THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS

ADAMS

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BY HENRY ADAMS

INTRODUCTION BY

JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS

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THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS

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INTRODUCTION

Few books have had so unexpected a success as *The Education of Henry Adams*. Printing the manuscript privately in 1907 in an edition of one hundred copies only for distribution among his friends, the author declined to allow the book to be published during his lifetime. He bequeathed the copyright, however, to the Massachusetts Historical Society, and in 1918, about six months after his death, the first published edition appeared. Although *The Education* had aroused a deep interest among all those who had been able to have access to one of the original copies, few if any would have predicted for it a great popular success. Yet it has already sold more copies than many "best sellers," and has won an assured place not only among the significant works in American literature but among those which command a wide and steadily enlarging public. Especially among the younger generation, the influence of the book is markedly increasing. To understand why this should be so, we shall have to consider briefly the mood or mind of the public as well as the author.

Henry [Brooks] Adams was born in Boston, February 16, 1838, and died in Washington, March 27, 1918. Within that span of eighty years, although usually thought of as a rather sedentary man of letters, he had been one of the most far-ranging and constant of American travellers, his wanderings taking him over practically all of his own country, Mexico, the West Indies, Europe, Egypt, the Near East, Japan, and the islands of the Pacific. His life, however, was one of a spiritual and not of physical adventure.

The most profound influence in his life and character was that of his heritage. His great-grandfather was John Adams, revolutionary hero, Commissioner to negotiate peace with England in 1783, first Minister to England, and second President of the United States. His grandfather was John Quincy Adams, Com-

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missioner to negotiate peace with England after the War of 1812, Minister to England following the cessation of hostilities, and subsequently President of the United States. His father was Charles Francis Adams, Minister to England during the Civil War, and one of the ablest diplomats America has produced. By the time the line reached Henry, the accumulated weight of great abilities and great offices had become crushing in a democracy. In no other American family, and in few anywhere, have ability and service been so conspicuous generation after generation without a break. In an aristocracy such a family would have been given a title, and have become a continuing entity *as a family* in the political and social life of the country. In a democracy there could be no such scaffolding built, so to say, about the structure. The members of each generation would have to stand or fall by their own abilities and, quite as much, by the particular relation that those abilities and qualities might bear at any given moment to the national life, temper, ideals and aims about them.

For three generations the family had had power to direct the destinies of nations. Their careers had all been great, and they had all been played out as the center of things in times of great crises. No Adams was ever a politician. They cared little enough for mere office in itself. They had little respect for the mind or opinions of the common man merely because he was a man. They always got their own light from their own guiding stars and not from the will o' the wisps of the marsh of "public opinion." But they did care intensely for power, power to serve their country and to direct events toward what they considered the right goal.

Having played such parts for a century it would become a fair inference to a new generation that inability to carry on the tradition would spell failure, failure in one's self or failure somehow in adjustment to the conditions of the environment. A certain failure of that sort had become noticeable by the time of Henry's father, in some ways the ablest of all, although that title belongs indubitably to John Quincy. Henry's father had not become President, though in the war he rendered greater service to the nation than anyone, perhaps, except the President. The failure in adjustment to environment had begun. In Henry it

became complete, in so far as in his own day there could be no place for a man of his peculiar abilities and qualities in public life. Having always had their hands on the lever of power, success, however distinguished in science, the arts or other careers, could scarcely fail to spell comparative failure, and in considering the rather over-done irony and constant acceptance of himself as a failure in the *Education,* the fact of Henry's burden of inheritance must be given its due weight. By any ordinary standard for individuals, Henry's career was a brilliant one. The sense of frustration and failure came because he was not wielding that power the desire for which was in his blood and which each of his ancestors had managed to control.

