



Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams

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A fresh look at this astute, likably quirky statesman, by the author of the Pulitzer Award-winning *Founding Brothers* and the National Book Award winning *American Sphinx*. "The most lovable and most laughable, the warmest and possibly the wisest of the founding fathers, John Adams knew himself as few men do and preserved his knowledge in a voluminous correspondence that still resonates. Ellis has used it with great skill and perception not only to bring us the man, warts and all, but more importantly to reveal his extraordinary insights into the problems confronting the founders that resonate today in the republic they created."—Edmund S. Morgan, Sterling Professor of History Emeritus, Yale University.

Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams Details

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From Reader Review Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams for online ebook

Bill Tress says

A lot has been written about our founding fathers, yet, I suspect to date we have not had such an insightful biography on John Adams. Ellis who is an excellent writer and story teller produced a compelling case for Adams status as "best of the best" founding fathers. It is obvious that Ellis is big fan of Adams, yet, he does balance his praise by acknowledging the attributes that have kept Adams in the shadows particularly when it comes to his protege Thomas Jefferson who is celebrated for his wisdom even to the extent of a memorial in Washington, DC while Adams has far less adulation afforded to not only Jefferson but other founding fathers such as Madison and Hamilton.

Ellis makes a interesting comparison of style and intellect between Nixon and Kennedy, and it is used effectively to contrast Adams and Jefferson. There are many similarities between these four men and a quote from Nixon seems to be a case in point. Nixon said, " when people look at Kennedy they see what they want to be, yet, when they look at me they see what they are! Ellis makes this quote come alive when he contrasts Adam and Jefferson.

It is clearly illustrated in this book that Adams had a great mind, Ellis as well as 21st century historians believe that Adams may have been the most notable thinker of the age. He understood the dynamics that drove the country as it existed in 1770, and almost in a mystic way, how it would appear in the future even to the extent of its decline. Adams seemed to have had the clearest understanding of the elemental urges of mankind and this contrasted with the Jefferson liberal view that trusted the instincts of the people. Jefferson is famous for the saying, "He who governs least governs best", while Ellis shows us that Adams saw the need for government to be the check and balance on the depravity of man; Adams mystical view has proved correct in the 21st century.

Ellis emphasized that both Adams and Jefferson were educated in the classics of Greek and Roman governance. They were also profoundly affected by the French Revolution. Each man was present in France to actually see the Revolution and each man saw that Revolution differently. Adams was scared by the mob rule, the brutality and killing while Jefferson saw the beauty of the uprising of the people. This lead to bitterness between the two men that lasted most of their lives until they were able to reconcile in their twilight years.

We are grateful for this reconciliation because the correspondence has provided much insight into their thoughts. Ellis points out that the tide of discovery by historians because of all of Adams correspondence in his twilight years has exposed the brilliance of Adams and places him second to only Washington in the ranks of the founders of this country. This book is valuable historical research with 200 pages of notes and bibliography, it is not just a well written book but also a valuable historical document.

Dale says

It is always good to find a well-written, well-researched book detailing the history of the Founding Fathers and what they were like. Far from icons of perfection, they were people of flaws and contradictions. Ellis brings this out for Adams, but shows us the humanity thoroughly. We get a sense of the prickly man behind

the legend, who fought with so many of his compatriots. But the effort he put forth gave us a great nation for many years. A wonderful addition to our history lessons.

Florence Millo says

Commitment to principle somehow necessitated unpopularity for John Adams, and the fullest expression of his best energies occurred in singular acts of passionate defiance. For Adams, virtue demanded a level of disinterestedness and a purity of public spiritedness that derived its compulsion from psychological imperative which seemed to require isolation and unpopularity as evidence of its authenticity.

Adams believed that there is no one principle which predominates in human nature so much in every stage of life as the passion for superiority. Every human being compares itself with every other around it and will find some superiority over every other.

Adams was obsessed with interior integrity, not with the external rewards that mastery of appearance could bring. Humility, piety, self-denial, and other habits were not just means to an end for him, but the ends themselves.

Adams suggested that most enduring political, social, and economic transformations were evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Successful revolutions such as the one he helped lead in America, were merely the final and most visible stages of what was a long process of preparation. The only kind of progress Adams truly trusted came gradually, moving at an evolutionary pace that allowed institutions to adjust and expectations to remain under some modicum of control.

In his political thinking, Adams did embrace two of the central tenets of the liberal tradition: the doctrine of popular sovereignty, that is, the notion that political power ultimately derives from the people; and the principle of equality before the law, the view that justice is blind to the class, race, or gender of the accused. In these two areas, Adams was a liberal.

Adams warned Jefferson that individual freedom and social equality were incompatible ideas, that ignoring their conflict only assured the triumph of the privileged. Adams insisted that government needed to play an active role in managing national priorities; that it was not, as Jefferson seemed to believe, only and always, a source of oppression.

