

gence organs, “a Western journalist and a Western spy were both agents of Western intelligence-gathering, and both alike threats to the security of the communist system.” They were right, although not in the way they understood it. Eventually all of this and the book he published on East Germany got him banned from the country.

The author’s file survived, but many did not. In the offices of the Gauck Authority, which had been the Stasi’s central archive (“a ministry of truth occupying the former ministry of fear” is how Garton Ash describes it), is something called the “copper cauldron.” Once intended to house in an interference-free zone “a vast new computer system containing all the information on everybody,” it now contains “hundreds of sacks stuffed with tiny pieces of paper: documents torn up in the weeks between the beginning of mass protest in the autumn of 1989 and the storming of the ministry in 1990.” The Gauck Authority is attempting to piece them together. Although the shredders and incinerators and bonfires were busy all over the former Warsaw Pact as the old guys tried to save their skins while the regimes they supported were falling—and after they fell as well—other countries were not so careful to save the scraps. As I write this I am looking at the charred remains of files from the Romanian secret police, picked up from a remote pit where tons of them had been dumped and set afire several months after the fall of the Ceaușescu regime. Some of the files found there postdate the revolution of 1989.

In Germany, this shredding and burning of the most sensitive files temporarily stopped when the Stasi headquarters

were occupied in January 1990. “But then, in an extraordinary decision of the Round Table negotiating the transition from communist rule, the foreign intelligence service, alone among all the departments of the Stasi, was formally empowered to continue its own ‘self-dissolution.’” Most of the records of that branch have since been destroyed—or as is sometimes said, and as Garton Ash reports, transported in part to Moscow. Curious. Perhaps it was convenient for everyone that the records be destroyed or moved. Perhaps the records were too dangerous, not only to the East but to the West, which in the defense of liberty played some extreme games of its own.

So what is one to conclude? “What you find here, in the files,” Garton Ash writes, “is less malice than human weakness, a vast anthology of human weakness. And when you talk to those involved, what you find is less deliberate dishonesty than our almost infinite capacity for self-deception. If only I had met, on this search, a single clearly evil person. But they were all just weak, shaped by circumstances, self-deceiving; human, all too human. Yet the sum of their actions was a great evil.”

And, beyond the scope of Garton Ash’s search through his own file, some of the perpetrators did evil, too. The costs of bringing out this truth, of exposing the files to light and history, are enormous, but the benefits are greater.

> WILLIAM MCPHERSON, a former Guest Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center, is finishing a book about Romania after 1989.

## *The Reluctant President*

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS:  
*A Public Life, a Private Life.*

By Paul C. Nagel. Knopf. 432 pp. \$30

by *Kenneth Silverman*

Beginning at age 11, John Quincy Adams kept a diary for nearly 70 years. It makes a Great Wall of self-reflec-

tion that, with related material, stretches across nearly 50 reels of the Adams Papers microfilm. Paul Nagel, author of two

books about the John Adams family, is the first biographer to explore this gigadocument beginning to end. The result is an affecting narrative of JQA's inner journey, tracking his conflicted feelings about politics, his lifelong literary ambitions, and his dismal evaluations of his own worth.

Adams (1767–1848) chose to spend much of his life in the public eye, beginning in 1794 with his appointment as American minister to the Netherlands. From then on, he manned one high-visibility post after another: minister to Prussia, Massachusetts state senator, U.S. senator, minister to Russia, minister to England, secretary of state, president of the United States (1825–29), and finally member of the U.S. House of Representatives. Yet he once announced that he would rather clean filth from the streets of Boston than be a politician.

Street cleaners got thanked; independent-minded politicians got dumped on. Adams's support in the Senate for an embargo halting exports from American ports (part of an effort to remain neutral in the war between Britain and France) brought down on him the outrage of fellow Federalists and the wisecrack that he represented not Massachusetts but Napoleon. In his first annual message as president, he called for the federal government to foster human progress by improving patent laws, funding geographical exploration, and establishing an astronomical observatory—visionary prospects that drew jeers in Congress and the press and died aborning. (Nagel joins a consensus in judging Adams's presidency a “hapless failure.”) When the ex-president returned to Washington as a House member representing the Plymouth district, his passionate campaign to repeal the new gag rule—by which all petitions concerning slavery