We cannot deal with that career in any detail here. Briefly, after graduation from Harvard, and two years' travel in Europe, he accompanied his father as secretary when the appointment as Minister to England suddenly took the latter to London a few weeks after Fort Sumter had been fired on. There for about eight years Henry watched the game of diplomacy played. Returning to America after the war was over, he reached for power through the press, acting as a special correspondent in Washington, with his eye on an eventual editorial chair from which he might influence opinion. President Grant's régime and the opening of the 70's dashed his hopes of public service, and he accepted a chair in history at Harvard and the editorship of the *North American Review.* Although his work at Harvard, both in the influence of his personality and in his introduction of new methods of teaching, was brilliant, seven years were enough, and he and his wife moved to Washington. Until her tragic death in 1885 he devoted himself to literature, among the works of that period being his yet standard *Life of Gallatin,* and his two novels,—*Democracy,* a brilliant picture of Washington social and political life, and *Esther.* After the death of his wife he made the first of his Far Eastern trips with La Farge, and on his return devoted several years to completing his History of the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison, the nine volumes of which at once placed him in the very first rank of American historians. That completed, he again wandered to the Pacific with La Farge, sailing from one group of islands to another, a trip which clearly marked the change from one phase of his life and thought, and

the opening of another. From then on he moved back and forth between America and Europe, becoming more and more absorbed in his efforts to read the riddles of history and human existence.

Could he find any common denominator for the various sorts of forces playing in the universe,—the dynamo and the Virgin? Could history, that is human existence, be given anything approaching the laws of the physical universe? I have dealt elsewhere at length with his theory of history and need not trouble the general reader with it here. Suffice it to say that in his attempt to establish mathematical laws of speed and direction he wished to establish, first, certain reference points from which the curves could be plotted. For the first, he chose roughly the twelfth century, in which he thought that man had attained to his highest sense of unity; and for the second, the twentieth, in which that unity had completely given place to multiplicity. For a full description of the first point, he wrote his *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres,* and for the second his *Education of Henry Adams.* No one now reads either of these books with any reference to Adams's theory of history. In fact, as he wrote them his own theoretical purpose gave way, and the first became under his hand one of the finest of introductions to an understanding of the Middle Ages, and the second one of the most absorbing and significant of autobiographies. It is as such that they have both become abiding possessions of American literature.

The first, Adams finally consented to have published, it originally having been privately printed as was the *Education.* The latter was never fully revised, and, it must be confessed, in its later portions it shows somewhat too clearly the impossible purpose which Adams had in mind in writing it. He himself was never satisfied with its form, and for that reason he had declined publication. He had revised *Mont-Saint Michel* in 1911 but suffered from a paralytic stroke the following year, after which further literary work was out of the question. Those who wish to study his historical theory will find a clearer exposition in the essays in *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma,* and those who do not, may skim lightly over certain chapters of the *Education.*

Even in its somewhat amorphous form, however, that book

has become, as I have said, not only an American classic but a popular one, and we may try to answer to some extent the question *why?*

As I have tried to show, the attaining of power is a question not only of ability but of adjustment to environment. John Adams was well attuned to his. His theory of government by the people was an eighteenth century theory, and his power was lost in the first year of the nineteenth. John Quincy was a better democrat than the revolutionary John, but he began to lose faith as he watched the democracy of the Jacksonian era in operation. One after another he saw the ideals of what a great democracy might strive for abandoned in the lust for gain, for personal comfort and riches. By the time of Charles Francis the American democracy had swung far from the orbit in which, and in which only, the individualists of the Adams family could continue to revolve. Henry could only watch the body politic swinging at incredible speed away from the family into the waste spaces beyond. "We, the people" had become marvelously "we, the plunderers." To be sure, most of the people were rather the plundered, but hope was in the air; any day the rôle might be reversed in the individual case, and meanwhile it would be best to let the game go on in case Fate should throw trumps to us some day. The really great and noble American dream, the dream of a better and fuller life for every man, had become a good deal like the stampede of hogs to a trough. Such a stampede, like the subway rush, is no place for the development of the finer elements of life and thought. The mere ability to get there becomes of high value, and the display of gentlemanly qualities would preclude one from ever boarding the train.

