



Jeanne E. Abrams. *A View from Abroad: The Story of John and Abigail Adams in Europe.* New York: New York University Press, 2021. 296 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-0287-6.

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Studies of the founding fathers and mothers exist in an overcrowded genre, but Jeanne E. Abrams has found a unique angle in *A View from Abroad: The Story of John and Abigail Adams in Europe* by focusing on just one experiential slice of the Adamses. Abrams posits that John and Abigail Adams defined aspects of American identity, status, and political thought through their interactions with Europe, often mediated by material culture. John Adams's diplomatic work and observations of European society confirmed his own fears of the danger presented by aristocracy devolving into oligarchy or democracy into ochlocracy. Adams's thought was intrinsically tied to classical republican ideas and a Protestant faith, but Abrams is careful not to stretch this too far: "The Adamses reflected *one* important strain of thought regarding an American identity, but they were not representative of all Americans" (p. 19). As self-made members of the elite and New Englanders, they tended to be far more likely to stress frugality, a Protestant work ethic, and Puritan values than their fellow countrymen. Abrams does an excellent job of interweaving the official diplomatic duties of Adams and the personal family dynamics at play. The Adamses' European sojourn helped develop their sense of an American identity, affirming literally if not metaphysically T. S. Eliot's

"Little Gidding": "And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." [1]

The book begins with John Adams's initial journey to Europe to serve as part of the US diplomatic mission to France, where he served alongside Arthur Lee and Benjamin Franklin. Adams arrived after the Treaty of Amity and Commerce had been signed and ended up doing much of the grunt work of keeping accounts and records while mediating between Franklin and Lee, who were often at odds. While Adams appreciated aspects of French art and culture, he found himself horrified by the decadence of the aristocracy, the futility of court ceremony, the superstitious Catholicism of the lower orders, and the Deism of so many members of the French elite. Adams's frustration with the Comte de Vergennes, France's foreign minister, and Franklin, whom Adams felt was too accommodating to the French, led him to recommend that Congress reduce the delegation to one man. Congress selected Franklin, and Adams returned to the United States.

Despite the failure of his earlier diplomatic effort, Adams secured an appointment to negotiate a preliminary peace agreement with the British. Adams traveled overland to France from Spain,

where he criticized both the society and government, which he felt paled in comparison to the United States. In Paris Adams again found himself at odds with Vergennes and Franklin, resulting in his journeying to the Netherlands to secure loans for the US government. Though a Protestant country and one in which Adams secured diplomatic victories, here, too, Adams criticized elements of Dutch society such as the absence of hospitality, the lack of public spirit, and an obsession with accumulating wealth. He also wrote of a growing American oligarchy, which he linked to his opponents in Congress. On returning to France, Adams, John Jay, and Franklin negotiated the preliminary peace treaty with the British, which Adams gave most of the credit for to Jay. Congress then charged Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin to begin negotiating commercial treaties with the nations of Europe and North Africa.

Abigail's arrival in 1784 resulted in an analysis of France that mirrored her husband's judgments. Abigail proved highly critical of Americans like Anne Bingham, whom she believed had become too enamored of French culture, though Abigail praised French women like Adrienne de Lafayette due to her husband's service to the United States, her knowledge of English, and her elegant but simple dress. With Adams's appointment as the US minister to Great Britain, Abigail again joined him. Adams repeatedly failed to negotiate a commercial treaty with the British given lingering ill feeling from the war and an overestimation of the importance of US trade. As in France, the Adamses proved critical of British society, with Abigail particularly shocked by the degree of poverty: "She insisted that the English elite were occupied with the pursuit of enjoyment and pleasure and that they suffered from depraved manners. Moreover, she was grateful that American society did not exhibit the extreme social divides she witnessed in England" (p. 167). Still, Adams admired the British form of government. Adams wrote *A Defense of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America*, which

laid out his argument for mixed government with a strong executive, while in Britain, where he had ample time to read and write given the absence of progress in his official capacity. Mercy Otis Warren's response that Adams supported the creation of an American monarchy would be picked up by Jeffersonian Republicans to attack Adams, and they often traced this idea to his too-long experience in Europe. Abrams demonstrates repeatedly that this was not the case, that though Adams admired much in European arts and sciences his writings at the time reveal a consistent critique of European society and government—whether in France, Spain, the Netherlands, or Britain—that informed his concerns over a rising oligarchy within the United States.

Abrams reveals multiple contradictions with the Adamses' experience in Europe. They offered numerous critiques of European finery even as John and Abigail purchased luxury goods to gift to relatives and to demonstrate their own status. The European experience gave them a greater degree of sophistication even as they celebrated republican simplicity. The European frame of reference affirmed Adams's belief that human nature was the same everywhere, but he still maintained there was a unique American sensibility even if based on accidents of geography and history rather than divine providence or the insights of a new, more rational age: "In their eyes, the European lifestyle, were it to be imported to their fledgling nation, could threaten the health of the new republic through an assault on American virtue, religion, community cohesion, and the moral rectitude they held dear" (p. 228). Their exposure to other nations helped shape their New England/Puritan-based sense of Americanness, but, as Abrams recognizes, many of their contemporaries had different conceptions of American identity.

Abrams relies primarily on the correspondence of John and Abigail Adams and the *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, and to a lesser extent their children's correspondence, particularly

that of John Quincy and Nabby (Abigail). In addition, Abrams balances their views at points with those of other Americans in Europe, like Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Thomas Jefferson. This is well-trodden ground, but given Abrams's topic and analysis, she garners insights that others have missed. She also regularly advances and adds to arguments throughout the text made by Jonathan Dull, Pauline Maier, David Waldstreicher, Gordon Wood, and others, making this work relevant to multiple historiographic discussions. This book should prove of great interest to scholars of the American Revolution, early republic, and diplomatic history as well as those interested in questions of identity and material culture. Just as importantly, Abrams writes well and the text has a strong narrative, which should allow it to reach a more popular audience than most university press monographs.

Note

[1]. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971), 145.

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