and jealous prejudices of Randolph and his friends sound like systematized treason; but they were the honest convictions of that generation which framed and adopted the Constitution." Given the stench that federalism gave off in the late 1860s, those who sought to preserve the federal system had little chance of succeeding. After Reconstruction and the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments, Adams held in an 1870 essay:

The powers originally reserved by the Constitution to the States are in the future to be held by them only on good behavior, and at the sufferance of Congress.... Their original basis and sanction no longer exist, and if they offered any real protection against the assumption of supreme and uncontrolled power by the central government, that protection is at an end.

The rise of the industrial corporation presented a similar

problem. Both Henry and Charles Adams feared that these new corporations would in time come to resemble the old feudal corporations against which their ancestors had rebelled. Large corporations had no particular love of competition, and when such companies as the Pennsylvania Railroad employed more people than the U.S. government, they could threaten to use their power to twist the laws to their own benefit. In light of that danger, Henry and Charles Adams argued that it was necessary to regulate railroads. But as close students of the Founders, they sought regulations that would be consistent with constitutional principles.

The brothers supported the "Sunshine Commission," which Charles had designed as a means of tackling the railroad problem. The Sunshine Commission was a government agency that held the power to request information from railroads and to release reports. By repeatedly demanding statistics from the various railroads in the state, it forced them to standardize data and service across the industry. Since the commission lacked formal power either to legislate or to judge, it did not compromise the separation of powers; it did not, like many modern administrative agencies, collapse legislative, executive, and judicial powers together. Unfortunately, as Henry came to realize, the Sunshine Commission assuaged the problem but came nowhere close to solving it.

Henry Adams paid particular attention to the problems besetting the democratic process—the spoils system and machine politics. Most of his fellow citizens, even the majority of self-styled reformers, thought of reform in pragmatic terms, without considering the relationship of their proposals to constitutional principles. If bribes were being taken, the legislature should simply pass laws to stop this practice. Adams thought differently. As he explained in an essay on civil-service reform: "Laying aside, therefore, the usual arguments in favor of civil-service reform,—arguments drawn from finance or from administrative convenience, this essay will attempt to show that the soundness and vigor, nay, even the purpose of the reform movement, must depend upon its recurrence to the fundamental principles of the Constitution."

Adams believed that political machines had developed in the United States as politicians took advantage of the financial

and political opportunities popular government afforded them. Certainly, parties had their place, but the challenge was to keep them there. "The fabric of party must be reduced to a size that corresponds with its proper functions. The relation between the party system and the constitutional system must be reversed," he wrote.

The Founders had designed the Constitution to ensure that senators, congressmen, and presidents would often be at odds with one another, as each represented a different constituency and had a different institutional interest. They were supposed to wrestle with each other but, ultimately, to make compromises in the public interest. Overly strong parties undermined that system by coordinating the president and members of the two houses and reconciling their interest to that of their constituents, rather than to the nation as a whole. In an 1869 essay, Henry Adams silently quoted his great-grandfather:

"If the executive power, or any considerable part of it, is left in the hands either of an aristocratical or a democratical assembly, it will corrupt the legislature as necessarily as rust corrupts iron, or as arsenic poisons the human body; and when the legislature is corrupted the people are undone."—This principle, laid down by an American writer upon government before the Constitution was framed, received a striking illustration in the result of that revolution which threw the executive patronage into the hands of the legislature.

Adams understood that a democratic government could escape the restraints of law as easily as any other, and that checks and balances were necessary to keep democracy honest. In this respect, he saw no real difference between Louis XIV's "L'etat, c'est moi," and Rousseau's "L'etat, c'est nous." By effectively putting the legislative power in control of the president's appointment power, the spoils system rendered constitutional restraints almost impossible to maintain in practice.

### **Democracy in America**

Henry Adams' career as a reformer lasted from 1868 to 1878. Upon his return to the United States after the Civil War, he began his efforts in Washington as an activist and journalist. In 1871, he moved to Harvard, where he took a position in the history department. He also became editor of

the prestigious *North American Review*, which he promptly turned into a reform organ. All the while he kept up his more direct political activities—organizing, lobbying, and cultivating. Yet Adams worried that his approach to politics might be misguided. In the early 1870s, he feared that historians would one day find that “the most interesting experiment that has ever been made in the laboratory of political science ... only demonstrates the impossibility of success through its means.”

