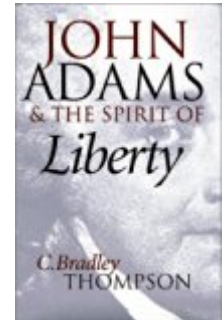


**C. Bradley Thompson.** *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. xix + 340 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-0915-4.



**Reviewed by** Richard A. Samuelson

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This book, the first major study of John Adams's political thought in well over a generation, argues that American historians and students of political thought have failed to understand the second President because they have not taken him as seriously as he took himself. In a cogent and well-organized, though not always terse, manner, C. Bradley Thompson, an associate professor of history and political science at Ashland University, complains that scholars have tried to situate Adams within the ideological framework that they argue was prevalent in his day (republicanism) or within the cultural confines of the world in which he grew up (late Puritan New England), rather than locating Adams's own point of view. While he does not deny that Adams's cultural and ideological world influenced him, Thompson contends that fully to understand Adams, one must give him self-consciousness as a man who understood the age in which he lived, and who worked within the grand traditions of political philosophy and political science to shape the politics of his day. As Thompson writes in his introduction, "ultimately, what I am suggesting is that certain Founders like Adams constitute a class of

their own, and must therefore be studied by a different method and judged by different historical standards" (p. xvii).

Thompson divides his book into two broad sections, each tackling a different aspect of Adams's thought: "Principles of Liberty" and "Principles of Political Architecture." That division serves three purposes. It gives the book what narrative it has by focusing upon Adams's career before 1776, chiefly his early diary, his essays on the "Canon and Feudal Law," and "Letters of Novanglus," in Part One; and by exploring Adams's works of the mid- to late 1780s and early 1790s, *Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* and *Discourses on Davila* in Part Two. Beyond that, the crisp division between the two parts of the book allows Thompson to study different parts of Adams's thought in fundamentally different ways. In so doing, Thompson shows that Adams used ideas as tools to solve certain discrete problems and was not merely carried along by the ideological zeitgeist. That step provides the foundation for Thompson's chief historiographic contention, that, contrary to work by

such luminaries of the American historical profession as Joyce Appleby, John Howe, and Gordon Wood, Adams's thought did not change fundamentally over time, but rather he wrote differently at different times because he was asking different questions, addressing different problems, and trying to reach different audiences.

At first glance, the first part of the book does not seem to discuss the "principles of liberty" at all, but a closer reading shows that Thompson is coming at them from a slightly different angle than other recent historians. Rather than showing how Adams thought about the concept of "liberty," Thompson relates young Adams's thoughts as he came to devote his life to the cause of human freedom. Contrary to the scholars who argue that Adams was a kind of Puritan, Thompson shows that the young Adams wrestled with the "new philosophic rationalism." He reasoned his way to the beliefs about God, about human nature, about human reason, and about what man is supposed to do with himself in the world that would ground his career. In particular, Adams deserted the doctrines of New England Calvinism--election and the Augustinian idea of original sin, and the idea that reason alone cannot distinguish between right and wrong--and instead embraced free will. Thompson thus moves the discussion of liberty in the era of the American Revolution from the social and cultural perspectives from which historians usually discuss it to the political philosophical perspective from which many of the actors themselves discussed it.

Adams's approach to political problems, according to Thompson, grew naturally out of the core principles Adams had worked out for himself in his confrontation with Locke and other major thinkers in his early adulthood. At the end of the first section Thompson shows us his hand: "The idea of a written constitution was the device by which Adams and other American Revolutionaries finally broke from the medieval common-law tradition of Coke and fully embraced the modern

natural-right philosophy of Locke. A written constitution was the product not of history, custom, usage, or the 'artificial reasoning' of common-law lawyers; it was, rather, the product of philosophy and free will, reason and choice, deliberation and consent" (p. 86). The natural rights philosophy Adams enshrined in his arguments for American independence and his constitution for Massachusetts was tied symbiotically with Adams's brief for reflection, deliberation, and choice, and his rejection of original sin and predestination.

