

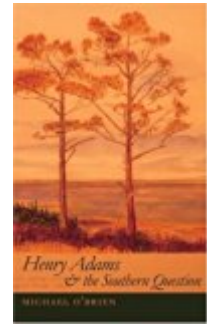
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael O'Brien. *Henry Adams and the Southern Question*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005. xiv + 201 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2711-2.

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Sense and Sensibility in Henry Adam's America

O'Brien's book is a delightful read. His light and sometimes ironic tone appealed to me and I must have chuckled at the same points as did his appreciative audience during the Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures. This slim volume is well suited for a thoughtful seminar where discussions can range from Southern regional identity to Anglo-European travel literature to feminist political ideology in an easy and familiar way. For those of us who like to study Southern historiography, the book presents many questions of its own and resulting discussions can be far ranging. It is appropriate, then, that O'Brien dedicates this compilation of his lectures to the memory of C. Vann Woodward who, like Adams, had a "deep influence upon what Americans thought about the South" (p. xiii).

Mingling the personal, the political, the cultural, and the historiographical, O'Brien gives his readers an interesting view of Henry Adams, one of the most important writers of the nineteenth century, couched directly in terms of "the Southern Question." The grandson of President John Quincy Adams and great-grandson of President John Adams knew he was "distinctly branded" and had no choice but to think about the South, since it was, for him and for his family, a way to portray political hegemony in the United States.[1] Through a greater understanding of Adams' writings, O'Brien connects to a greater understanding of the relevance of Southern culture in U.S. history even though the book ends up being "a study of how New England viewed the South" (p. xiii).

In his first chapter, "Sable Genius of the South,"

O'Brien examines the early writings of Adams—including personal letters, drafts of journal articles and essays—and the matriarchal points of influence in Adams' life up to 1869. We get a detour into what O'Brien thinks about Louisa Johnson Adams from Maryland (the subject of his next book) as a way of exploring her role as the "exotic" in her grandson Henry Adams' life and thought (p. 20). Chapter 2, "The Little Society of Washington," focuses on a crucial time in Adams' life—his marriage to Bostonian Marian Hooper, life in Washington D.C. as an Adams descendent, and his friendship with some Southerners who serve as archetypes in his writings.

Chapter 3, "American Types," focuses on the 1880s, when regional literature began its heyday, though funding for Southern universities was again at one of many nadirs and so few Southern intellectuals were able to take on the great Northern intellects of the day. O'Brien explores the relationship between Henry Adams and his brother, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., finding unique expressions of Southern iconography beginning to emerge in the younger brother's writings. Chapter 4, "The South in a Supersensual Multiverse," begins with the death of Adams' wife, a crucial turning point. O'Brien goes on to explain how Adams came to his spurious assessment of classmate Rooney Lee, the son of Robert E. Lee. In *The Education of Henry Adams*, Adams writes in a slightly bitter, slightly nostalgic way about this "Virginian of the eighteenth century" who was the most popular man in his class at Harvard with "every advantage," and yet who, like all Southerners, "steadily lost ground.... Strictly, the Southerner had no mind; he had temperament. He was

not a scholar; he had no intellectual training; he could not analyze an idea, and he could not even conceive of admitting two.”[2]

During this part of his life as a widower, Adams tried to escape from all that he knew, and he finally found his judgment of the South in the unintelligible emotions he experienced and in the exotic landscapes he painted while traveling in the South Seas. “Adams saw the American South as connected to these primitive places, partly via his ideas about race” (p. 117). But, O’Brien clarifies, Adams paid more attention to the tastes and vistas than the people during his travels. So, for example, “the South seems to have been a landscape and little more,” and “an emotion and not a thought” (pp. 118, 122). Adams’ own experiences of his times in southern Europe, Cuba, Fiji, and South Carolina colored his historical and philosophical stance in his memoir. The South as the feminine side to American culture was part of the overall tragedy Adams described in which the world made no sense anymore. O’Brien found the South in *Education* in three places: Adams’ grandmother (the proper female), Washington D.C. (the tempting whore) and Rooney Lee (where “female unintellectuality structures male aggression,” p. 132). Thus, some would classify Adams as a “proto-modernist” or even as a “proto-postmodernist” when he saw chaos instead of patterns in the social order and the death of the South in a disorderly “supersensual multiverse” (p. 129).

Adam’s legacy to Southern historians is his insistence that there was nothing of intellectual value other than the unconscious (the heart rather than the mind)

or the ripeness of the South’s natural resources ready for the taking. His insistence that the South lacked any science or industry of its own worthwhile to American progress sets easily within the scholarship of the 1900s, and appealed to later Southern writers. In this last chapter, O’Brien exposes his views on postmodern theorists and explains how Southern conservatives identified with Adams. “The richness, not to say contradictions, in Adams’s oeuvres allowed Southerners the freedom to move between Rooney Lee, the Virgin, and the Dynamo, and so create an Adams to serve their purposes” (p. 146).

Who better to express this contribution by Adams to Southern intellectual thought, than Michael O’Brien? University Lecturer in American History at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Jesus College, he is the author or editor of several books on Southern intellectual history, including his two-volume study, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860* (2004) for which he received the coveted Bancroft Prize and was a finalist for a Pulitzer. His writing combines well with the interesting portraits selected from Marion Hooper Adams’ photographs. I look forward to reading his upcoming work on the formidable daughter-in-law of Abigail Adams, Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams.

Notes

[1]. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918), p. 3.

[2]. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

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