

## The Library of America interviews Gordon S. Wood about John Adams

In connection with the publication in April 2011 of [\*John Adams: Revolutionary Writings 1755–1775\*](#) and [\*John Adams: Revolutionary Writings 1775–1783\*](#), both volumes edited by Gordon S. Wood, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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*John Adams: Revolutionary Writings 1755–1775 begins when Adams was starting out as a lawyer and ends on the eve of the American Revolution. John Adams: Revolutionary Writings 1775–1783 takes us from the Revolution until Adam’s successful conclusion of the Treaty of Paris ending the war. You have written that “None of the other Founders passed on such a rich and revealing body of personal documents as Adams did.” How are Adams’s documents different and what portrait of him emerges from these volumes?*

Adams was the best and most colorful stylist among the Founders. Although Jefferson is widely regarded as the smoothest writer, Adams is by far the most engaging and imaginative. His vividly descriptive prose is supremely quotable. Adams wears his heart on his sleeve and reveals all of his ambitions, doubts, and insecurities, especially in his diary, which is one of the greatest and most readable in all of American literature. Here are some diary entries from 1759 when Adams was a twenty-three-year-old lawyer: “Reputation ought to be the perpetual subject of my thoughts, and Aims of my Behaviour. How shall I gain a Reputation! How shall I Spread an Opinion of myself as a Lawyer of distinguished Genius, Learning, and Virtue. . . . What am I doing? Shall I sleep away my whole 70 years. No by every Thing I swear I will renounce the Contemplative, and betake myself to an active roving Life by Sea or Land, or else I will attempt some uncommon unexpected Enterprise in Law. . . . I will watch my Opportunity, to speak in Court, and will strike with surprize—suprize Bench, Bar, Jury, Auditors and all.” No other Founder revealed his ambition in this manner.

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*Benjamin Franklin once described Adams as a man who “means well for his Country, is always an honest Man, often a Wise One, but sometimes and in some things, absolutely out of his senses.” Does this description tell us more about Adams—or Franklin?*

Adams never hid his jealousy and resentment of the other Founders, especially Benjamin Franklin. In 1782 he wrote to an English friend about Franklin, who, he said, “must make himself a Man of Consequence by piddling with Men who had no title. . . . But thus it is, that Men of great Reputations may do as many Weak Things as they please, and to remark their Mistakes is to envy them. . . . His base jealousy of me and Sordid Envy of my commission for making Peace . . . have Stimulated him to attempt an assassination upon my character.” Franklin no doubt knew of Adams’s opinion of him, but what probably led to Franklin’s remark was Adams’s letters to the chief French minister, the Comte de Vergennes, in which he repeatedly lectured him on how he ought to treat the United States.

*On December 18, 1765, Adams wrote in his diary “The Year 1765 has been the most remarkable Year of my Life.” This was the year thirty-year-old Adams entered the life of public discourse by first publishing “A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law”—which argued that the freedoms Americans sought did not violate British law—and then his “Instructions to Braintree’s Representative Concerning the Stamp Act”—a document from which certain phrases jump like firebrands: “no taxation without representation” and “we never can be Slaves.” Aren’t these surprising documents to come from someone who then had the largest law practice in Massachusetts?*

Not at all. Adams was certainly a firebrand and one of the leaders of the move toward American independence, but his involvement in the Revolution was not at all about increasing his income as an attorney. He did resent the ruling families in Massachusetts, “the better sort of people,” who had “all the great Notions, of high Family,” but, more important, he shared the widespread American feeling that imperial authority three thousand miles away should not control the destiny of the people of Massachusetts. Although he talked about the rights of Englishmen, his affection and loyalty in 1765 belonged to his colony of Massachusetts.

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*Abigail Adams was the great love—and correspondent—of Adams’s life. Because they were apart for so much of their lives they exchanged more than a thousand letters. Both volumes feature many of his letters to her. How different is the Adams in the letters to Abigail from the Adams we see in his other letters, diary, and autobiography?*

Adams’s letters to Abigail are wonderful. In his letters he is loving, humorous, preachy, learned, and saucy. He speaks to her with almost complete abandon, revealing all of his sensuous and vulnerable nature. His letters to others are more circumspect. His diary, of course, is even more revealing of his feelings. Both his letters to Abigail and his diary tell us what he really thinks about people and events. His letters courting Abigail Smith are especially priceless. In one of 1764 he addresses her as “Miss Adorable” and says that “By the same Token that the Bearer hereof *satt up* with you last night I hereby order you to give him, as many Kisses, and as many Hours of your Company after 9 O’Clock as he shall please to Demand and charge them to my Account.” In another of 1763 he tells her that “I mount this moment for that noisy, dirty Town of Boston, where Parade, Pomp, Nonsense, Frippery, Folly, Foppery, Luxury, Polliticks, and the soul-Confounding Wrangles of the Law will give me the Higher Relish for Spirit, Taste and Sense, at Weymouth, next Sunday.” With letters like these it is not surprising that she agreed to marry him.

