

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

**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

Hill portrayed the English Civil War as a class struggle. The German-born Geoffrey Elton (a Jewish refugee who spent his career trying to comprehend the enigma of the hospitable English) asserted that what we thought was the birth of the English nation under the Tudors in the 16th century was in fact mere bureaucratic reorganization. J. H. Plumb found the Whig Revolution and Ascendancy equally the work (and profit) of Tories. A. J. P. Taylor deflated the heroic legend of 1940 by pointing out that “all that was best and most enlightened in English life” had been only too willing to appease Hitler.

In America, the Arkansas-born C. Vann Woodward, who recalled as a boy watching a lynch mob form and seeing the Ku Klux Klan march into church in full regalia, revealed a South rather less segregated, far more divided, and much more complex than the conventional view had it. William McNeill, a Canadian Presbyterian transplanted to a riotous 1920s Chicago, leapfrogged the Great Man school of history to give pride of place to microbes and plagues rather than human weapons. The brilliant young Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who challenged the deeply held American myth of the classless society by identifying the class politics in the Age of Jackson, went on to revive the Great Man delusion with a moving if near-hagiographic account of John F. Kennedy’s *Thousand Days*.

Palmer is on to something when he suggests that the World War II historians had much in common beyond the way they potted back and forth across the Atlantic to form an almost single culture. The American historians were grappling with the origins of a great power that had suddenly reached its prime, while the British were dealing with the causes of their decline as well as with the causes of their earlier ascendance to global power. And both were living in societies gripped by the Cold War, which made Marxist analysis, whether of the English Civil War or the American one, acutely political.

The author clearly relishes the grand tussles, such as the debate between Lawrence Stone and Hugh Trevor-Roper over the decline—or rise—of the English gentry in the century before the Civil War, or between Trevor-Roper and A. J. P. Taylor over the roots of World War II. Indeed, the book would be far less enjoyable without Trevor-Roper, an intellectual bully with a killer instinct. No wonder half of Oxford cheered when Taylor rebutted his attacks in a celebrated *Encounter* article called “How to Quote—Exercises for Beginners,” which showed Trevor-Roper misquoting or unfairly summarizing what Taylor had written. Taylor concluded: “The Regius Professor’s methods might do harm to his reputation as a serious historian, if he had one.”

—MARTIN WALKER

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

CHURCHES.

By Judith Dupré. HarperCollins. 168 pp.
\$40

In 1996, Dupré published *Skyscrapers*—a fine collection of minibiographies of the world’s most famous very tall buildings, presented chronologically in a distinctively proportioned volume, 18 inches tall and eight inches wide. The left-hand page was given over to a black-and-white photograph of a particular building, while on the facing page was stacked all the accompanying information. It was both an inventive design

decision and a clever marketing device.

In 1997 came her equally informative book *Bridges*. Since these structures also tend to be unidirectional, the format of *Skyscraper* was repeated, only this time turned on its side. While justifiable, this approach had its drawbacks. *Bridges* spans three feet when open. This not only makes it awkward to handle; it also imposes potentially threatening structural demands on the book’s comparatively modest spine.

After three years, Dupré is back with another large volume, *Churches*. As she states in her