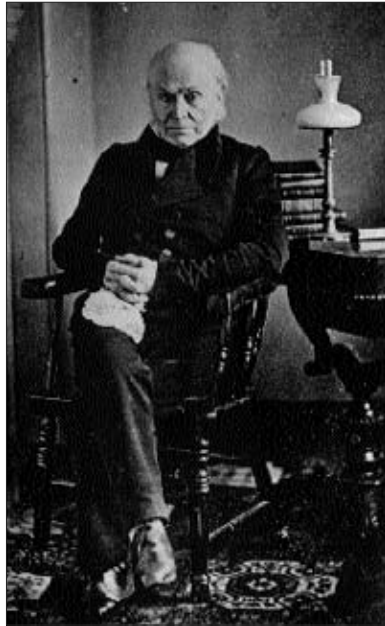
were tabled—led him so far as to bring up the possibility of disunion. From the floor of the Southern-dominated House came shouts of “Expel him! Expel him!” and a resolution accusing him of high treason.

Adams's pleasure in the excitement of public service was undermined not only by partisan abuse but by his reverence for literature. “Could I have chosen my own genius and condition,” he wrote, “I should have made myself a great poet.” During the seven years of his youth he spent abroad with his father, he read Alexander Pope, John Dryden, and Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*; mastered

French and rendered the fables of Jean de La Fontaine into English; and haunted the bookshops of Paris, London, and St. Petersburg. After returning to America in his teens, he met the Connecticut poet John Trumbull, author of the mock-epical *M'Fingal*, a work, Adams admiringly said, “in which Americans have endeavored to soar as high as European bards.” Bored with studying law after graduating from Harvard College, he experimented with different verse forms and indited

his first sustained poem, a satirical portrait of nine young women entitled “A Vision,” influenced by Trumbull's *Progress of Dulness*.

The political rough-and-tumble of Adams's adult life put hardly a crimp in his literary ambitions. At least at first, he treated his ministerial posts as sinecures, “a mode of life which will allow me leisure for my private pursuits and literary studies.” When serving at the court of Prussia he read Gotthold Lessing and Johann Schiller, published essays on German literature and culture in Joseph Dennie's *Port Folio*, and translated Christoph Wieland's 7,300-line *Oberon* (to relieve



the strain, he translated Juvenal). His passion for language did not desert him in the Senate. Between sessions he served as the first Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard, a service that resulted in his two-volume *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*. Over the years he kept versifying—hymns and Psalm paraphrases, amatory verse, an ode on justice, and the lengthy *Dermot MacMorrough or the Conquest of Ireland*, which reached a second edition. He carried on a long correspondence with the actor James H. Hackett concerning the character of Hamlet. Adams considered the publication of these letters in 1844 “more tickling to my vanity than it was to be elected President of the United States.”

When he came to marry, Adams was drawn less to a possible first lady than to a muse. Schooled in Nantes, Louisa (née Johnson) Adams spoke French, played harp and piano, and wrote poems, plays, and essays. They read aloud to each other—Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, Sir Walter Scott, Maria Edgeworth. He copied out for her lines from John Donne’s lubricious “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” including the couplet “Off with that wyerie Coronet and shew / The haiery Diademe which on you doth grow.” Adams may be the first and last president to have read Donne, but he joins an expanding list in on-the-record sensuality. He rated Byron’s *Don Juan* “very licentious and very delightful.” His almanac during his early twenties intimates encounters with prostitutes or lower-class pickups in Boston: “my taste,” he explained to himself, “is naturally depraved.” He fancied delectable food and drink, and when leaving England to become secretary of state left behind for sale 560 bottles of claret and 298 of champagne.

Despite Adams’s conviction that authorship eclipsed “every other occupation,” a settled devotion to poetry would not have carried him far. The emotional temperature of the verse that Nagel quotes rises at best to muffled indignation, as if the astringent hauteur of Yeats were struggling to be heard above the soft-bellied platitudinizing of Longfellow:

The man tenacious of his trust,  
True to his purpose fair and just,  
With equal scorn defies  
The rabble’s rage, the tyrant’s frown.

Wielding his pen during the period that brought to prominence Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Transcendentalists, Adams remained on the far outskirts of American literary life, as he conceded in calling himself “one of the smallest poets of my country.”