*Adams filled his letters with colorful details. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Adams, David McCullough wrote “In another time, under different circumstances, [Adams] might have become a great novelist.” Do you have favorite passages in which he demonstrates this talent?*

McCullough is correct. Here, for example, is Adams’s private description of his Braintree minister:

“P[arson] W[ibird] is crooked, his Head bends forward. . . . His Nose is a large roman Nose with a prodigious Bunch Protuberance, upon the upper part of it. His mouth is large and irregular, his teeth black and foul and craggy. . . . His Eyes are a little squinted, his Visage is long, and lank, his Complexion wan, his Cheeks are fallen, his Chin is long, large, and lean. . . . When he prays at home, he raises one Knee upon the Chair, and throws one Hand over the back of it. With the other he scratches his Neck, pulls the Hair of his Whigg. . . . When he Walks, he heaves away, and swaggs on one side, and steps almost twice as far with one foot, as the other. . . .

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When he speakes, he cocks and rolls his Eyes, shakes his Head and jerks his Body about.”

Henry Fielding could not have done better.

*More than two hundred pages in the first volume are devoted to the remarkable series of exchanges in 1774 and 1775 that Adams had as “Novanglus” with the loyalist essayist “Massachusettensis,” whom Adams believed to be his good friend Jonathan Sewall. Did Adams’s essays succeed in persuading readers to his way of thinking?*

We have no easy way of evaluating the effect his “Novanglus” essays had on Massachusetts opinion. They were so learned and so full of citations from a wide variety of historical and legal sources that probably only a few readers could follow them. Adams, like other Revolutionary leaders, did establish the point that the colonies were not under Parliament’s authority at all but were tied only to the king. I believe that this is the first published collection of both sides of the debate, of the writings of both “Massachusettensis” and “Novanglus,” since 1819.

*“The Resolution on Establishing New Governments,” dated May 15, 1776, that Adams submitted to the Continental Congress lays out the grievances the colonies had against the Crown in language strikingly similar to that finally included in The Declaration of Independence. Does Adams get too little credit for what he contributed to that document?*

I think Adams was correct when he said that his May resolutions were “an Epoque, a decisive Event,” and tantamount to a declaration of independence. As he told Abigail on May 17, 1776, “I have Reasons to believe that no Colony, which shall assume a Government under the People, will give it up. There is something very unnatural and odious in a Government 1000 Leagues off.” He always felt that his contribution to bringing about independence went unappreciated, especially after the 1790s when Jefferson began to be lauded as the “author” of the Declaration of Independence. After all, the Declaration was a committee report, and Jefferson was simply the draftsman. Adams’s crucial role in bringing about independence in the Continental Congress has tended to get forgotten.

*On July 3, 1776, the day after twelve of the thirteen colonies voted for independence, Adams wrote to Abigail: “Yesterday the greatest Question was*

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*decided, which ever was decided in America, and a greater perhaps, never was or will be decided among Men.” But Adams’s grand vision, enthusiasm, and expectations for the country sour somewhat over the years. Can we trace the path and cause of that change in his writings?*

Certainly. Adams never had an optimistic view of human nature, and his experience in the Congress and abroad only deepened his suspicion that his fellow Americans might not have the character to sustain a republican government. As early as 1776 he expressed his doubts about America’s capacity for virtue. “I have seen all along my Life, such Selfishness, and Littleness even in New England, that I sometimes tremble to think that, altho We are engaged in the best Cause that ever employed the Human Heart, yet the Prospect of success is doubtfull not for Want of Power or of Wisdom, but of Virtue.” By the time he came to write his *Defense of the Constitutions of the United States* in 1787 he had as dark a view of the American character as that of any critic in our history.

*Adams’s 1779 document, “The Report of a Constitution or Form of Government for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts” is less than thirty pages and yet it has served as the blueprint for the still working charter of Massachusetts, the oldest working government charter in the world. What about this document explains its enduring effectiveness?*

The Massachusetts constitution was written much later than the other revolutionary state constitutions, and thus it avoids some of the earlier mistakes. The executive is stronger, with a limited veto; the senate is more formidable; and the judiciary is independent. It resembles the federal Constitution of 1787 more closely than any of the other revolutionary state constitutions. It was also drawn up by a special convention, and it provided for popular ratification—practices that were followed by the drafters of the federal Constitution of 1787 and subsequent state constitution-makers.