An excellent book which explores the principles of government which two hundred years later we are still debating.

Ross says

Quite interesting history and analysis of John Adams' retirement years. This is a kind of psychoanalysis of Adams peculiar nature and an apology of sorts for why Adams created so many enemies leading up to his retirement. A good deal of the book is devoted to the famous reconciliation with Jefferson through the hundreds of letters they corresponded leading up to the incredible coincidence of they're both dying on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The author gives his theories on why it is Jefferson who is remembered today and not Adams. This is a very scholarly work and probably only of interest to fans of John Adams.

Greg Boswell says

Of the four Adams biographies I've read, this is the only one that I can say that I felt ambivalent about. I

would not recommend this book to anyone who only wanted to read one book about John Adams. Ellis provides an overview of Adams' political theories and does so accurately and fairly, but one would hard-pressed to nail down a compendium of his policies, accomplishments and victories that truly define the man for posterity.

More importantly, the author does a pretty amazing job of rendering a psychological profile of our nation's 2nd president. Ellis does not simply pull things from the air to critique Adams, mainly because he does not have to. There is probably no political figure that ever existed that left behind more documentation than Adams. Ellis has given the reader a very educated character portrait of the subject, not to be taken lightly. My only real problem with this book is that I felt that the author exceeded his bounds when judging Adams emotional constitution and animation. As I read it, I felt like every outpouring of emotion from Adams was a negative in his account as far as Ellis was concerned. Adams simply did not fit the status quo. At times, I felt as though Ellis might be a resurrected enemy from Adams' past. A question that kept popping up in my mind was "If You don't like the man, why did you take the time to write about him?" All in all, by the end of the book I changed my mind about him and was glad I had read it. I still disagree with him on some things but he's probably more right than I am.

I recommend this book but only as an addendum to a full length biography on John Adams.

Jason Kinn says

Ellis's choice to center this biography on Adams's years **after** his presidency was brilliant. He offers an explanation for why Adams does not have a monument to him -- and Jefferson does. (John Adams is also never going to have a damn musical made out of his life like his bitterest rival, Alexander Hamilton.) Adams was a terrible writer and his philosophy (shaped by the disastrous outcomes of the French revolution) was more about constraining the masses than about turning the reins of power over to them.

Adams's thoughts are especially interesting to read now, after America's masses have recently elected a man whose campaign was based on racial animus. Adams would have predicted just such a thing.

John Adams deserves some love. He was a great president -- his refusal to go to war with France in 1798-1800 (even though that is what popular opinion demanded) allowed the nation to strengthen in its infancy as a constitutional republic without getting entangled in war. HE ALSO DID NOT OWN SLAVES, the only one of the first five presidents who didn't. (The second president not to own slaves was the sixth, John Quincy Adams - John Adams's son.)

Paul Bond says

The naturally prickly among us have to find our own ways to contribute. Adams did. Ellis explains how Adams, a bitter pessimist, contributed psychological realism to the political DNA of the country. Adams knew and distrusted the animal passions of his fellow "founding brothers" and countrymen. He knew that partisanship and glory-seeking are intrinsic to human nature. Washington himself may be above party politics, but the nation as a whole would not remain so. In part, the political genius of the American system consists in structural features designed to turn self-interest to the common good. It took people like John Adams to think through that process. While we're far from the ideal linkage between individual and common interest that later philosophers like John Rawls would champion, that theme is there from the start. It seems Ellis reinvigorated interest in Adams, though it's fun to reflect on the scathing corrections and objections

Adams might pen reading the book from Heaven. Some people are most safely appreciated after they're dead.

Philip says

For some time, I avoided picking up this book because I was so disappointed with Ellis' treatment of Jefferson in *American Sphinx* and perhaps I was still impressed with McCullough's treatment of Adams in his masterful biography. But I finally summoned up the energy to tackle *Passionate Sage*—and I'm glad I did.

Ellis' focus in this biography is on Adams' later years, from the time he left presidential office until the time of his death. Substantial time is spent examining the mercurial Adams who stood in sharp relief to his more subdued compatriots. One of Ellis' excellent observations is that Adams felt before he thought. And it was this passionate temperament that led him to be both revolutionary and also less influential than his contemporaries.

This biography does much to rehabilitate the image of Adams. Instead of the Adams of aristocracy and high Federalism, we are presented with Adams the pre-modern Classicist. Adams' desire to elevate caution over progress, morality over money, and ideal leaders over mob rule are all explained in a fresh and stimulating way—particularly coming to a surface in the Jefferson-Adams letters.

Unlike *American Sphinx*, Ellis' treatment of Adams involves both interesting biographical information as well as thorough engagement with Adams' thought. While Ellis is quick to caution readers not to read too much of the current debates into the modern-classical debate of Jefferson and Adams, the touchstones of the debate seem far clearer and more applicable than in the other volume.