The problem Adams pondered was this: Few of his fellow Americans thought as he did about government. They passed laws undermining federalism, used the spoils system, regulated the railroads extra-constitutionally, and went about their business blithely unaware that they were doing anything wrong. Moreover, Adams found they had a point. The nation seemed to be working rather well: The people were happy, and many of the worst abuses of the spoils system and of the giant corporations were being addressed, however imperfectly. The constitutional theory that Adams cherished seemed like an anachronism. This realization led him to turn away from the republican theorizing of the Fathers and toward the study of American democracy.

According to Charles Francis Adams, a social revolution had taken place since the Founders had lived.

The men who effected the independence of this people and who made them republican were not themselves the offspring of the schools of theoretical democracy.... However admirably these may have adapted themselves to the maintenance of the democratic institutions which their favorite theory led them to establish, they must be admitted to trace an earlier origin.

Henry Adams feared that the idea of democracy, itself a consequence of the principles of liberty, compromised the means the Founders had deemed necessary to sustain those principles. This was the problem Tocqueville had discussed so brilliantly. How could the nation survive the transition from one form of government to the other with its principled core intact, and what could Adams do to help?

Adams concluded that the foundations of 1776 had either been lost or had never actually existed. It was not the principle of law, even higher law, upon which the nation had been built. Rather it was democracy, understood as a society in

which the majority ruled, not so much through suffrage but by setting the tone and direction of society through its opinions and mores.

Adams found himself caught in a paradox. In order to remain loyal to his ancestors' project, he had to embrace the democracy that had risen on the republican foundation they had laid. He engages this problem in his novel *Democracy*. In one dialogue, Mrs. Lee, the heroine of the novel, declares, "There is only one thing in life ... that I must and will have before I die. I must know whether America is right or wrong." Nathan Gore, a "literary man" and historian from Massachusetts, asks her why she questions American democracy. Mrs. Lee turns the tables on him, "Do you yourself think democracy the best form of government, and universal suffrage a success?" Gore "saw himself pinned to the wall" and so replied,

These are matters about which I rarely talk in society; they are like the doctrine of a personal God; of a future life; or revealed religion; subjects which one naturally reserves for private reflection. But since you ask for my political creed, you shall have it. I only condition that it shall be for you alone, never to be repeated or quoted as mine. I believe in democracy. I accept it. I will faithfully serve and defend it. I believe in it because it appears to me the inevitable consequence of what has gone before it. Democracy asserts the fact that the masses are now raised to higher intelligence than formerly. All our civilization aims at this mark. We want to do what we can to help it. I myself want to see the result. I grant that it is an experiment, but it is the only direction society can take that is worth taking.

Like his fictional creation, Henry Adams was well acquainted with the vices, follies, and evils of the past, and so embraced democracy in the hope that it would make for a better future.

### **History of the United States**

To learn about democracy in America, and to explain it to his fellow citizens, Adams turned to history. In 1877, he abruptly quit his post at Harvard and moved to Washington. There he intended to write a grand work in American history, the American national epic, which would help his nation achieve self-understanding. "I am writing for a continent of a hundred

million people fifty years hence," he wrote. In telling the tale of the rise of democracy out of America's revolutionary republican roots, Adams would perform his patriotic and familial duty.

The result, the *History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*, is Adams' masterpiece. Almost every other American work of history is time-bound, but the *History* still remains fresh. A historian in the grand, narrative fashion, Adams believed that history was philosophy taught by example. By studying past politics, political men gleaned knowledge of human nature which they used to inform their decisions. The problem Adams faced was that America represented something new under the sun. As he wrote in the last chapter of the *History*, "The American, in his political character, was a new variety of man."

According to Adams, America's Founders had tried to make a partial revolution. Endowed with a practical sense of the limits of government, they hoped their republic would succeed because it was not as ambitious as past republics had been. In the past, it had been thought that republics required a virtuous citizenry, and thus the founders of those republics created various institutions designed to foster virtue directly. America's Founders were not so naive as to believe that a truly virtuous mass citizenry could be created. Instead, they hoped that the citizens would not trample on each others' rights because they would see that it was not in their interest to do so.

America's Founders, however, hedged their bets. They believed that for their experiment to succeed, the country would need a small number of dedicated servants from each generation, men who understood the regime's basic principles and who would preserve those principles through changing times. In short, they had demanded that there always be Adamses and Jeffersons around to oversee the progress of the United States.

Adams' *History* records that, to the eternal chagrin and bafflement of such statesmen, democracy worked by breaking away from their control. That is, democracy neither needed nor wanted the help of enlightened statesmen. In his *Life of Albert Gallatin*, Adams described how democ-

racy had won its victory:

There are moments in politics, when great results can only be reached by small men,—a maxim which, however paradoxical, may easily be verified. Especially in a democracy the people are apt to become impatient of rule, and will at times obstinately refuse to move at the call of a leader, when, if left to themselves, they will blunder through all obstacles, blindly enough, it is true, but effectually.

