THE LAST AMERICAN ARTISTOCRAT:

The Brilliant Life and Improbable Education of Henry Adams

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The Last American Artistocrat:
The Brilliant Life and Improbable Education of Henry Adams B
By David S. Brown
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DAVID S. BROWN HAS PROVIDED AN ENGAGING EXAMINATION of Henry Adams in his new biography. He tracks Adams' career, thinking, and contributions to American letters with great skill, researching much like his subject, extensively. He repeatedly makes note of his general thesis that Adams straddled two worlds very well, but is also critical of him and candid about his flaws. One cannot count the times he notes that Adams' imagination moved easily and often from present to past and vice versa. The book, however, is crisp with short trenchant chapters, all coming together symphonically.

When the much-venerated Adams was offered the chance to write a biography of John Randolph for the respected *American Statesmen Series*, edited by John Torrey Morse, he jumped at the chance. Adams understood the character of Randolph, who was one of the most significant, influential, and colorful Speakers of the House of Representatives (and later Senator) of his day during the early American republic. When Randolph was a young man, Henry's great-grandad, John Adams, was the second President. He spanned

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a quickly changing world, much like Henry Adams, and it is no wonder that Adams agreed to write his biography.

John Randolph was, however, what the kids today might call "cray-cray," to suggest "crazy." A more cultivated view may say he was "eccentric," or "touched," and many of his contemporaries disliked him. He was also a rich, influential, and stolid plantation man, comfortable bringing his hunting dogs into the halls of Congress, along with a retinue of slaves.

Famously, Randolph fought a duel with another link to Adams' past, Henry Clay, who was closely linked politically with Adams' grandfather, President John Quincy Adams. A tablature at a busy street near Chain Bridge in northern Virginia marks the spot where the duel took place. Randolph took a wide shot from Clay, then ended the duel by firing into the air.

Clay was contrary to Randolph. Clay was trans-alpine from the new part of America across the Appalachians, served as Quincy Adams' Secretary of State, and helped, unwittingly, to usher in the Jacksonian "Democracy," which Henry Adams was critical of in his writing. Brown's views are clear in his persuasive book, but he could have included more of Clay in relation to Randolph and Adams' grandfather, as Clay played such a pivotal role leading up to and, arguably, delaying the Civil War. This delay, of course, advantaged the North in the prosecution of the War. Brown explains that Adams really never understood the major impact of the American Civil War when he served as a secretary to the America ambassador to England, his father Charles Francis Adams. He never recognized that slavery was the fundamental struggle of a war that was finally beginning to bring its end! This comes out clarion clear in Brown's book.

As noted by Brown, Morse then later refused to accept Adams' biography of Aaron Burr for the *American Statesman Series*, saying Burr was "no statesman." Burr, arguably, the most infamous dueler in American history killed Alexander Hamilton during the early republic. Burr later was accused of treason by Thomas Jefferson. He was reputed to have planned an invasion of Mexico to make himself ruler there, as is later recorded dramatically by Adams. Rejecting Henry's Burr biography proposal was a major mistake by Morse, but also one that can be understood because of the sentiments of his times, and while the memory of Burr's transgressions were still raw.

When shunned by him, Adams took his notes regarding Burr and put them (to the discredit of Morse's series) in the approximate 150 pages devoted to Burr in Adams' nine-volume *History of the United States of Amer-*

ica During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison. This is a must read for any serious student of early American (or Atlantic) history, as is Brown's biography of Adams.

Norman Mailer would later write that he figured himself as the great grandson of Henry Adams. Mailer borrowed Adams' use of the narrational third person to present himself, and plowed this narrational stance into many of his major works. Not only learning from Adams, Mailer went on to typify the garrulous qualities of his own day, much like Adams' sometimes splenetic nature and, at times, dialogue, of his day. This is brought out very well in Brown's biography.

Both Mailer and Adams wanted to be on the political inside, but American letters and learning profited more because they were kept somewhat on the outside. Both were too well read and too volatile to be in the inside. Both then commented extensively, while loving and exploiting the rotations they were in, on what was happening in the high politics of the United States and the world, which was changing dramatically in the times of each author / observer's time.

Henry was maybe the last gasp in letters of the end of the post-colonial world in the United States that he inherited only to see it perish, and lived to see a new America gaining colonies overseas. Yet, he chronicled both by being in them, writing about them, and creating, arguably, modern historical writing. He was prolific. He was also a period piece where later generations have taken note of his, now obvious, flaws judged through a modern lens. The book under review is measured in its presentation of Adams, and this is a strength. Brown clearly demonstrates the crises Adams experienced, his resolve to surmount them, and his subject's brilliance.

Adams understood that he straddled a changing world. The post-colonial past was fast passing. The Gilded Age was bolting forward with canals, replaced by railroads, money politics, and the dying bastions of the southern Jeffersonian plantation culture, as well as Boston's brahmin national lead. The American West was opening (unfortunately described by Brown as the "post Appalachian west"), and the whole world was changing. Adams had the acumen to foresee this, and then write of the changes happening. This was exploited in his novels and much more in his non-fiction. Yet, he was always a grandee, as so deftly recorded in *The Last American Aristocrat*.

It is a thick book that must unavoidably repeat some material already written, but it provides a unique and critical glimpse of Adams. Brown's

book is fast-fisted and worthy of the punch. Adams once devoted many pages to the color blue in Norman cathedral glass windows, which makes for wonderful reading if one can stay awake. And, if you can, you should, because this portrait by Adams is worth the extra coffee. Brown's book is also worthy of the read.

Brown's thesis is clear from the start, and a close reader can find it throughout his rich depiction of Adams' writing and his social career. All told, David S. Brown has given us a beautifully written new biography to advance the understanding of Henry Adams' legacy.