I would highly recommend this biography to anyone interested in early American history. It would be worth pairing this biography with McCullough's work in order to get a bigger picture of the entire life of this enigmatic Founding Father.

Stephen says

G.K. Chesterton once wrote that the Catholic Church is the only thing that saves a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age. I don't know that the Church has a monopoly on timelessness, but some historic personalities have a sense of integrity that bids me think they would remain who they were if they were plucked up bodily and thrown into another age. Robert Ingersoll is one such man; John Adams is another. This sense of integrity isn't magically imbued; it requires a certain force of mind, and the decision to root one's self in deeper principles. *Passionate Sage* is a rare treatment of John Adams which focuses on him not as an architect of the revolution, or as an executive officer, but as a retired statesman coming to terms with what he and others had wrought -- satisfied with what he'd done, even if he was regarded as an anachronism. He had followed his own convictions, and that was enough.

Ellis' treatment of Adams make me suspect that Adams would be his own man in any time because while classical allusions were rife in the founding era, Adams' very soul was grounded in the classical tradition. Some revolutionaries like Thomas Jefferson believed that the Revolution had made all things new again, that

institutions like monarchy which prevented people from fulfilling an innately good nature had been escaped from. Adams held to an older view, however, that man was flawed and would constantly struggle with his inner demons -- that virtue and vice hold us in a perpetual tug of war. Our greatest flaw, Adams believed, was pride and vanity; these would drive men to compete ferociously with one another even if they were economic equals. For Adams, the great problem of politics was how to build a productive government that took human frailty in mind. He was a grim realist in an age of idealism. This led him to promoting unpopular ideas -- for instance, that the presidency should be invested with a certain sense of awe, not to honor the person but for the office and for the law's sake. If people do not believe in the law, have a certain respect for it, it loses its persuasive power. If awe does not work, people resort to brute force -- and things go to pieces. His pragmatism also led him taking a high and lonely road during his administration, when he doggedly pursued a course of non-interference during the Franco-English spats of the time. Federalists looked to trade and defense deals with England, and Republicans looked to France. Adams defied them both, following his studies of philosophy that indicated one must do the right thing even if it was unpopular. Adams hoped that history would vindicate him, and on that matter it has. (Ellis notes that Adams often chose the course of action that would alienate the most people, being suspicious of popularity even as he desired it.)

Although Ellis focuses on Adams' thinking and writing, even still we get glimpses of Adams the man -- reading ferociously, for instance. Adams not only challenged Jefferson in terms of the piles of books they both read, but filled his books with notes arguing and debating the authors. Adams loved a good intellectual bout, though his approach was more a pugnacious boxer's than an exercise in rapier wit. In his exchange of letters to Thomas Jefferson, for instance, he fired off as twice as many letters as he received. Although often bombastic in his criticisms (especially where the "bastard brat of a Scotch pedlar", Alexander Hamilton, was concerned), Adams' delight in conversation meant that he'd mend bridges with people like Jefferson or Mary Otis Warren just so he could lock horns with them again. Although by the time he died Adams was regarded as highly as Jefferson, throughout the 19th century his reputation was steadily surpassed by his old friend, who sometimes seemed to be shadowing Washington. Ellis attributes this to the triumph of Jacksonian democracy, which had and less use for Adams' caution, and still less for his philosophic intransigence.

For my own part, I have found Adams endearing and redoubtable ever since discovering him via 1776 and David McCullough. Although self-conscious about his frailties, particularly his vanity and temper, that never stopped him from charging ahead in a roar, with a mouth firing off fusillades. He had a rare energy that left him only when the grave took him.

Steve says

<http://bestpresidentialbios.com/2013/...>

"Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams" by Joseph J. Ellis was published in 1993. Though it remains a relatively well-read title on our second president, in terms of sheer popularity and acclaim it has been overshadowed by more recent John Adams biographies. Of the modern books on Adams in my library (everything since Page Smith's series) "Passionate Sage" is one of the oldest and seemingly the most unique.

Somewhat to my surprise, "Passionate Sage" is not actually a biography at all. Instead, it is more a character analysis of John Adams and, at times, almost as much a book of philosophy as of history. That fact alone makes it no more or less interesting to me than the traditional Adams biographies I'm reading, but does make it difficult to directly compare this work to the others.

Ellis' key thesis is quickly proposed: that John Adams (at least as of the date of publication) remains one of the most misunderstood and underappreciated of American's Founding Fathers. In defending this thesis, Ellis uses his book to examine, explore, dissect, analyze and penetrate the character of Adams principally through his writings – to his wife Abigail, with his son John Quincy, with Thomas Jefferson during his retirement years and with multitudes of others. Also used as evidence are his publications such as his Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America published in three parts in 1787 and his Thoughts on Governments which he wrote in 1776.