In the *History*, democracy did just that. It had achieved the goals that the Founders had sought through other means: "Not only was the unity of their nation established, but its probable divergence from older societies was also well defined. Already in 1817 the difference between Europe and America was decided." The amorphous force of democracy made the United States a distinct nation, and secured its divergence from the pattern of history. Like some kind of pagan god, it had given birth to its own democratic age.

Although it escaped the politicians' control, American democracy took on some of the tendencies with which Jefferson and his peers had tried to endow it. Jefferson believed that modern political wisdom could save mankind from war and tyranny, and the Americans were stamped with the mark of that ambition. "The unfailing mark of a primitive society," Henry Adams wrote

was to regard war as the most natural pursuit of man; and history with reason began as a record of war, because, in fact, all other human occupations were secondary to this. The chief sign that Americans had other qualities than the races from which they sprang, was shown by their dislike for war as a profession, and their obstinate attempts to invent other methods for obtaining their ends; but in the actual state of mankind, safety could still be secured only through the power of self-defence.

Although, as Adams' *History* demonstrated, there would always be wars and government would at times always need to claim sovereign power in order to function, that did not mean that the political project of Jefferson and his cohorts had been a failure. In its idealistic character, America would reflect the founders' image, even if American government would at times have to act as all governments had throughout history.

### What's an Adams to do?

Where was Henry Adams left, in light of these conclusions about the nation? When Adams began writing his *History*, a profound, benevolent ambition drove him. He wanted to help make democracy work. He wanted to be the American Gibbon, revered by readers throughout his land as a source of political wisdom. Yet, however great was Adams' *History*, few Americans actually read it, and still fewer understood it.

After he finished the *History* in 1889, Adams resented the nation that had deprived him of an heroic role, and that had little time for his political wisdom. He began to take long trips to the far corners of the globe in order to escape from his native land. He feared that the English critic Matthew Arnold was right about America:

In what concerns the solving of the political and social problem they see clear and straight; in what concerns the higher civilization they live in a fools paradise.... What really dissatisfies in American civilization is the want of the *interesting*, a want due chiefly to the want of those two great elements of the interesting, which are elevation and beauty.

As these thoughts took form, Adams also began to express hostility toward Jews. Earlier in his life, he had not harbored such attitudes. German antipathy to the Jews had led him in the 1850s to conclude that "the Germans are still a semi-barbarous people." In his *History*, he criticized Jefferson's "dislike for New Englanders and Jews." He thought there was a strong Hebraic element in Puritanism, and he knew that his family patriarch had been taken with that element of the New England heritage. In their famous correspondence, John Adams had tried to correct the virulent anti-Judaism that Jefferson had learned from Voltaire. As the years passed, and Henry Adams reconciled himself to the failure of his profound ambition, his antipathy toward the Jews abated. At times, he amused himself with the thought that he and the Jews of Eastern Europe had something in common—both were out of place in the modern world.

Ultimately, Henry Adams found a new, if less heroic, role to play. He would retreat to the sidelines, helping his nation when and where he could, but no longer pursuing his family's

emphatic political project. Adams grew to agree with another of Tocqueville's students, James Bryce, that America *was* interesting and elevated, because it had solved its political and social problems. This was the logical conclusion to draw in light of the changes he saw from the Founders' world to his own. However illogical its foundation, democracy worked in America.

If the social was more central than the political in America, Adams reasoned, then America's loyal servant needn't spend his career in government. In the beginning of *Democracy*, Adams let the readers know Mrs. Lee's true desire: "What she wanted, was *Power*." But at the end of the novel, she had realized that that desire, however benevolent her intentions, was itself at war with democracy. Mrs. Lee quit Washington and returned "to the true democracy of life, her paupers and her prisons, her schools and her hospitals." In other words, the true task of democracy's loyal servant was in society, not in government. A great man's glory was inherently at war with his duty in a democracy. Adams found that his duty was in the realm of the voluntary activities that Tocqueville had emphasized. For an Adams that would still be political activity, but it would be politics once removed. He would study and advise but not be actively engaged in politics.

From the mid 1890s to the end of his life, Adams sought to shore up the principled foundation upon which American democracy rested. Like Tocqueville, Adams regarded mediocrity as democracy's characteristic feature. The average man was better off in a democratic age than in any other, but there were few truly great Americans. Adams feared that such mediocrity would become the nation's Achilles' heel. With equality as its reigning idea, a democratic society had difficulty upholding the notion that some ideas were superior to others. To stand for a principle—even the principle of democracy itself—implied that there was a hierarchy of values, beliefs, and, ultimately, truths. But this was a principle that democracy was ill-prepared to uphold. How big of a step could it be from the belief that some truths were superior to others, to the idea that some ways of life were superior to others, and ultimately that some men were superior to others? Adams wondered whether democracy could

survive a direct confrontation with such questions.