*Except for a short three-month visit home in 1779, Adams is occupied with diplomatic missions in Europe from the middle of 1778 until the end of the period covered in Volume Two. How do his experiences in Europe change his thinking about the future of the American experiment?*

I think he developed a much deeper suspicion of France and the other European powers than he had earlier. He lost much if not all of the utopian thinking about international politics and diplomacy expressed in his Model Treaty of 1776 and became much more cynical about the world. “America,” he

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said in 1781, “is treated unfairly and ungenerously by Europe.” But what could one expect? “When nations are corrupted, and grown generally vicious when they are intoxicated with Wealth or power, and by this means delivered over to the Government of the base passions of their Nature, it is very natural that they should act an irrational part.”

*In your book Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different you argue that Adams believed America could never be truly egalitarian and that this led him to work much more stridently than any of the other Founders to defend the traditional idea of a mixed or balanced government. While Adams did not participate in the framing of the Constitution, should we give more credit to his influence on how it turned out?*

I think his influence on the federal Constitution was indirect. Many including James Madison mocked the first volume of Adams’s *Defense of the Constitutions of the United States* in 1787. But his Massachusetts constitution was a model for those who thought about stable popular governments, with its separation of powers, its bicameral legislature, its independent judiciary, and its strong executive. So it was his Massachusetts constitution if anything that influenced people. It was not the structure of Adams’s balanced government that offended people; it was his attempt to justify that structure by the traditional notion of social estates—that the executive represented the monarchical estate, the senate the aristocratic estate, and the house of representatives the estate of the people. This rationale, which justified the mixed constitution of Great Britain, might have made some sense in 1776, but by 1787 most American thinkers had come to believe that all parts of their balanced governments represented in one way or another the sovereign people. They had left the Aristotelian idea of mixed estates—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—way behind. Adams had not, and his stubbornness on this point caused him no end of trouble.

*Adams had occasion to work closely with Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington in the Continental Congress—and even more closely with Franklin and Jefferson on his diplomatic missions abroad. What portraits of the other Founders emerge from Adams’s writings? How accurate or skewed do you think they are?*

Actually I think his descriptions of the personalities of Franklin and Jefferson and others were pretty accurate. It is only when he felt he was wronged by them that he lets loose his anger and resentment. He is impressed

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with Jefferson's learning, but noted his silence during the debates in the Congress: "I never heard him utter three Sentences together." His description of Franklin in a letter to Abigail in 1775 is laudatory. Only when he experiences all the adulation paid to Franklin in Paris does he begin to change his tune. Franklin may be a great philosopher, he told his diary in 1779, but "as a Legislator in America he has done very little." By 1782 he had come to feel for Franklin "no other sentiments than Contempt or Abhorrence."

*In 1782 Adams succeeded in getting the Netherlands to recognize the American republic and, perhaps even more remarkable, secured a two million dollar loan from the Dutch bankers, achievements Adams considered the greatest diplomatic triumphs of his life. How important was this loan to the finances of the infant republic? Do his letters help us understand how he pulled off these improbable feats?*

This was a very significant achievement, and one that Adams had every right to be proud of. Not only was the loan essential to America's financial survival, but getting the Netherlands to recognize the fledgling republic was crucial in establishing America's position in the world. Adams's letters reveal his persistence and determination to win over the Dutch against all odds and to convince them and the other peoples of Europe of the potential greatness of the United States and of the importance of the Revolution to the world. Americans, he wrote in 1780, believed that their "revolution is as much for the benefit of the generality of Mankind in Europe, as for their own."

*Volume Two includes two extended exchanges of letters Adams wrote in 1780: the twelve "Letters from a Distinguished American" argue for Great Britain's recognition of America's independence; the twenty-six "Replies to Hendrik Calkoen" address a Dutch politician's concerns about the new nation. How influential were these letters in forming European opinion about young America?*

It is of course impossible to measure their influence on European opinion. The "Distinguished American" letters were garbled because Adams wrote them as coming from a British subject. And the Calkoen letters, written in 1780, were not published until 1786. Instead of measuring their influence, these letters should properly be used to reveal Adams's thinking about his country at crucial moments. Whatever his private doubts about America's character, he offered a fulsome defense of the United States in these letters.

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*Volume Two ends before Adams is elected vice president or president. His career continued for another forty years. How many more volumes of his writings can we expect?*

We can expect two more volumes, which, unfortunately, will be slower in appearing, since most of the papers for the period from 1784 to Adams's death in 1826 are not yet in modern letterpress editions; indeed, many are still in manuscript form.

*There's a superstition that historians who write about the eighteenth century fall under a spell of enchantment such that they must continue writing about that period forever. When did you first fall under the spell?*

In graduate school. It's a great period to write about because so much is changing. It's a period of world-historic revolutions—the moment when the Western world becomes modern.