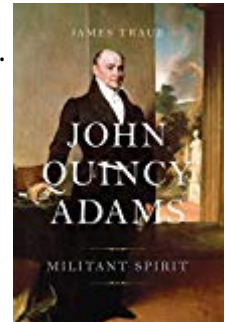


James Traub. *John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit*. New York: Basic Books, 2016. 640 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-02827-6.



Reviewed by Frank Cogliano

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In recent years publishers have brought out a spate of books on John Quincy Adams and Louisa Catherine Adams. Two years ago Fred Kaplan's thorough scholarly biography of the sixth president appeared, as did a biography of Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams, born in London to American parents, who married Adams in 1797. [1] This spring these volumes have been joined by another biography of Louisa Catherine Adams as well as James Traub's new study of her husband. [2] To a large extent this efflorescence of scholarship has been made possible by the monumental Adams Family Papers project at the Massachusetts Historical Society. This project, a landmark in documentary editing, is publishing the papers of multiple generations of the Adams family. The advent of digital technology has made it possible to make images of the manuscripts themselves available to scholars in advance of their publication. This has been a particular boon to students of John Quincy Adams. Adams was, perhaps, the most assiduous and conscientious diary-writer who ever held public office in the United States. He began writ-

ing his journal as a boy of twelve during the American Revolution and wrote his last entry shortly before his death in 1848 at the age of eighty. Adams's diary is 14,000 pages long spread across 51 volumes. John Quincy Adams was an engaging writer and an astute, often caustic, observer of the political scene in the United States and Europe. Although portions of the diary have been published, they comprise just 40 percent of the total. The entire journal is now available on the Internet thanks to the Massachusetts Historical Society.[3] Louisa Catherine Adams was also a prolific writer--producing journals and letters, her correspondence with her father-in-law, John Adams, is particularly valuable--and her writings have formed the basis of recent scholarship about her and her marriage to John Quincy Adams. The diaries and the correspondence of John Quincy and Louisa Catherine are the main sources for James Traub's engaging and entertaining study of the life of Adams.

Over the course of a long life John Quincy Adams held a variety of (mainly public) roles--he

served as American minister to the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, and Britain; United States senator, representing Massachusetts; secretary of state; president of the United States; and, after serving as president, he represented Massachusetts in the House of Representatives for eighteen years. Adams also held a chair in rhetoric at Harvard University. He crossed the Atlantic for the first time with his father just as he entered adolescence and died after collapsing at his desk in the House of Representatives. He encountered some of the most famous men and women of his time, including George III of Britain, Tsar Alexander I of Russia, as well as leading figures in the new American republic—such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Among his political allies and rivals were Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Andrew Jackson. Abraham Lincoln and Adams briefly served in Congress together. His life bridged the generations between the American Revolution and the Civil War. He was, of course, the son of Abigail Adams and John Adams, a connection which shaped his life but, as Traub shows, came at a price.

James Traub reconstructs the arc of Adams's long and varied life in an engaging, thorough, and fluent manner. It is a relatively straightforward birth-to-death story, recounting Adams's various public roles as well as his private worries and tribulations. Traub portrays Adams as an admirable man, highly principled and capable of physical and political bravery—he lost his Senate seat when he broke with Massachusetts Federalists over Jefferson's policy toward Britain; late in life he led the fight against slavery in Congress at considerable personal risk. Traub also shows that Adams could be a difficult man—he was stubborn, aloof, and insensitive to the feelings of those around him, especially his long-suffering wife and children. Traub's is a thorough portrait of a complex man. It is strongest in dealing with two key aspects of Adams's life: his career as a diplomat and his personal life.

James Traub is an experienced journalist who has written widely on international relations and American foreign policy. John Quincy Adams was probably the most accomplished American diplomat before the twentieth century. As such this is a perfect meeting of author and subject. Adams helped to develop and implement American foreign policy as a very young man—President Washington sought advice from his vice president's son when developing the US response to British and French efforts to interdict American trade during the 1790s. Traub recounts Adams's long tenure as an ambassador in various European capitals. His account of the War of 1812 is especially valuable as we see the conflict from the perspective of Adams in St. Petersburg. The “real” war of 1812 was Napoleon's invasion of Russia, and the British-American conflict is best understood as a theater within the broader international struggle between Napoleon and his enemies, and Traub's account underscores this. Traub deftly recounts Adams's leading role in negotiating the Peace of Ghent that brought the War of 1812 to a close. He narrates Adams's return to the United States and his tenure as James Monroe's secretary of state, recounting his role in negotiating the 1819 Transcontinental Treaty by which the United States obtained Florida from Spain as well as his contribution as the primary architect of the Monroe Doctrine.