The confession of incapacity is typical. Over and over in his diaries, Adams lashed himself for “slowness of comprehension,” for floundering “spell bound in the circle of mediocrity,” for being a “commonplace personage,” “a mere slave to circumstance!—nothing of the better sort of clay about me.” His chronic feelings of indolence, failure, and shortcoming, Nagel shows, grew out of his hunger for applause and renown, which in turn stemmed from his parents’ towering demand that he achieve something of significance on the stage of world history. “If you do not rise to the head not only of your profession, but of your country,” John Adams warned him, “it will be owing to your own *Laziness, Slovenliness, and Obstinacy.*” Abigail Adams, here a sort of stage mother of the early republic, pushed him too: “let your ambition be engaged to become eminent.” Adams evidently sensed how the racket his parents’ querulous voices made in his head had left him a self-reviling insomniac. When his mother lay dying of typhus in 1818, he did not travel from Washington to Massachusetts to come to her bedside, or even to attend her funeral. He began but never finished a biography of his father, finding endless excuses not to work on it.

Nothing and no one seems to have escaped Adams’s lust for the better-than-best. He turned even his relaxations into ordeals. When swimming for exercise in the Potomac, he strove day after day to see how much farther he could go before touching bottom, and stiffened the challenge by swimming clothed. He gave up chess because losing enraged him, he said, “to a degree bordering upon madness.” He

tried to inspire in his sons what he called “the sublime Platonic ideal of aiming at ideal excellence,” and inevitably thought them, too, withered by the “blast of mediocrity.” He forbade his son John to visit him in Washington from Harvard until he ranked among the top 10 students; without such a sign of industry and high achievement, “I would feel nothing but sorrow and shame in your presence.” Seeing the nation itself as a collective of Adamses, he exhorted Americans not to “slumber in indolence” and thus “doom ourselves to perpetual inferiority.” His scorn for the average brought him a reputation for being harsh, tactless, arrogant, a world-class grouch.

In accounting for his own failure to become great, Adams singled out his susceptibility to distraction. Genius, he believed, was “nothing but the power of applying the mind to its object.” Unable to concentrate his energies, however, he often took up projects only to put them aside, leaving “the voyage of my life in the shallows.” Nagel proposes that the castoffs may have represented “sublimated rebellion” against his parents’ nonstop prodding.

**T**he book entertains few other speculations. Adams’s intervals of seemingly clinical depression are discussed, briefly and solemnly, in terms of serotonin levels. Clearly no fan of psychobiography, Nagel largely passes over Adams’s damaging, unacknowledged rivalry with his father. It surfaces, for instance, in a meditation that Adams wrote in 1824 as he waited to hear whether he had won or lost the presidency: “To me the alternatives are both distressing in prospect, and the most formidable is that of success. All the danger is on the pinnacle. The humiliation of failure will be so much more than compensated by the safety in which it will leave me that I

ought to regard it as a consummation devoutly to be wished.” The remark smacks of both wishing and fearing to stand higher than his father, and a tormented need simultaneously to succeed and fail.

Nagel’s unwillingness to psychologize has its advantages. It leaves uninterrupted the good story he has to tell of a life crowded with incident—maybe too crowded for a biography of this length. The narrative whizzes by some consequential events, including Adams’s work in framing the Monroe Doctrine and his eight-hour closing argument before the Supreme Court in behalf of 39 Africans who had mutinied on the slave ship *Amistad*. Still, the author’s economical recounting of Adams’s many personal trials is often moving. JQA’s gambling, first-born son, George Washington Adams, apparently killed himself after fathering an illegitimate child. And the alcoholism of his son John made his life “Indian torture,” he said, “roasting to death by a slow fire.”

The most wrenching part of the book is Nagel’s dramatization of Adams’s octogenarian last years. Still eating and drinking too much, railing so savagely against slaveholders that some House members called him insane, he knew himself to be for all that “a tree dying downward from the top”—weepy, drooling, unable to remember the French poetry his wife read to him. At the end he sought not to be great but simply to calm himself, to purge, he said, “every sentiment of animosity, anger, and resentment against any and every fellow creature of the human family.” One finishes this strong biography regarding him in a like spirit of tenderness and awe.

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