



Henry Adams and the Making of America

Garry Wills

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One of our greatest historians offers a surprising new view of the greatest historian of the nineteenth century, Henry Adams.

Wills showcases Henry Adams's little-known but seminal study of the early United States and elicits from it fresh insights on the paradoxes that roil America to this day. Adams drew on his own southern fixation, his extensive foreign travel, his political service in Lincoln's White House, and much more to invent the study of history as we know it. His nine-volume chronicle of America from 1800 to 1816 established new standards for employing archival sources, firsthand reportage, eyewitness accounts, and other techniques that have become the essence of modern history.

Adams's innovations went beyond the technical; he posited an essentially ironic view of the legacy of Jefferson and Madison. As is well known, they strove to shield the young country from "foreign entanglements," a standing army, a central bank, and a federal bureaucracy, among other hallmarks of "big government." Yet by the end of their tenures they had permanently entrenched all of these things in American society. This is the "American paradox" that defines us today: the idealized desire for isolation and political simplicity battling against the inexorable growth and intermingling of political, economic, and military forces. As Wills compellingly shows, the ironies spawned two centuries ago still inhabit our foreign policy and the widening schisms over economic and social policy.

Ambitious in scope, nuanced in detail and argument, *Henry Adams and the Making of America* throws brilliant light on how history is made -- in both senses of the term.

Henry Adams and the Making of America Details

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From Reader Review Henry Adams and the Making of America for online ebook

Todd Stockslager says

Very good recap of Adam's classic multi-volume "History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison." Wills de-revisionizes the historian's viewpoint of Adams that he was an apologist for the Presidents in his family and for New England, and anti-Republican and anti-Southern.

Wills show how Adams, instead of attacking the Republican Virginians Jefferson and Madison or claiming that they discredited themselves by turning into Federalists, traced the United States in their hands growing beyond those labels into a "nation".

And Wills reminds us of the quality of Adam's writing, his groundbreaking archival research, and his international focus. Many historians of the period, especially of the events leading up to and during the War of 1812, focus just on events at home, while Adams shows through his deep archival research in England, France, and Spain that many of these events were driven by events abroad.

Alex Nelson says

This book is basically one part biography of Henry Adams, the great grandson of John Adams (and grandson of John Quincy Adams), and two parts summary of Henry's 9-volume history of the US. It's a bit of an intellectual biography, but essentially pushes the perspective the 9-volume history is vastly undervalued...I would suggest getting this from the public library if you're interested in reading it.

Carol says

A distillation of and commentary on Adams 9 volume histories of the administrations of Jefferson and Madison. Essential for those who no longer have the leisure to read the originals. Adams was a Zelig like character who was part of the politics and artistic activity of his time. As the grandson and great-grandson of presidents he had access to archival material not available to many others. But it was his insight that was impressive. After more than a hundred years his work still remains important reading for historians including his history of the War of 1812. This book accords him his due respect.

Rick says

Adams, according to Wills, is underappreciated and, in particular, his nine volume History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison is a neglected masterpiece. Wills's goal is clearly twofold: prove his point and get you to read the masterpiece. However, when I am reading a single volume book summarizing a masterpiece of nine volumes I admit I'm thinking better than two birds with one stone is getting ten volumes by reading one. But Wills isn't easily denied. A persuasive writer, he first convinces you that Henry Adams's history has been misread by the few who have

read it and reported on it in their own histories. Then he convinces you that as good as *The Education of Henry Adams*, *Democracy*, and *Mont St. Michel and Chartres* are, this earlier work may very well be better. The history, he argues, makes the case that America became a nation, not a ragtaggle of partially settled coastal states, under the Jeffersonians and Adams approves of this. Conventional viewpoints were that Adams wrote to defend his grandfather (JQ) and great-grandfather (John) by disparaging Jefferson and the Republicans but Wills shows the opposite to be true. That not only wasn't Henry fond of either of his ancestors, politically or personally, he thought Jefferson and Madison, despite their citizen-farmer bias and anti-Federalist views made decisions that put the United States on a path to a strong national government, with a standing army and navy, and westward expansion as a federally supported urge. Wills also, by quoting liberally but not clumsily, makes the case that Adams was a gifted stylist. Here he is describing a seemingly inexplicable American perspective on Spanish Florida's standing...that somehow it was part of the Louisiana Purchase even though we purchased it from France, not Spain. "[Livingston] was forced at last to maintain that Spain had retroceded West Florida to France without knowing it, that France has sold it to the United States without suspecting it, that the United States had bought it without paying for it, and that neither France nor Spain, although the original contracting parties, were competent to decide the meaning of their own contract." So, I'm buying the Library of America set of these histories. Thank you, Garry Wills, an American master in his own right. He is one of our best popular historians, in the best senses of both the adjective and the noun, and a fine, thoughtful and entertaining writer.

