
History

PASSIONATE SAGE: The Character and Legacy of John Adams. By Joseph J. Ellis. Norton. 277 pp. \$25

In 1801 an embittered John Adams, defeated at the polls by his rival, Thomas Jefferson, exchanged the White House for his family home in Quincy, Massachusetts. There he would remain in near-seclusion for the next 27 years. Ellis, a professor of history at Mount Holyoke, uses this period of retirement to bring into focus the entire career and character of that "misfit" among the Founding Fathers.

Adams lacked the Olympian calm of George Washington, the good humor of Benjamin Franklin, the "eternal taciturnity" of Jefferson. Possessed of an "ungovernable temper" and susceptible to "gusts of passion," he was the only president not to attend his successor's inauguration. It thus comes as little surprise that Adams spent much of his retirement trying furiously to vindicate himself. For five years he wrestled with a never-finished autobiography, an incoherent "open wound" in which he excoriated his enemies. Between 1809 and 1812 Adams wrote a series of lengthy, vituperative essays in the *Boston Patriot*, touting his accomplishments in foreign policy and answering his critics. These disjointed writings, Ellis suggests, served as a kind of therapy for the aging Adams.

His most significant retirement writings, however, were the lengthy letters he exchanged with Jefferson, his former rival. "You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other," Adams wrote in 1813, a year into their epistolary dialogue. The 14 years of correspondence between the "North and South Poles of the American Revolution," as Benjamin Rush dubbed them, cover history, political theory, and current issues—though never slavery. Throughout, the differences between the two are apparent. Unsympathetic to the prevailing thought of his day, Adams never made room in his vast lexicon for such key words of American liberalism as *freedom* and *equality*—the very pillars of Jeffersonian thought. The rather shocking argu-



ment of Adams's early *Discourses on Davila* (1790)—that irrational rather than rational forces shape history—was heresy in the Age of Reason.

As one after another of the Founding Fathers died, Adams and Jefferson lived on. Exactly 50 years to the day after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, on July 4, 1826, Adams passed away, uttering his last words, "Thomas Jefferson survives." Unknown to him, in the most startling coincidence in American history, Jefferson had died earlier that same July 4th at Monticello. After

their deaths, the two men's stars followed different trajectories: Jefferson was enshrined in the pantheon of America's civil religion, while Adams faded further in popular esteem. Ellis attributes this to the fact that Adams was too skeptical about American exceptionalism. His prognosis for the American republic has proved right at least as often as Jefferson's, but Jefferson's language was celebratory

while Adams's was always cautious. "The glass was always half-full at Monticello and half-empty at Quincy," Ellis concludes. For this reason, the Mall—and our national conscience—has room for monuments to Washington and Jefferson but none for the hard, passionate, and idiosyncratic president who came between them.

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy. By Robert D. Putnam, with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. Princeton. 258 pp. \$24.95

Tocqueville never wrote a *Democracy in Italy*. Now someone has. Putnam, a Harvard professor of government, began studying Italian regional politics two decades ago, shortly after Rome established 20 semi-autonomous regional governments throughout the country. Putnam was curious to discover why some of these governments were faring better than others. Now, 20 years later, his conclusions resonate with implications that extend far beyond the Italian peninsula.

Although the formal structure of all the regional governments is identical, their performances are anything but. Those in northern Italy work far better than those in the south. Why? Putnam puts forward many plausible explana-