
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-

tions, including economic development, the extent of higher education, and the level of urbanization. He rejects each in turn as insufficient. Differences in performance, he finds, are most closely correlated to the degree of civic involvement. And, surprisingly, that correlation depends on traditions of civic consciousness and civic practices that have endured for a thousand years.

In the 11th century, the north and the south of Italy set out on divergent paths of development. In the north, communal republics such as Florence and Bologna addressed their public needs through collaboration among citizens. Civic groups—trade guilds, neighborhood associations, parishes whose members swore oaths of mutual assistance—extended horizontally through the community. In the autocratic south, by contrast, rulers in places such as Sicily strengthened feudal arrangements of fiefs, hierarchy, and dependency. These two traditions have persisted for a millennium, through plague and war and technological advance. Unlike southern politics, which too often produced isolation, suspicion, and economic stagnation, northern politics fostered civic engagement and successful cooperation—“social capital,” as Putnam calls it. It is this capital, he argues, accumulated over time, that makes democracy work.

Does the Italian south hold lessons for the Third World and the former communist lands as they move uncertainly toward self-government? Putnam thinks so. “Palermo,” he writes of the Sicilian capital locked in its spiral of inefficiency, stagnation, and lawlessness, “may represent the future of Moscow.” Putnam counsels against despair, however. He points out that even the least effective regional governments appear to have had some salutary effect on political life. Some readers may not be reassured. Beneath the composed professorial surface of the book, they may hear less a call to community than a half-voiced cry of surrender.

Science & Technology

TOUCHED WITH FIRE: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament. By Kay Redfield Jamison. Free Press. 370 pp. \$24.95

“We of the craft are all crazy. . . . all are more or less touched.” Thus Lord Byron on poets. Even

in his day, it was hardly a novel idea. Since antiquity, artistic creativity has been linked to “a fine madness.” But with recent advances in genetics, neuroscience, and psychopharmacology, the hard evidence is in. And the old characterization of the artistic temperament as alternating between feverish energy and darker moods is now the clinical definition of manic-depressive illness.

Even though most artists are probably not manic depressive (or vice versa), the disease is known to occur far more often among artists and their families: Byron, van Gogh, Melville, Burns, Coleridge, and Virginia Woolf all had manic depression running through their family histories. Jamison, a professor of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins Medical School and co-author of the standard text *Manic-Depressive Illness*, notes that science may soon identify the exact gene or combination of genes responsible for the illness. Yet every advance in medical knowledge creates thorny ethical issues. Although Jamison endorses medical treatment—indeed, treating manic depression psychiatrically without medication would generally be considered malpractice—she recognizes that drugs such as lithium, valproate, and carbamazepine often leave artists