Kevin A. says

The first (and best) part of this book, is an essay arguing that Henry Adams is over praised for his autobiography, written when he was a crotchety old man. Instead, Wills praises Adams's nine-volume history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations, and notes Henry's admiration for the Southern Democrats at the expense of his own presidential ancestors. (Wills himself is infatuated with the Virginia dynasty and foolishly dismisses New England as a backwater, which was in fact the nation's intellectual and industrial leader in the decades prior to the Civil War.)

Wills spends the rest of the book in a chapter-by-chapter précis of Adams nine volumes. Granted, it seems unlikely that many people have the time to read the original, but Wills' regurgitation becomes tiresome.

Robin Friedman says

A Study Of Adams's History

Henry Adams's nine-volume *History of the United States in the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* is by all accounts the greatest historical study written about the United States. Adams begins with a survey of the condition of the United States in 1800, following the election of Thomas Jefferson. He concludes sixteen years later with a description of the United States in 1816, following the end of the War of 1812. For all the turmoil of these years, the country had grown and prospered, and attained something of a sense of itself as a nation. Adams researched his history meticulously, discovered previously unknown documents in the archives of England, France, and Spain, and produced a detailed diplomatic, military, and political history of the era between 1800 and 1816. Fortunately, Adams' history is accessible in its entirety to the interested reader in two volumes of the Library of America series.

In his recent book, "Henry Adams and the Making of America" (2005), Garry Wills describes the creation of Adams's seminal history and leads the reader through Adams's work. Wills's book thus is in part a mirror, describing and commenting upon both Adams' history and the underlying subject of Adams' history -- the United States in the first 16 years of the Nineteenth Century -- and Wills explains why this history matters. Wills points out that Adams's history is too little known and read and that it is frequently misinterpreted. He offers two reasons for the misinterpretations.

First, some readers assume that Adams's aim was to vindicate the policies of his great-grandfather, President John Adams, and his grandfather, President John Quincy Adams by deprecating the work of Jefferson and Madison. But Henry Adams did not have a high regard for the work of his illustrious ancestors. He is critical of them both and praises the work of Jefferson, in particular, in helping take the United States in a different, pragmatic, and democratic direction.

Second, according to Wills, some readers tend to read Adams's histories backwards, through the world-weariness and pessimism expressed in Adams's most famous work, "The Education of Henry Adams". This reading overlooks the vitality, optimism, and sense of comedy that Adams brought to his History as he praised the sense of nationalism and progress that he found in the United States following the War of 1812.

I think both Wills's points are well-taken. But it is also fair to say that the United States grew and developed, by 1816, almost in spite of itself. Adams was not making a case for Federalism, but he also was not entirely in the party of Jefferson and Madison. His book shows a fine sense of irony and ambiguity in considering the development of the United States. Thus, the thought of the book has ties to the "Education," in that it suggests the accidental, unplanned aspect of history, and also shows, as Wills points out, some effort to see the history of the United States in terms other than as a dichotomy between two political parties.

Wills's book is in three parts. The first part offers background on Henry Adams, his relationship to his grandfather and to his grandmother Louisa, to Civil War America, and to the way in which Adams prepared himself for the writing of his history. The second and third parts of the book consist of a detailed discussion of Adams's history itself, with the second part dealing with the Jefferson administration and the third part with Madison's administration. With respect to Jefferson, Wills concentrates, as does Adams, on the Louisiana purchase, the conspiracy of Aaron Burr for Western secession, and the Embargo. With respect to Madison, the focus is on the War of 1812 and its aftermath. As Wills points out, the two major protagonists in Adams's history are Jefferson and Napoleon.

Wills offers both a good introduction to Adams's history and a good account of the 1800-1816 period in his own right. He amplifies and comments upon Adams's discussion with other materials and with comments of his own. In an Epilogue, Wills points to Adams's study as the first attempt at modern source-based historical writing in the United States. Wills finds the importance of Adams's work in the emphasis he places on the growth of democracy and on American nationalism. I think Wills goes well beyond Henry Adams in some of his conclusions and observations.

Wills has written an excellent study which may encourage readers to read and think about American history and about the nature of American democracy and to explore on their own the great historical work of Henry Adams.