The book's second and longer part--"the Principles of Political Architecture"--proceeds much like the first part, apparently drifting from the stated topic, but actually honing in on it at ever closer range. It moves from a consideration of Adams's intentions as an author to an assessment of his impact, with stops along the way to discuss Adams's method of political science, his use of history, his understanding of human nature, the nature of republican government, the purposes of republican government, and the art of writing constitutions. The section argues that, contrary to the charges leveled at him in his own lifetime and still echoed by historians, Adams never deserted the faith of 1776, and that his ideas remain relevant to American politics. In particular, Thompson shows that Adams wanted to influence both Americans and Europeans to write constitutions that would sustain liberty. He sought to convince the former to keep their balanced constitutions, and convince the latter not to follow the Baron Turgot and other votaries of unicameralism.

In this portrait, Thompson gives us an Adams who was simultaneously conservative and radical. Adams's belief that liberty was the end of government was radical, but the means he judged necessary to that end varied with circumstances. In 1776, Adams supported "Revolution principles" as essential to the cause of liberty, but after that he devoted himself principally to securing new governments, and he wrote his major work in political science to teach people how to build gov-

ernments that guarantee liberty. Mixed and balanced constitutions with separated powers and checks and balances were nothing more than the appropriate means to secure inalienable rights.

In response to the old idea that Adams belonged to a political school of one, Thompson contends that Adam's *Defense* influenced constitutional thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic, notably at the American Constitutional Convention and in the French Constituent Assembly. In France and elsewhere in Europe, Thompson shows that many important thinkers in and around the Assembly read, discussed, and praised Adams. At the Constitutional Convention, he shows several strong correlations between the ideas expressed and those in the *Defense*, particularly in the case of Hamilton. Moreover, he quotes many influential thinkers of the time in America and Europe praising Adams's work. Thompson also argues (as John P. Diggins maintained in *The Lost Soul of American Politics*) that Adams's ideas were not all that different from those of the Federalist's Publius. They shared not only a defense of balanced government and separation of powers, but also their justifications for that constitutional structure. There was a reason why Adams's 1780 constitution for his home state of Massachusetts served as a model for many other state constitutions and the Federal Constitution as well. (Thompson does not ask, but it is worth considering in this context whether Gordon Wood was justified in making the unicameral Pennsylvania constitution normative in his study, when so many states never considered imitating it, even in 1776.)

>From his brief for Adams's relevance, Thompson draws the inevitable conclusion: "If the leaders of the Virginia Dynasty ... were right in their accusations against the *Defense* and *Davila* essays, it would be entirely proper for modern scholars to say that Adams was an anachronism who missed the intellectual significance and political meaning of the American Revolution. But if

they were untrue, it would be incumbent upon us not only to reexamine the significance and relevance of John Adams, but also to look anew at American intellectual and political culture in the years after 1787" (p. 275). In other words, Thompson argues that if Adams's ideas were not only mainstream, but also important in his day, then perhaps previous scholars have misconstrued not only his ideas, but the intellectual climate of his times as well. Similarly, if Thompson's scholarly method yields better fruit than others, perhaps other scholars ought to think twice about their own.

The relationship between the first and second parts of the book comes through most clearly in the section at the exact middle of the book in which Thompson discusses Adams's admiration for certain parts of Plato's *Republic*. While he criticized many of Plato's ideas, "Adams agreed with Plato that there is a direct parallel between the process of constitutional transformation and the human soul. He also agreed with Plato that simple governments were most susceptible to degeneration because they are the least capable of controlling the human passions" (p. 139). If Adams's notion of liberty grew directly from his belief that God endowed us with reason and free will so that we may make deliberate choices in life, then by definition a good regime was one which maximized the tendency of citizens to exercise those capacities. Adams thought that constitutional architecture was the key to such a regime. The great constitutional problem was, as Adams knew, God made man with passions in addition to his reason, and his passions were liable to run away with his reason. In particular, political man was driven by the "spectemur agendo" or the desire to be seen in action. The spectemur agendo drives men in all ages and countries (Adams was a firm believer in the fixity of human nature) to compete for place, office, wealth, and above all notice. The constitutional architect needed to structure the government so that the passion for distinction would

work for liberty and the common weal, rather than against it.