The first third or so of the book is essentially a compendium of the author's conclusions on Adams – almost a summary I would expect to find at the end of a traditional biography. This portion of the book often presumes a degree of familiarity with Adams which some readers may not possess. Mitigating this somewhat is the fact that the author's line of reasoning is laid before the reader in significant detail, with reference back to primary sources.

The mid-section of the book was a thoughtful, but often dry and overly academic, discourse on Adams' political philosophies as revealed through his "retirement years" letters with Thomas Jefferson (written between 1812 and 1826, when they both died) and his correspondence with (and reaction to) John Taylor who in 1814 wrote a comprehensive critique of Adams' three-volume Defence work nearly thirty years earlier. Though quite interesting at times, this portion of his book often leaves the casual reader bogged down in detail which seems unnecessary to all but the doctoral-level history (or philosophy) student.

The remainder of the book covers the last decade or so of John Adams' life, focusing particularly on his political philosophies and core principles as evidenced by his letters to son John Quincy and daughter-in-law Louisa Catherine, who in later years almost seemed to serve as a surrogate Abigail (before her death in 1818 she had been John's most reliable correspondent).

Overall, "Passionate Sage" proves to be a successful, thought-provoking analysis of John Adams, published a decade before the better-known McCullough book and some fifteen years before the HBO mini-series which popularized this early American hero. Though it is not a biography of Adams, at its core it is an interesting and convincing book. Unfortunately, it often wandered a bit within chapters and explored tangents with unnecessary fervor. In addition, I often had the sense when reading this book of being in class, taking notes furiously while listening to a lecturing professor, hoping for everything to become clear in the end. And in the end, the core message is clear, but the journey was not carefree or unobstructed.

For the serious student of political philosophy or someone wishing to more finely calibrate Adam's political perspectives against those of his peers, "Passionate Sage" is a well-argued and thorough analysis. For its purpose it is, without a doubt, an excellent book. But for the more casual reader of history, or someone seeking a good introduction to the life and times of John Adams, there are several better places to begin the journey.

Overall rating: 3¾ stars

Rebecca says

John Adams was a well read, shrewd political thinker and a realist who never mastered the calm exterior of Washington or the lyrical writing of Jefferson. He was well aware of his flaws but this makes him more human and even more accessible than others of his generation. His view is often forgotten or dismissed as it

does not fit into the mythology of America, but it was and is needed as it balances the idealistic views we often associate with Jefferson.

Paul Arbogast says

Good book on Adams, one of the most forgotten Founders.

Kirsten says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Adams has become my favorite founding father because he, like myself, cannot learn to keep his mouth shut to save his life. Or in his case his legacy. Adams was a man ahead of his time his respect and friendships with learned woman was breath of fresh air. Humorous, interesting and provides content that is timely in our current quest to continue this experiment with democracy.

John Windt says

Excellent, excellent, excellent! A new found appreciation regarding John Adams after reading this book. A wonderful portrait of the Sage of Quincy.

Lauren Albert says

Ellis does a great job of showing Adams as the complex man he was--he was a perfect example of the kind of person whose flaws and strengths cannot be separated. He was a realist and that didn't lead to his popularity--in his own time or later. As Ellis wonderfully writes: "Finally, he was linked historically with Jefferson as the supreme embodiment of the American dialogue: he was the words and Jefferson was the music of the ongoing pageant begun in 1776; he was the 'is,' Jefferson was the 'ought' of American politics." 213 Yet, though a political realist, he was personally passionate about friendship and could not hold a grudge against someone who had attacked him, as Ellis writes, "he could forgive and forget, not because he had achieved stoic detachment, but because he had never lost a childlike impulse to share his deepest personal feelings." While being a brilliant thinker, Adams manages also to make you feel like he is everybody's favorite curmudgeonly uncle.

Some of my other favorite quotes:

"Adams objected to Jeffersonian rhetoric because it tended to rhapsodize about the omniscience of popular majorities in much the same way that medieval defenders of papal and monarchical power had claimed a direct connection to the divine. For Adams, the threat to the American republic could just as easily come from the left as the right; democratic majorities were just as capable of tyranny as popes and kings." 130

"The best republics will be virtuous,' he noted in the Defence, 'and have been so; but we may hazard a conjecture, that the virtues have been the effect of the well ordered constitution, rather than the cause.'" 149

“Adams kept insisting that he was not celebrating the enduring social divisions within America at all; he was only calling attention to their existence, refusing to believe the lovely lie that the American environment acted as a kind of solvent that dissolved away all social distinctions and class differences.” 158

“one of his deepest political convictions: namely, that comprehensive theories of politics were invariably too neat and rational to capture the maddening messiness of the real world.” 172