There are not a few signs to-day that in this America of ours, there is wide revolt against the direction that our life has taken. We are no longer sure that we are to achieve social and economic democracy by giving everyone except minors and idiots the vote; that wealth will create a satisfying scale of values for us; that by losing our individuality so that every want can be satisfied under a national brand we shall somehow attain to a higher standard of living. In a word there is a good bit of questioning of democracy as it has developed; an interest in people who have insisted on being themselves and suiting them-

selves, even at the risk of being called snobs; a questioning of all concepts, including those of failure and success. Against the whole rushing stream of contemporary life, the individual feels himself rather powerless, and prone to irony as the way of escape. The flood of biographies shows the public's interest in personality, and this flood may be expected to keep up so long as the readers feel their own personalities more and more submerged. In the old days the servant girl used to read about the duchess. In just the same spirit to-day the person who feels himself lost in standardization reads about anyone who insisted upon being a person, even if only to be a racketeer. The autobiography of Henry Adams fits all the above and other moods of the present day. Just as an Adams was in power or not, regardless of his abilities, according as he fitted his environment, so a book has to fulfill this relation of adjustment. For some years yet, *The Education of Henry Adams* should find a receptive public. It is not the least of its irony that its author should succeed where he thought he had failed, and exert a posthumous power through a source which he had sought to conceal.

It is too soon to argue about the permanent place in any literature of an author who has been only a dozen years in his grave. We may, however, forecast a lasting one for a man who has to his credit at least one brilliant novel, a biography that is still "definitive" after a half century, a full-length history of one of the most important periods in American history that will not be superseded for many a year, the best synthesis of the varied spiritual life of the Middle Ages, and the most important autobiography that has yet been written in America. As for "failure" we may add that books last longer than statesmen. We will find among our figures of the past no stronger individualists, when we need them, than in the Adams line. We come to grips with the heart of John Quincy in his *Diary*. We find another phase in his grandson's *Education*.

JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS

LONDON, *January*, 1931.

CONTENTS

I. Quincy (1838–1848) 3
II. Boston (1848–1854) 23
III. Washington (1850–1854) 40
IV. Harvard College (1854–1858) 54
V. Berlin (1858–1859) 70
VI. Rome (1859–1860) 82
VII. Treason (1860–1861) 98
VIII. Diplomacy (1861) 110
IX. Foes or Friends (1862) 128
X. Political Morality (1862) 145
XI. The Battle of the Rams (1863) 167
XII. Eccentricity (1863) 180
XIII. The Perfection of Human Society (1864) . 194
XIV. Dilettantism (1865–1866) 208
XV. Darwinism (1867–1868) 224
XVI. The Press (1868) 237
XVII. President Grant (1869) 255
XVIII. Free Fight (1869–1870) 268
XIX. Chaos (1870) 284
XX. Failure (1871) 299

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XXI. TWENTY YEARS AFTER (1892) 314
XXII. CHICAGO (1893) 331
XXIII. SILENCE (1894–1898) 346
XXIV. INDIAN SUMMER (1898–1899) 362
XXV. THE DYNAMO AND THE VIRGIN (1900) . . . 379
XXVI. TWILIGHT (1901) 391
XXVII. TEUFELSDRÖCKH (1901) 403
XXVIII. THE HEIGHT OF KNOWLEDGE (1902) . . . 416
XXIX. THE ABYSS OF IGNORANCE (1902) 426
XXX. VIS INERTIAE (1903) 436
XXXI. THE GRAMMAR OF SCIENCE (1903) 449
XXXII. VIS NOVA (1903–1904) 462
XXXIII. A DYNAMIC THEORY OF HISTORY (1904) . . 474
XXXIV. A LAW OF ACCELERATION (1904) 489
XXXV. NUNC AGE (1905) 499
INDEX 507

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CHAPTER I

Quincy (1838–1848)

Under the shadow of Boston State House, turning its back on the house of John Hancock, the little passage called Hancock Avenue runs, or ran, from Beacon Street, skirting the State House grounds, to Mount Vernon Street, on the summit of Beacon Hill; and there, in the third house below Mount Vernon Place, February 16, 1838, a child was born, and christened later by his uncle, the minister of the First Church after the tenets of Boston Unitarianism, as Henry Brooks Adams.

