

given, Renda conveys the texture of the occupation by examining a number of unusual and revealing sources, such as the postcards the marines sent home and the private correspondence of their commander.

The author writes scathingly about the Wilsonian highmindedness that sent marines into Haiti in the first place. She sides with George F. Kennan, who, in *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (1951), saw more of a threat to world peace in a foreign policy that allegedly pursued abstract ideals than in one that openly pursued concrete national interest. Wilson, thinks Renda, was an archetypal liberal humbug who was unable to see any contradiction between the occupation in practice of Haiti and the right in theory of small nations to self-determination. Similar contradictions characterized the occupying troops, whose actions were sometimes philanthropic and sometimes brutal.

The second half of the book concerns representations of Haiti in American pulp fiction, plays, serious novels, films, plastic arts, and even wallpaper. For some years before World War II, Haiti was an object of fashionable interest (Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Emperor Jones* started the ball rolling). It was seen by turns—and sometimes at the same time—as dangerous, sexually alluring, primitive, exotic, noble, and culturally authentic. People used Haiti according to their purposes: American racists saw its history as proof positive that blacks were unfit to rule themselves, while American blacks, smarting under segregation and other disabilities, saw in figures such as Toussaint L’Ouverture and le Roi Christophe proof that black heroes could equal white ones. It is the author’s thesis that exposure to Haitian themes had a profound effect on American race relations.

Renda’s discussion of these matters is subtle, honest, and evenhanded, where it could easily have been strident. One lesson from this most interesting book is that while powerful nations can change small ones, they cannot mold them into any shape they choose. Neither men nor nations are putty. This is a lesson that has still not been fully assimilated in the corridors of power.

—THEODORE DALRYMPLE



Like father: John Adams

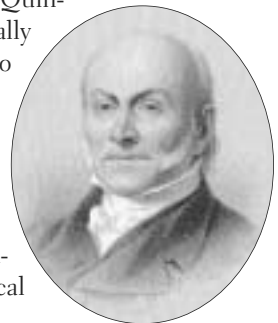
**AMERICA’S FIRST DYNASTY:  
*The Adamses, 1735–1918.***

By Richard Brookhiser. Free Press. 244 pp. \$25

Why family political dynasties come into being is not altogether clear. Name recognition is important but not sufficient. Franklin Roosevelt benefited from sharing a surname, and to some extent a family, with his fifth cousin Teddy, but no other Roosevelt ever captured the country’s heart. Kennedys have provided endless reams of copy but so far only one president. The present White House incumbent was picked by his party from a group of (arguably) more impressive contenders in part because of his patrimony, yet it required a national emergency to give him the look of a leader.

Genetic inheritance might be a factor, although many more sons and daughters have failed to match their successful parents’ careers than have equaled them. What seems more significant is the momentum generated by the founder’s commitment to public service, carried down through each succeeding generation. That and the lash of high expectations: John and Abigail Adams told John Quincy that his career should reflect his “advantages”—if it did not, that would be due to his “*lasiness* [sic], *slovenliness* and *obstinacy*.”

*America’s First Dynasty* is the story of two presidents, John (1735–1826) and his son, John Quincy (1767–1848); Charles Francis (1807–86), John Quincy’s son, an especially valuable minister to England during the Civil War; and Charles Francis’s son, Henry (1838–1918), a formidable historian and political observer. It



chronicles a **Like son: John Quincy Adams** family whose members, “although admirable, and frequently lovable, [were] seldom likable.” They

were, with few exceptions, driven, intense, hypercritical—almost never, it seems, at ease. Fortunately, they were also the stuff of fascinating reading, as David McCullough and now Richard Brookhiser make clear.

Benjamin Franklin famously said that John Adams, his colleague in the quest for French support of the American Revolution, was “always an honest man, often a wise one, but sometimes, and in some things, absolutely out of his senses.” Adams was very much in his senses during the critical months leading up to the colonies’ declaration of independence. One pro-independence delegate called him “Our Colossus on the floor”; another, “the Atlas of American independence.” Peculiar and prickly, Brookhiser calls him, and yet he was also brilliantly clear in argument and dogged in the pursuit of freedom.

A farmer’s son, Adams was democratic in his respect for the rights of others, of whatever station, and puzzled by his friend Jefferson’s continued reliance on slave labor. Yet he was also convinced that aristocratic status could be defended on the ground that people admired the well born and relied on them to protect society against despots and political chaos. Paine and other levelers thought him a friend of privilege. He would probably have replied that he was a friend of civic order.

Neither he nor his highly intelligent, public-spirited descendants were natural politicians. “John and John Quincy . . . both professed to be above the scrum of partisanship; to desire office only when it came to them; to disdain the fever of ambition,” Brookhiser writes. “They were sincere enough in these professions to hobble themselves in their practice of politics; not nearly sincere enough to stay home.” John’s presidency (1797–1801) was distinctly second-rate, marked by long absences from the capital. He was totally absorbed by the pursuit of great objectives, and almost as completely repulsed by the political environment surrounding them. Of John Quincy’s term (1825–29), the kindest that can be said is that it was largely hapless. He was, however, a powerful voice against slavery when he returned to public life as a congressman, and he argued the *Amistad* case

before the Supreme Court on behalf of African captives in 1841.

Charles Francis helped persuade England not to recognize the Confederacy—a matter critical to the survival of the Union. With him in London was his son Henry, who alone of these four Adamsses never sought public office, though he remained a close (if often contemptuous) observer of the political class throughout his long life. He had an impressive grasp of the nation’s history, and produced a great account of its early years—though by the 1870s there had “seep[ed] into Adams’s writing the arsenic whiff of unrelieved irony, the by-product of forswearing power.” A brilliantly phrased observation, applicable not alone to Henry Adams.

The Adamsses were important figures in American life for a century and a half. Other dynasties may have lasted as long in business, farming, or perhaps the arts, but it is hard to conceive a match for theirs in terms of public service. That it was achieved without inherited rank or title makes it all the more remarkable, and worthy of recalling in this excellent account.

—HARRY MCPHERSON

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**ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PAST:  
*The Lives and Works of the World  
War II Generation of Historians.***

By William Palmer. Univ. Press of Kentucky. 372 pp. \$32

Soviet historians used to joke that they were the bravest academics of them all. Any fool could predict the glorious Soviet future; only the boldest would dare deal with something so dangerously unpredictable as the past. But then all historians do this, reinterpreting and even reinventing the past in the light of concerns and biases of their own day. In Britain and America over the past 50 years, there were few risks and many rewards for striking out boldly in a fast-expanding field.

Palmer, a professor of history at Marshall University in West Virginia, has written a most engaging book about the generation of British and American historians who challenged the orthodoxies sustaining some of the most cherished national myths. Christopher