Henry Adams

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Henry Adams: The Historian as Political Theorist.

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Henry Adams is a thinker more admired than read, though it is interesting to note that the Board of the Modern Library has placed *The Education of Henry Adams* at the top of a list of the best one hundred nonfiction books of the twentieth century published first in English. Nevertheless, I think my characterization remains true for political scientists and political theorists and probably others as well, even including historians. In this study, I suggest that while there is some material by Adams that is of little use and a smaller part that is utterly reprehensible, there is also much that is of value to political theorists, as well as to historians and to political scientists of a historical bent.

Because of the obscurity into which much of his work has fallen, I felt the need for more exposition than is usual in studies of historical figures in political theory, and because he is such a superb writer, I chose to develop the exposition in his own words to the greatest possible extent in the hope of conveying to the reader new to Adams a sense of his often scintillating style. He writes so brilliantly that it is no wonder that a large proportion of the work devoted to Adams is by literary scholars.

In quoting Adams, I have taken the liberty of modernizing a few spellings, usually archaisms or Anglicisms, such as substituting *clue* for *clew*. These changes are not frequent, and they may help keep the contemporary reader from getting distracted. In contrast, I retained Adams’s sometimes unusual punctuation, notably his use of the semicolon where today we would use a comma.

I hope that this study will revive interest in the work of Adams. At this time, when political scientists have rediscovered the virtues of historical analysis, he has a lot to offer, both substantively and by the example of the way he worked. The *History of the United States during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison* is perhaps the greatest work of history ever written by an American and has been compared with Adams’s model, Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This is a period crucial to the founding of the American nation; moreover, Jefferson is so central to the
history of the United States that no one seriously interested in the American experience can afford to overlook Adams's seminal contribution to our understanding of this elusive leader. Another reason for attending to Adams is that he lived in a time much like ours, a time of great political corruption and extremely rapid technological development. Adams's journalism exploring the nexus between money and politics makes fascinating reading in our time, as do his reflections in the Education. So do his writings on science and technology, which become a major theme in the Education and are continued in some difficult and perplexing essays written late in his career. And his wonderful meditation on art, religion, science, and theology in Mont Saint Michel and Chartres deserves to be read not just for its ideas but for its sheer beauty as well. Also, the much too often neglected journalism Adams produced in the 1870s has great resonance in today's world of rampant financial speculation. Finally, though I have focused on Adams's published writings, his letters are a treasure trove of ideas and observations on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century society in both the United States and Europe, not to mention his excursions to the South Seas. Out of this large body of work I think it is possible to derive a theory of American political development and a philosophy of world history. Neither is uncontroversial, but they demand to be read.

Beyond my endnotes, I wish to express a general debt to three major studies that were of inestimable help to me. All Adams scholars are reliant on the three-volume biography by Ernest Samuels. While I have differences with Samuels on a few matters of interpretation, his work has been of the greatest importance to me in understanding the setting of Adams's ideas. As a study of these ideas, J. C. Levenson's The Mind and Art of Henry Adams, after over forty years, is still a model of interpretation not equaled since. If anyone has come close to meeting the standard set by Levenson it is William Merrill Decker, whose The Literary Vocation of Henry Adams has not received the attention it deserves, perhaps due to the recent neglect of Adams's work.

While I was still at Binghamton University I had wonderful assistance in compiling the materials on which this study is based from two graduate students, Kimberly Maslin-Wicks and Michelle Barnello, who are now my friends and professional colleagues. I also benefited from the helpful staff of the Hatcher Library at the University of Michigan. At the University Press of Kansas it was a pleasure to work with Susan Schott and Melinda Wirkus. The director of the press, Fred Woodward, was a wonderful publisher, gently prodding me along while providing me with good conversation and constant support. I also owe a great debt to my computer guru son-in-law, Drew Schmidt, who
managed to overcome my technological ineptitude and made it possible for me to get past the problems posed by recalcitrant programs and actually produce a manuscript.

Several friends and colleagues provided aid and comfort. Some early drafts were read by Tom Dumm and Josh Miller, who raised questions I tried to answer, though perhaps not to their satisfaction. Lance Banning brought his historian's mind to bear and made me reconsider a number of points. My greatest debts go to George Kateb and Wilson Carey McWilliams. As he has before, George Kateb provided encouragement, along with penetrating questions and observations. In particular, the discussions of Mont Saint Michel and Chartres and of technology were enriched by his ideas and his writings, though he bears no responsibility for the use I made of them. And if some parts of the book are clear, it is because his doubts pushed me to rewrite some previously incomprehensible passages. Carey McWilliams read through not one but two drafts and, to my great benefit, shared with me his vast knowledge of Adams, American political thought, and American history in general. Every writer needs the sort of warm encouragement he provided. My stubborn streak is well enough developed that I rejected or ignored some of the advice I received, but the fault is mine rather than my friends'.

My other debts are personal, but even more important. Years ago, in my first book I wrote that my wife Gladys performed all the traditional tasks of the traditional academic wife in the traditionally outstanding fashion. She still does. Without her there would be no book. As in everything I do, Jim and Ellen, Susan and Drew, are constantly in my mind. Last, but absolutely not least, are Julia, Allison, and Elizabeth, who provide so much joy. I look forward to the time they are old enough to read what I have written.