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The idealism of Henry Adams

By Zachary Karabell
September 14, 2005

In recent years, Americans have been obsessed with the period during which the Revolution was fought, the Constitution written and George Washington served as president. But while this formative phase set the agenda, it was during the administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison – the country's third and fourth chief executives – when theory gave way to the rough-and-tumble realities of the world. While these two men might have preferred to preside over an agrarian republic humming with activity and untroubled by the federal government, Jefferson and Madison instead were forced to use that government to steer the burgeoning nation between the Scylla of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Charybdis of an arrogant British navy.

The dyspeptic historian Henry Adams (1838-1918) believed that these two presidencies were pivotal to the formation of the United States. Later in life, when he became disgusted with the politics of the Gilded Age, Adams morphed into a hard-bitten skeptic about American democracy, famous for his scathing critiques of politics and politicians. But as Garry Wills rightly notes in an unconventional new book, at heart he was an idealist who believed in the greatness of the Constitution and the promise the country held.

It was, however, an idealism tempered by a healthy respect for human limitations, and that was nowhere more evident than in what Adams wrote about the 16 years spanning the administrations of Jefferson and Madison. Before he aged into the author of his most famous work, the partly autobiographical, partly historical "The Education of Henry Adams," he penned one of the seminal – and now largely unread – multi-volume histories of the early American republic. In it, he explained, and celebrated, how the United States inadvertently acquired a strong central government capable of playing a significant role not just in North America but in the rest of the world. It did so, Adams contended, even though Jefferson, Madison and their party wanted the exact opposite: a weak government detached from international affairs.

According to Wills, both this period in history and Adams the historian have been overlooked and misrepresented. To rectify that, and to introduce the subtlety and genius of Adams to a generation obsessed with the founding fathers as a means to help understand the present, Wills has distilled Adams' nine-volume history of America during the administrations of Jefferson and Madison in "Henry Adams and the Making of America."

Wills is an unabashed admirer of Adams, for his fierce convictions, his rigorous discipline as a scholar, his integrity and his knack for noticing what others missed. Among other things, he credits Adams with elevating Napoleon into a major player in the emergence of the United States. Because Adams thought "internationally while telling a national tale," he recognized that the destiny of the United States has always been shaped by forces beyond its borders and beyond its control. That is, of course, a relevant lesson for today, and one that Americans have not fully integrated.

Wills also credits Adams for changing the way history was written in the United States. Because Adams insisted on original documents as the foundation of everything he wrote, he helped shift history writing away from conjecture and toward evidence, away from imagination and toward rigorous analysis of facts. While it is a given today that historians rely on archival sources, in the 19th century history writing was often philosophy enlivened by the past. That transformation has dominated the writing of history ever since.

It is not surprising that Wills – one of the preeminent essayists, historians and public intellectuals in the United States today – should be drawn to Adams, one of the preeminent essayists, historians and public intellectuals of his day. It is surprising,

however, that he has chosen to write about Adams in this particular fashion.

Wills devotes the bulk of his time to a meticulous, volume-by-volume analysis of what Adams wrote. Unlike a similar dissection of **Lincoln**'s economical Gettysburg Address, which won Wills the Pulitzer Prize, dissecting Adams' lengthy historical work requires Wills to spend a considerable amount of time retelling that history. While he does that with great erudition, there is a limit to how brilliant one can be while condensing nine volumes into one.

The unfortunate result is that we get neither the best of Adams nor the best of Wills. While Wills does sprinkle the retelling with his own analysis, the balance tilts toward the former. Because he is trying to illuminate someone else's historical account, however, much of the color gets jettisoned. Less interested in Adams as writer than Adams as historian, Wills gives us history crammed with ideas and names linked by skeletal facts. It requires more than a passing familiarity with what happened during these years, as well as a well-formed picture of the main characters, to appreciate the efforts of either writer.

That said, Wills has an infectious passion for the subject. He is outraged that Adams "has become a wholly owned subsidiary of English departments, while he is neglected by history departments." He is perturbed that so many have gotten Adams so wrong, and that the lessons of the nine volumes have been overlooked. And in the pungent, sharp pages that conclude the book, Wills leaves us with several searing conclusions about history and American attitudes toward the past. Americans, he says, are forever looking to the past for answers. But the past, as both Adams and Wills know so well, isn't simple. Trying to learn clear, unambiguous lessons from the founding fathers, writes Wills, "diverts attention from what is really happening in the world. It constantly cycles back to childish illusions."

Like all of us, the founders were fallible. What Wills and Adams both grasp is that the failures are as meaningful as the successes. The core of Adams' thesis is that Jefferson failed to create the republic he dreamt of and instead created the nation we have.

Adams appreciated the irony, and reveled in it. But today, laments Wills, it seems that we cannot bear to confront the nitty-gritty of the past and want instead facile heroism. Too many of us fetishize the founders and try to make the Constitution into a shrine not to be disturbed.

"We often hear attacks on presentism," writes Wills, "without the acknowledgment that there can be such as a thing as pastism – the belief that the past is beyond our challenge or judgment." Wills uses Adams to remind us that the past is there to be engaged. Both of them offer us hard history, complicated history, messy history. It is history we need now more than ever, because if we can't examine the failures of our past, how can we possibly come to grips with the failures of our present?

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