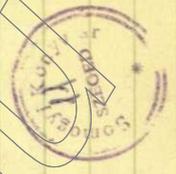


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Bubbling With Ideas

JOHN ADAMS AND THE PROPHETS OF PROGRESS. By Zoltan Haraszti. 362 pp. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. \$5.

By DUMAS MALONE

THE countrymen of John Adams ought to know him better for the man, the thinker and the writer he actually was. His family has certainly not been neglected and his patriotic services in the American Revolution have been widely recognized, but there has been much misunderstanding of him from that point on. In the present work Zoltan Haraszti, the Keeper of Rare Books and Editor of Publications in the Boston Public Library (where most of the books of the second President are stored), gives good reasons for this misunderstanding and does a great deal to correct it. He has undoubtedly made an important contribution to our knowledge of Adams, and, in my opinion, has written a fascinating book.

Perhaps the author underestimates the great and growing regard in which John Adams is held by scholars, including a number if not all of the current Jeffersonians, but he is quite right in saying that this political maverick has never been taken up by a party, that many of his most interesting qualities have been inadequately presented, and that he lacked some of the most important elements of personal popularity anyway. The difficulty has not arisen from

Origins

ALL of Adams' thoughts and actions had, ultimately, a common origin. Wisely he confessed that wrangling over philosophy was essentially futile. "I love to read these fluent and flip-pant metaphysical disquisitions," he commented on one of Frederick's letters, adding, "but I never get any knowledge or satisfaction from them. A song, a romance, a tune is equally instructive and often more so."—"John Adams and the Prophets of Progress."

the inarticulateness of the man, for he, like his most famous descendants, was highly articulate, bubbling over with ideas and vivid expressions. But his formal writings are ponderous, his vital and exuberant letters have been incompletely published, and, partly because of the very impetuosity of his nature, his philosophy has often seemed distorted. What we need is a selected edition of his formal writings, which contain an incredible amount of dull and undifferentiated quotation, and a full edition of his spicy correspondence.

Throughout life this highly

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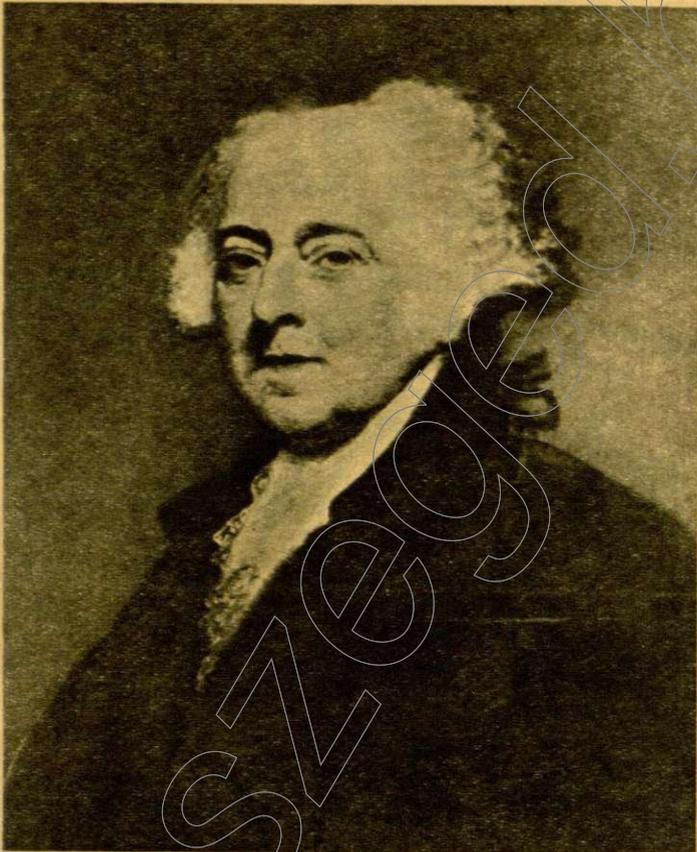


Illustration from "John Adams and the Prophets of Progress."
John Adams. From a portrait by Gilbert Stuart, 1798.

intellectual man sought to apply the hose of common sense to the foibles and sentimentalities of his time. He was always criticizing something or somebody, with results that were often devastating, but he was more than a destructive force. He was one of the best political thinkers that his country has ever had, and he still has something to say that is decidedly worth hearing.

Mr. Haraszti quotes him as saying in his extreme old age: "The fundamental doctrine of my political creed is that despotism, or unlimited sovereignty, or absolute power, is the same in a majority of a popular assembly, an aristocratic council, an oligarchic junto, and a single emperor. Equally arbitrary, cruel, bloody, and in every respect diabolical." Thus he was at heart much closer to Jefferson, who opposed all forms of tyranny, than to Hamilton, who was a consolidationist. His remedy was a balanced government, and it is by no means out of date, though many of the terms themselves have changed.

IN the first three chapters of this work, Mr. Haraszti provides an admirable introduction to the man, his philosophy, and his books. After that, attention is centered on his books—the few he wrote and the many he read. His library was comparable with that of Jefferson in size, and he wrote more extended comments in his books than his friend and rival did. These show that he was most interested in the eighteenth-century *philosophes*. His own comments on some of them run to 12,000 words.

In effect, he carried on a dialogue with these writers—such as Bolingbroke and Rousseau, Turgot and Mary Wollstone-

craft, Condorcet and Joseph Priestley. Most of them were philosophers of progress, and these comments comprise "the first critique of the doctrine of progress (as well as of the doctrine of regress) by an American." The dialogues themselves cannot be summarized, but they abound in acute observations on the part of Adams and will evoke many smiles from his readers. They vary in interest, but Mr. Haraszti puts each in its proper setting and they constitute a valuable commentary on the thinking of an age.

THE author says: "Adams berated the *philosophes* for their trust in abstract systems, their lack of experience, and their overweening self-confidence. * * * Yet, on the whole, he was more moderate than Burke; he did not reject indiscriminately all their ideas." He was not a blind reactionary but was apprehensive of the consequences of excess. He warned against the dangers of democracy, but was by no means a partisan of the rich. He had a sort of "inverted affection" for the group he ridiculed. Indeed, he was a sort of *philosophe*—in spite of himself.

He rather liked to shock people and thought it a weakness in a public man not to proclaim unpopular opinions. In his early reaction against the French Revolution he flirted with monarchical ideas and made reckless use of monarchical terms, while remaining a republican at heart. Perhaps no other prominent statesman of his time was so bad a politician, but perhaps no other was so realistic. He and Hamilton could never be added together, but he and Jefferson can be, and they amount to something that is exceedingly good.