Had he been born in Jerusalem under the shadow of the Temple and circumcised in the Synagogue by his uncle the high priest, under the name of Israel Cohen, he would scarcely have been more distinctly branded, and not much more heavily handicapped in the races of the coming century, in running for such stakes as the century was to offer; but, on the other hand, the ordinary traveller, who does not enter the field of racing, finds advantage in being, so to speak, ticketed through life, with the safeguards of an old, established traffic. Safeguards are often irksome, but sometimes convenient, and if one needs them at all, one is apt to need them badly. A hundred years earlier, such safeguards as his would have secured any young man's success; and although in 1838 their value was not very great compared with what they would have had in 1738, yet the mere accident of starting a twentieth-century career from a nest of associations so colonial — so troglodytic — as the First Church, the Boston State House, Beacon Hill, John Hancock and John Adams, Mount Vernon Street and Quincy, all

crowding on ten pounds of unconscious babyhood, was so queer as to offer a subject of curious speculation to the baby long after he had witnessed the solution. What could become of such a child of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when he should wake up to find himself required to play the game of the twentieth? Had he been consulted, would he have cared to play the game at all, holding such cards as he held, and suspecting that the game was to be one of which neither he nor any one else back to the beginning of time knew the rules or the risks or the stakes? He was not consulted and was not responsible, but had he been taken into the confidence of his parents, he would certainly have told them to change nothing as far as concerned him. He would have been astounded by his own luck. Probably no child, born in the year, held better cards than he. Whether life was an honest game of chance, or whether the cards were marked and forced, he could not refuse to play his excellent hand. He could never make the usual plea of irresponsibility. He accepted the situation as though he had been a party to it, and under the same circumstances would do it again, the more readily for knowing the exact values. To his life as a whole he was a consenting, contracting party and partner from the moment he was born to the moment he died. Only with that understanding — as a consciously assenting member in full partnership with the society of his age — had his education an interest to himself or to others.

As it happened, he never got to the point of playing the game at all; he lost himself in the study of it, watching the errors of the players; but this is the only interest in the story, which otherwise has no moral and little incident. A story of education — seventy years of it — the practical value remains to the end in doubt, like other values about which men have disputed since the birth of Cain and Abel; but the practical value of the universe has never been stated in dollars. Although every one cannot be a Gargantua-Napoleon-Bismarck and walk off with the great bells of Notre Dame, every one must bear his own universe, and most persons

are moderately interested in learning how their neighbors have managed to carry theirs.

This problem of education, started in 1838, went on for three years, while the baby grew, like other babies, unconsciously, as a vegetable, the outside world working as it never had worked before, to get his new universe ready for him. Often in old age he puzzled over the question whether, on the doctrine of chances, he was at liberty to accept himself or his world as an accident. No such accident had ever happened before in human experience. For him, alone, the old universe was thrown into the ash-heap and a new one created. He and his eighteenth-century, troglodytic Boston were suddenly cut apart — separated forever — in act if not in sentiment, by the opening of the Boston and Albany Railroad; the appearance of the first Cunard steamers in the bay; and the telegraphic messages which carried from Baltimore to Washington the news that Henry Clay and James K. Polk were nominated for the Presidency. This was in May, 1844; he was six years old; his new world was ready for use, and only fragments of the old met his eyes.

Of all this that was being done to complicate his education, he knew only the color of yellow. He first found himself sitting on a yellow kitchen floor in strong sunlight. He was three years old when he took this earliest step in education; a lesson of color. The second followed soon; a lesson of taste. On December 3, 1841, he developed scarlet fever. For several days he was as good as dead, reviving only under the careful nursing of his family. When he began to recover strength, about January 1, 1842, his hunger must have been stronger than any other pleasure or pain, for while in after life he retained not the faintest recollection of his illness, he remembered quite clearly his aunt entering the sick-room bearing in her hand a saucer with a baked apple.

The order of impressions retained by memory might naturally be that of color and taste, although one would rather suppose that the sense of pain would be first to educate. In fact, the third

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