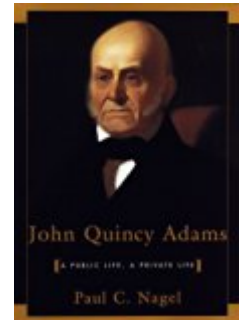


Paul C. Nagel. *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. x + 432 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-679-40444-6.



Reviewed by Sandy Moats

Published on H-SHEAR (January, 1999)

Thanks to Steven Spielberg and Anthony Hopkins, moviegoers have been introduced to a living, breathing John Quincy Adams through *Amistad*, a movie familiar to H-SHEAR subscribers. For those wishing to learn more about Adams, Paul Nagel's biography, *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, a Private Life* serves as an excellent source to understand the lesser-known private man within the famous public career. Drawing upon Adams' massive diary rather than the truncated published version, Nagel successfully challenges the prevailing view that Adams was a cold and aloof person. Instead, Nagel presents a complex man who struggled to choose his own career path despite the overpowering expectations of his famous parents. Aside from his professional accomplishments as a statesman, diplomat, and intellectual, Adams fulfilled a variety of private roles as ambivalent son, loving husband, and impatient father. Although Adams came into the world with many advantages and opportunities, he faced his share of problems through the alcoholism and premature deaths of his two oldest sons, his lifetime of financial struggles, and his periodic bouts with depression. Adams ultimately reconciled his family's

legacy with his own desires through his service as a Congressman from Massachusetts. Using Adams' diary as his guide, Nagel presents Adams' life from his own perspective to demonstrate conclusively the close relationship between the public and private for him. Nagel's work vastly expands the existing scholarship on Adams and provides a much-needed complement to Samuel F. Bemis' excellent study on his career.

Nagel divides his study into five major sections which allows him to uncover the private man at the major stages of his life. In the first section entitled "Facing Expectations" covering the years 1767 to 1794, Nagel recounts Adams' childhood and youth. Born in 1767, Adams was the second of four children of Abigail and John Adams. Despite their images in historical imagination, Abigail Adams proved to be a stern, disapproving mother while John Adams was the warmer, more loving parent. Alcoholism and related problems ravaged Abigail's brothers (and later her younger son). To ensure her first-born son avoided a similar fate, she delivered a steady barrage of admonitions and criticisms to him throughout his life.

Nagel, author of an earlier work on the Adams women, concludes that Abigail was "a calamity as a mother" who instilled her "ambitions and apprehensions upon her children" (p. 31). Young John temporarily escaped his mother's tirades by spending much of his youth in Europe while his father served in different diplomatic posts. Free to pursue his own interests, Europe came to represent intellectual and personal freedom from his family's expectations and intrusions.

When he returned to America, his parents regained direction over his life, sending him first to Harvard, where he graduated in 1787, and then to Newburyport, Massachusetts to study law. His unhappiness with his legal training, along with Abigail's insistence that he end his engagement to Mary Frazier, sunk him into a deep depression, a recurring event in Adams' life. Despite the professional and personal struggles his parents engendered, JQA found relief by authoring the "Letters of Publicola" in response to Paine's *The Rights of Man*. However, his father's patience ran thin and he sharply upbraided JQA for his lack of attention to his legal training. "You come into life with advantages which will disgrace you if your success is mediocre. If you do not rise to the head not only of your profession, but of your country, it will be owing to your own Laziness, Slovenliness and Obstinacy" (p. 76). Against his son's will, John Adams arranged for President Washington to appoint him as Minister to the Netherlands, an appointment which returned him to Europe in 1794.

In the second section entitled "Discouraging Choices, 1794-1805," Adams returned to Europe to serve as an American minister and to confront his future career plans. Although reluctant to accept a job his father arranged, these years in Europe provided Adams with some personal and professional independence. Away from Abigail's interference, Adams began his courtship of Louisa Johnson, the daughter of a London-based tobacco and commodities trader. In contrast to the stiff and dominant Adams, Louisa possessed intelli-

gence, assertiveness and an ability to tease and be light-hearted. Despite Adams' initial reluctance to marry because he did not want to yield his independence to her or any other woman, theirs was a happy and affectionate union. In one of the many romantic letters they exchanged during their marriage, the publicly dour Adams wrote to Louisa that "a very little clothing, you know, upon a lady will answer all my purposes" (p. 149). Appointed as ambassador to Berlin by his father, JQA resented the nepotistic appointment, but he enjoyed the time for his literary pursuits, including German translations and travel writing. With his father's reelection defeat, JQA returned home in 1801 to face an uncertain future.

At age 34, Adams needed to select a career which would engage him intellectually while providing sufficient income to support his wife and new son. Due to his father's recent defeat, his parents' enthusiasm for their son's political career had greatly diminished, allowing JQA to contemplate this option unencumbered. His entry into politics rested upon two conditions which would define his political career. First, he insisted that the public must request his services, and second, he considered himself to be a statesman, not a politician. Pursuing a non-campaign campaign allowed his supporters to announce his availability without his active involvement. This strategy resulted in his election to the Massachusetts Senate in 1802 and his subsequent selection to fill an open U.S. Senate seat in 1803. Adams' political independence earned him the enmity of both parties. Although recommended for the Harvard presidency in 1804 (perhaps to remove him from the Senate), he declined, citing the lack of a soothing temperament required for this position. Despite his literary and intellectual interests, his political ambitions took precedence because they provided him with a forum to serve as a statesman akin to a philosopher-king. However, his independence would prove to be a future liability

because of his unwillingness to solicit and consider public opinion.

