

Philip James McFarland. *John Hay, Friend of Giants: The Man and Life Connecting Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Henry James, and Theodore Roosevelt.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. 384 pp. \$27.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4422-2281-6.

Reviewed by Claude R. Marx

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Commissioned by Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

Few people have had lives as engaging, varied, and accomplished as John Hay. Serving as a top aide to one iconic president, Abraham Lincoln, and secretary of state to two other presidents, William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, Hay lived a life many could only dream of. Had Dos Equis beer been doing an advertising campaign at the time, Hay could certainly have been a candidate for most interesting man in the world.

With all that to work with, one would think a biography of Hay would be a delightful book and a joy to read. Sadly, that is not the case with Phillip McFarland's *John Hay, Friend of Giants: The Man and Life Connecting Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Henry James, and Theodore Roosevelt*.

McFarland, like many people, finds Hay to be a larger-than-life figure and it is easy to understand why he wanted to write about him. Unfortunately for him (but fortunately for readers), John Taliaferro beat him to the punch with his comprehensive and well-written biography of Hay that came out in 2013, *All the Great Prizes: The Life of John Hay, from Lincoln to Roosevelt*. So rather than attempt another cradle-to-grave biography, McFarland takes a different approach and writes about Hay through the prism of his relationships with Lincoln, Twain, James, and Roosevelt. Sadly,

that approach gives McFarland too much material to work with, resulting in an unwieldy book that at times lacks focus.

Hay grew up in modest circumstances in a small Illinois town on the Mississippi River but went to the East Coast for college at Brown University. Through his hard work and series of fortunate encounters, he held a series of interesting jobs at a young age, the most important of which was staff aide to Lincoln. He had both a strong intellect and extraordinary networking skills. He was a living embodiment of iconic baseball executive Branch Rickey's observation that "luck is the residue of design." McFarland writes of Hay that "mostly the sun shone down on this capable gentleman" (p. xiv).

Hay had several professional achievements during his career, including his work as secretary of state forging major agreements with China and Panama; the latter laid the groundwork for the building of the Panama Canal. But for McFarland, the achievements are a backdrop for a more personal look at his relations with the four iconic figures. While including Lincoln and Roosevelt makes sense, Hay's relationship with Twain and James was less close and McFarland sometimes has to stretch to find adequate material. Too often he winds up writing minibiographies of the oth-

ers, which takes away from our chance to better understand Hay. McFarland does include some choice nuggets, however, such as Hay's wife, Clara, becoming upset at Twain for laughing too hard while visiting their home on a Sunday. Hay was not particularly devout (although he knew the Bible intimately), but his wife was.

Twain has been the subject of so many biographies that perhaps readers would have been better served had McFarland focused instead on Hay's friend and intellectual compatriot, Henry Adams. Adams appears in the book, but McFarland does not paint as thorough a picture of him as his accomplishments merit.

The sections on Lincoln and Roosevelt are the most interesting. We see Hay evolve from the admiring, at time worshipful, young aide to an esteemed statesman and social equal of the president. While Hay and Roosevelt had a mostly good relationship, there were strong disagreements that McFarland only touches on. Those wanting a more thorough account should read Taliaferro.

The book's major problem is that, rather than focus on his main subject, McFarland goes off on tangents and then takes too long to get back to the main point of the book. Dual biographies can work; Gordon Wood's masterful book about John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, *Friends Divided* (2017), is a great example of that genre. But McFarland's book shows the danger of trying to do too much.

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