Robin Friedman

Erik Graff says

This book is several things at once. It is American history covering the Jefferson and Madison administrations. Yet it is this history as seen by reflecting on Henry Adams' life and his nine-volume History of the United States of America, and criticizing, when (rarely) appropriate, Adams' text and (often and vigorously) other commentators and critics.

There is a thesis running throughout. On the surface it is to maintain that, contrary to most interpretations, Adams saw the administrations of Jefferson and Madison as progressive, as basically good years, because they adapted the nation to geopolitical realities and witnessed and promoted growth and national unity. Dig a bit deeper and it is a commentary and evaluation which distinguishes the virtues of adaptive, democratic politics from the debits of that kind of conservatism which, during these presidencies, characterized the Federalists--a commentary with implied relevance to all times.

Eric_W says

Wills decries our ignorance of Henry Adams great history of the early nineteenth century. (I fear I belong to the vast number of ignoramuses with regard to this work.) Wills sets out to rectify that nescience. Apparently, Adams even had a very different slant on the Jeffersonians, arguing that their four terms at the beginning of the 19th century provided for the development of a national unity that they seemingly eschewed publicly, ostensibly supporting a decentralized and weak government. In reality, Wills says Adams perspicaciously, says they began the development of American identity and empire. Of course, it's been my observation, especially given our most recent 8 years, that ideology always succumbs to a desire to consolidate power. I'm guessing that even Ron Paul would have pulled the reins a little tighter despite his rhetoric. Wills writes well and with erudition. Fascinating so far. Updates to follow.

Gayla Bassham says

Wills is never not interesting, but I wasn't crazy about the way he structured this book and found the first third (a more or less straightforward biography of Henry Adams) much more compelling than the two sections dealing with his interpretation of Adams's History of the United States; at times it felt as though Wills had forgotten entirely about Adams and was writing his own history.

Laurel says

This was surprisingly readable but I don't recommend picking it up just for fun. The chapters were broken into sections so when I got confused or bored I knew something else more interesting would come soon. That said, this is a VERY meta book with present-day historian Wills writing about ca. 1900 historian Henry Adams writing a history about ca. 1800 presidents with comparisons to other historic historians along the way.

Charles Stephen says

I was reading this book in tandem with a biography of Adams's wife, Clover. I disliked the way Garry Wills puffed himself in the opening chapter of this book, even if it was at the expense of long-dead historians. By the time I abandoned the book, I was tired of Wills's parsing of Adams interpretations of the history of the young republic. Also, I felt like I learned more about Henry Adams the man from the life story of the woman who married him and subsequently committed suicide. Wills's book served to remind me, however, of the beauty of Henry Adams's prose, which is something I might want to revisit at a future date. Perhaps I'll read *The Education of Henry Adams*, his most popular work (though Clover is not mentioned in it).

Joseph Hamilton says

Phenomenal book! Garry Wills is the best.

Elizabeth says

Garry Wills is a wonderful writer and this is an very interesting subject. It is really about Henry Adams' multi-volume history of America as much as (or more than) the history itself. Henry Adams was at the forefront of the writing of history--going back to the sources rather than making it up. [I still think most of it is made up, but that's besides the point.:]

Seriously, we went to war in 1812 because we (James Madison) supported Napoleon against England and thought we could take over Canada. This is something you never learn in school.

This is a book I'll read again because it is intersting, chock full of information, and needed to be read more closely than one can on the F Train.

John says

This was a good book with plenty of interestign details about America, history teaching in the US and Henry Adams himself. I learned quite a bit while reading this book. The books biggest problem was it's concept of redeeming Henry Adams does not really make for entertaining reading. Wills succeeds in proving his thesis, but it does get very repetitive when he is compelled to bash Adams critics. I'd rather have been reading more about the historical points than tally all the ways in which Adams critics were wrong.

Bookmarks Magazine says

Garry Wills is the great elucidator. Whether as biographer, essayist, or parser of historical documents, Wills has an enviable ability to aggrandize the individual. It's a skill that brought him the Pulitzer Prize for *Lincoln at Gettysburg* and has made his name a familiar byline on the best-seller lists with works like *Inventing America* and *Why I Am a Catholic*. Critics greet his work with mixed reviews, less for his skill as a writer than for his choice of subject. In his attempt to winnow down Adams's gargantuan history for the general

reader, some critics feel Wills has produced an "elevated Cliffs Notes" guide. If that's the case, maybe it's worth considering that even educated adults need a helping hand through the many great books they'll never have enough time to read.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.