The guardedly optimistic title of Book Three, "Cautious Hopes, 1805-1817," reflected a period of happiness and accomplishment for Adams as he engaged in intellectual pursuits as a professor at Harvard and returned to Europe as a diplomat. In 1805, JQA was appointed as the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory, a position he approached with enthusiasm. He held his Senate seat concurrently with this appointment and continued to stray from the Federalist line with his support for retribution against Britain over the Chesapeake incident and his vote for the embargo. In a confrontation with the Massachusetts legislature, Adams chose to resign rather than remain in the Senate beholden to the Federalist legislature who made his return conditional on his reversal of his embargo vote. His support for Republican policies earned him the gratitude of President Madison who appointed him Minister to Russia in 1809 and later Minister to England. These nepotism-free assignments permitted him to escape partisan politics and to pursue his literary interests while cultivating a friendship with Tsar Alexander I. JQA's contentment ended when President Monroe announced his intention to name Adams to the highly coveted position of Secretary of State in his new administration.

The fourth section entitled "Faltering Ideals, 1817-1829" covers Adams' life at what should have been the apex of his political career as Secretary of State and later president of the United States. Instead, unhappiness and frustration marred these years for the apolitical Adams. In his absence, he believed that the nation's capitol had grown even more political. As Secretary of State, he was the putative front-runner for the 1824 presidential election and became the focus of intense political maneuvering. Despite his discomfort in this atmosphere, Adams harbored presidential ambitions but wanted to be summoned for this office rather than campaign for it.

He considered the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819 and the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 to be his tickets to this office. Embracing his family's mantle, JQA regarded anything less than the presidency to be a disgrace to himself, his family, and the nation. But his refusal to campaign left him open to charges that he possessed an "aristocratic hauteur, and learned arrogance" (p. 282) which foreshadowed the difficulties he would encounter as president. Reflecting JQA's misery in this office, Nagel devotes only a single chapter to his presidency. However, Nagel identifies his ambitious presidential address of 1825 as his downfall because it displayed his political naivete and opened JQA to sharp criticism of usurping the public's will. In response, Adams became a bitter and disengaged president believing his critics were determined to destroy his character and reputation. Adams later political career would be an attempt to restore his reputation by attacking those who he felt had driven him from the presidency.

Along with his professional frustrations, these years also presented personal challenges for Adams due to the deaths of his parents, brother and two sons. His mother died on October 28, 1818. Reflecting his lingering animosity towards her, Adams did not return to her bedside or attend the funeral, citing official burdens. His father died on July 4, 1826. His younger brother Tom's drunkenness and gambling had become an increasing financial burden to the family and required a greater involvement from him after his mother's death. As a parent, Adams adopted Abigail's approach of stern lecturing which had little impact upon the behavior of his two eldest sons. Alcoholism afflicted both of them and resulted in their premature deaths. George, the eldest, killed himself by jumping overboard from a steamboat in 1829, and John II died in 1834 of alcohol-related maladies. These events, along with his political setbacks, sent JQA into another depression.

Book V, "Astonishing Results, 1829-1848," addresses the period after Adams' failed presidency

and the remainder of his life spent as a member of Congress from Massachusetts. Although he briefly returned to his beloved intellectual pursuits, his desire for the political fight outweighed his interest in these projects and led to his election from Plymouth in 1830. In Congress, Adams found two causes that electrified him: right of petition, which led to his strong anti-slavery stance, and the proper disposition of the Smithsonian bequest to build a federal institution devoted to scholarship. Through his adamant opposition to the 1836 gag rule and related pro-slavery initiatives, JQA found the political voice and platform that had eluded him for so long. His anti-slavery fervor extended to the Supreme Court where he argued the *Amistad* case in 1841. For the first time in his career, he became a popular figure attracting large, admiring audiences in Boston and elsewhere. Although he originally supported the Union over the abolition of slavery, by 1842 he introduced the idea of disunion because so much federal money was spent supporting the southern states. This approach led to southern members introducing a censure motion against him on the grounds of treason. Although unsuccessful, this censure motion merely fueled Adams' fighting spirit.

His desire to restore his reputation and avenge his enemies resulted in Adams finally embracing his role as a politician. Liberated from the presidency and his parents' expectations, Adams created a political career for himself that suited his temperament, his ambitions, and his principles. Despite his initial reluctance, Adams conceded that politics for him was "as much a necessary of life as atmospheric air" (p. 381). Although he pursued other careers, Nagel concludes that politics proved to be the most satisfying choice and the most enduring legacy for John Quincy Adams. He died on February 23, 1848 after collapsing on the House floor.

Nagel's biography does not include contemporary evaluations of Adams or provide the defini-

tive accounts of historical events such as the Treaty of Ghent negotiations or the Monroe doctrine. This observation is not a criticism, though. Nagel purposely allows Adams to do the talking in this biography in order to gain access to his inner world rather than rely upon external opinions of him. As this review indicates, Nagel succeeds impressively in constructing a comprehensive, human portrait of Adams. However, I have two small criticisms of this book. My primary one concerns the lack of footnotes. Since Nagel appears to be the first biographer to use Adams' entire diary, it would have been helpful to have citations to guide future scholars who might also use them. My second comment concerns the difficulty in determining the year Nagel is discussing. Perhaps a chronology at the beginning would clarify the major milestones in Adams' life. Nonetheless, this is an excellent and highly readable work that expands the existing Adams scholarship to include the man within the famous career and family.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: Sandy Moats. Review of Nagel, Paul C. *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2687>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.