From the political shadows, Adams coaxed America to be true to the democratic ideal. In the 1890s, he became an advocate for the Cuban effort to break away from their colonial oppressors, making his home the informal Washington office of the Cuban resistance. The report on Cuban independence which he penned for Senator Cameron of Pennsylvania, one of the less-known classics of American diplomacy, made the case for helping the Cubans fight for independence. Adams was happy to see the United States support the Cuban nationalists in the Spanish-American War, but he found the nation's postwar actions unjustifiable. By holding onto territories acquired in battle, the United States became a colonial power, repudiating the principles that had justified the war, the same principles that had justified American independence. Adams realized that German ships were prepared to invade the Philippines if the United States left, but he argued that this fact did not justify colonialism.

### Democracy's loyal servant

In the early 1900s, Adams wrote the books upon which his popular image is based. In his *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, Adams portrayed himself as a literary voyeur, reveling in the Virgin of Chartres. In his autobiographical *Education*, Adams painted himself as a miserable would-be American aristocrat, a man who hated the democracy that had arisen in his country. We should keep in mind that Adams did not write these books for general circulation; he published them privately for a select audience. If we read Adams' books closely, and as political, not literary or aesthetic exercises, a different, more complex picture of the author emerges.

Adams said that *Chartres* and *Education* were complementary. Taken together they were "a study of thirteenth-century unity" and "a study of twentieth-century multiplicity." Moreover, by leaving out of the autobiography his career as an historian, roughly the years 1871 to 1892, Adams indicated that the *Education*, together with *Chartres*, completes the *History*. The *History* was Adams' public work, but these other two books were Adams' private commentary on American history. These books set American history in its broadest philo-

sophical and historical context, describing political developments from before Thomas Aquinas to Adams' day. They explained the origins of the nation's republican principles and what had become of them. In *Chartres*, Adams describes the rise and fall of the medieval order, paving the way for the Reformation, and hence the Puritan deployment to New England. The *Education* was the story's other book-end, describing the collapse of America's republican order and the democratic chaos that replaced it.

From 1907, when he completed his biography, until his death in 1918, Adams tried to educate his own guild—the historians. Tocqueville had pointed out that historians in democratic ages tend to “attribute hardly any influence over the destinies of mankind to individuals, or over the fate of a people to the citizens. But they make great general causes responsible for the smallest particular events.” In a democratic age, historians gravitated to what we now call historicism. They wrote about cultural, ideological, and social movements, rather than about the individuals who have influenced the course of events. America's historians believed their new mode of history was not only especially suited to a democratic age, but, because it was “scientific,” also better history than the kind that preceded it.

To counter this tendency in his own profession, Adams wrote an essay that applied the Second Law of Thermodynamics to history, and sent it with a personal note to all American history professors. The great Adams scholar Ernest Samuels dubs the essay a “Socratic missile,” intended to reveal to historians the absurdity of modeling their discipline after physics or chemistry. As he told his brother Brooks, it was, “a jibe at my dear historical association,—a joke which nobody will know enough to understand.”

### **American greatness?**

Today, everyone has heard of Henry Adams, and all admit that he wrote well and had interesting ideas, but few bother to read him closely and learn from him. Adams foresaw that this would be the case. Like all people, a democratic people loves, perhaps even needs, great men to look up to. At the same time, a democratic society dislikes those who reflect

upon the implications of that reverence and who contemplate the place of great men in a democratic world. But exploring that subject had been the Adams family's special mission since John Adams published his *Defence of the American Constitutions* in 1786. By criticizing American democracy for its failings and foolishness, Henry Adams was serving his nation after his family's tradition.

Adams concluded his *History* with a series of questions that are as relevant today as they were then, a standing challenge to all Americans.

They were intelligent, but what paths would their intelligence select? They were quick, but what solution of insoluble problems would quickness hurry? They were scientific, and what control would their science exercise over their destiny? They were mild, but what corruptions would their relaxations bring? They were peaceful, but by what machinery were their corruptions to be purged? What interests were to vivify a society so vast and uniform? What ideals were to ennoble it? What object, besides physical content, must a democratic continent aspire to maintain? For the treatment of such questions, history required another century of experience.

As long as the American experiment continues, these will remain the central questions of American politics.