Traub portrays Adams as a foreign policy realist committed to American expansion. In this he is promoting a long-standing tendency in the historiography of American foreign policy to divide its practitioners into realists and idealists. While this suits the history of American foreign policy in the twentieth century, it is less persuasive for the early history of American foreign relations, when the weakness of the early republic was the key feature that constrained policymakers. American foreign policy was largely reactive because the early United States could do little to dictate cir-

cumstances. It mattered little whether the secretary of state was a realist or an idealist.

Traub eschews engaging in such historiographical debates in favor of a brisk narrative. This leads to the occasional misstep. His telling of the Louisiana Purchase (which Adams supported) does not account for *why* the United States sought to acquire New Orleans, beyond a general assertion about westward expansion. Similarly, in his recounting of the Monroe Doctrine he asserts that some historians attribute the doctrine to Adams while others give the lion's share of the credit to Monroe, without explaining or engaging with the debate. Traub might have benefitted from consulting Jay Sexton's recent study of the Doctrine. [4] Similarly, he seems to confuse the narrative of the development of the two-party system during the first half of the nineteenth century, implying that the Jeffersonian Republicans of the early part of the century were the antecedents of Lincoln's Republicans.

The Adamses were a complicated and difficult family. John Quincy was devoted to his parents, John and Abigail. They raised him with an intense sense of responsibility and a dedication to public service. John and Abigail Adams were demanding parents and their style of parenting exacted a heavy price from their children. Abigail Adams in particular could be distant and reserved. She intervened and forbade John Quincy from marrying a woman he loved when he was a young man. He was heartbroken. While John Quincy fulfilled his parents' expectations, enjoying a successful career as a diplomat and politician and succeeding his father as president of the United States, his brothers were not so fortunate. His brother Charles died, aged 30, as a result of alcoholism. His other brother, Thomas, struggled with alcohol and debt. (His sister, Nabby, died from breast cancer at age 48.) This pattern was repeated in the John Quincy Adams family. His eldest son, George Washington Adams, committed suicide at the age of 28 and his second son, John, died young having

been expelled from Harvard. John Quincy enjoyed a close relationship with his third son, Charles Francis, who served as American ambassador to Britain during the Civil War. It seems that Adams-style parenting produced one successful son per generation while the others struggled.

While it is very difficult to understand the dynamics of a marriage from the outside—particularly after more than two centuries—it seems that John Quincy and Louisa Catherine Adams did not enjoy the same warm and close relationship that John and Abigail Adams seem to have had. John Quincy and Louisa Catherine were married for more than fifty years and seem to have been close companions—she was an especially valuable social ally for him during his diplomatic postings. However, he could be distant and reserved, often seemingly neglecting his wife during long separations apparently made necessary by his public commitments. In a dramatic example, when John Quincy Adams was participating in the peace negotiations at Ghent in 1814 he left Louisa Catherine to make her own way across war-ravaged Europe from St. Petersburg with only young Charles Francis (aged seven) and a few servants to accompany her on a forty-day odyssey. The incident is one of many in which John Quincy Adams placed his public responsibilities ahead of those to his wife and children. Traub nicely details the personal tribulations of two generations of Adamses. He does so with a great deal of sensitivity.

John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit is a well-written, comprehensive, biographical study. It is entertaining; we learn that its subject enjoyed skinny-dipping in the Potomac, among other colorful details. However, it is not entirely satisfying as a work of scholarship because James Traub largely eschews engaging with the historiography. This is not always a disqualifying factor for a biography. David Herbert Donald's biography of Lincoln famously, and deliberately, ignored the vast historiography on its subject to focus on primary sources exclusively.[5] Traub does not seem

to be making such a deliberate and provocative methodological statement. Perhaps more significant, this book, so engaged by its subject--and enthralled by his journals--lacks an overall thesis. At the outset of his study Traub asks, "Why write--or read--about this man, archaic even in his own time?" In response he asserts, "John Quincy Adams is a way of recovering something vital in the American experience, all the more so because it has been obscured by time" (p. xvii). Traub does not really develop this argument, except to say that "Adams, in short, represents a defunct evolutionary line in American political life" (p. xviii). Unfortunately, we as readers do not really learn what that defunct evolutionary line was or why it was important.

Notes

[1]. Fred Kaplan, *John Quincy Adams: American Visionary* (New York: Harper, 2014); Margery M. Heffron, David L. Michelmore, ed., *Louisa Catherine: The Other Mrs. Adams* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). Also see A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, eds., *A Traveled First Lady: Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

[2]. Louisa Thomas, *Louisa: The Extraordinary Life of Mrs. Adams* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

[3]. "The Diaries of John Quincy Adams: A Digital Collection," Massachusetts Historical Society website, <http://www.masshist.org/jqadiaries/php/>.

[4]. Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012).

[5]. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

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