In these ideas about the relationship between a nation's constitutional architecture and its politics, and, ultimately, its political thought, one finds the foundation of Thompson's brief for Adams's relevance. According to Thompson, Adams's relevance is so great that we rarely appreciate it. The constitutional mechanisms of checks and balances and separated powers that Adams upheld were intended to and indeed have shaped the American mind in fundamental ways, predisposing Americans to think about society in liberal terms. "The Talmudic constitutionalism that Adams placed at the heart of American civic life" has created an "iron cage for nonliberal traditions" (p. 277). Although the book does not clarify what it means by "Talmudic," the logic behind the statement follows a syllogism: America's political architecture has shaped its discourse. Adams shaped America's political architecture, therefore Adams is very much relevant to America's political self-understanding. That is precisely what other scholars have missed in their studies of Adams. In this point, as in many others, Thompson probably goes a bit overboard, but his larger point about Adams, about how we study history, and of the influence of political institutions on political character is well taken.

As the above indicates, the book's principal, and not terribly serious, shortcoming is that the author's point of view is too congruent with that of his subject. That flaw probably grows out of the tendency of biographers in all places and at all times to identify with their subjects, both reading too much of their own ideas into their subjects at some points, and agreeing too much with their subjects at other times. One suspects, for example, that Thompson makes Adams's religion more like philosophy than it really was. That probably grows partly out of Thompson's method of focusing on discrete ideas. Consider Thompson's attack on the notion that Adams was a latter-day Puri-

tan. One suspects that the scholars who so characterize Adams do so because he inherited certain cultural and ideological traits of Puritanism—self-examination, the work ethic, the idea of a calling, man's tendency to do things he ought not do, and the like. Thompson, on the other hand, defines Puritanism as a set of ideas about God and man. Assuming he is not ignorant of the nature of other scholars' work, one must suppose that Thompson is arguing, implicitly, that their approach to Adams's religion (and perhaps more generally to American religion) has been flawed because it dwells too little upon discrete ideas in individual minds. He has a good point, but only to a certain degree. After all, Adams himself thought of his religious ideas as the natural fruit of the New England mind, and religion is not philosophy. As Adams wrote to Jefferson in 1813, "there can be no philosophy without religion." [1]

If one asks most of the scholars who characterize Adams that way, one suspects that their answer would dwell upon the cultural and ideological aspects of Puritanism—self-examination, the work ethic, the idea of a calling, man's tendency to do things he should not, and the like. Thompson, on the other hand, considers Puritanism a set of ideas about God and man, and assuming he is not ignorant of the cultural and ideological definition others have used, is arguing implicitly that historians have overlooked the real locus of historical force by dwelling too little upon discrete ideas. He has a good point, but only to a degree. After all, even Adams himself thought of his ideas as the natural fruit of the errand into the wilderness.

Moreover, Thompson focuses so intensely on disproving the notion that Adams's beliefs changed over time that he flattens Adams's thoughts into a consistently unified whole, ignoring the possibility that Adams's ideas changed over time, but not in the ways that historians have said. After all, what intelligent person ever made it from age 25 to age 91 without changing

his mind? The book's other shortcoming, which may be the fault of the publisher more than the author, is that Thompson frequently snips quotes from Adams so short that the reader often does not get to see Adams's complete thought, and to assess the given analysis.

Despite these flaws, the book, which grew out of Thompson's dissertation under Gordon Wood's direction, is an excellent piece of scholarship, the best discussion in the literature on Adams's political thought. The book's greatest strength is its challenge to the historical profession. Many of today's historians seem to have forgotten the degree to which political institutions shape national character on the one hand, and the degree to which deliberate choice shapes our institutions and our interactions with them on the other. While Thompson indulges the intellectual's natural bias and implies that philosopher-statesmen are the true legislators of the world, his readers need not follow him that far. Ultimately, Thompson implies that a good historian must be something of a political scientist as well. Moreover, he reminds us that just as each government influences the souls of the citizens living under it, so too does history, like it or not, influence the souls of the readers.

#### Note

[1]. Lester Cappon, ed., *Adams-Jefferson Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959).

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