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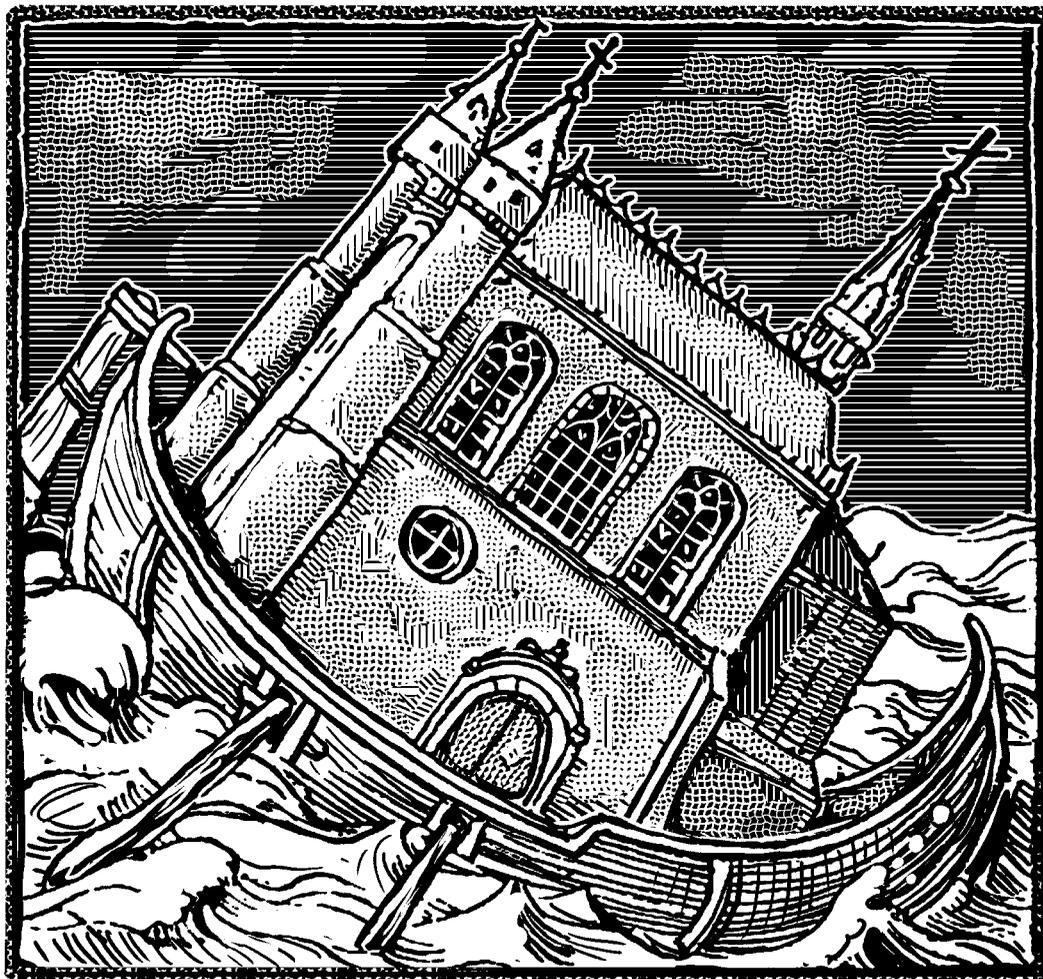
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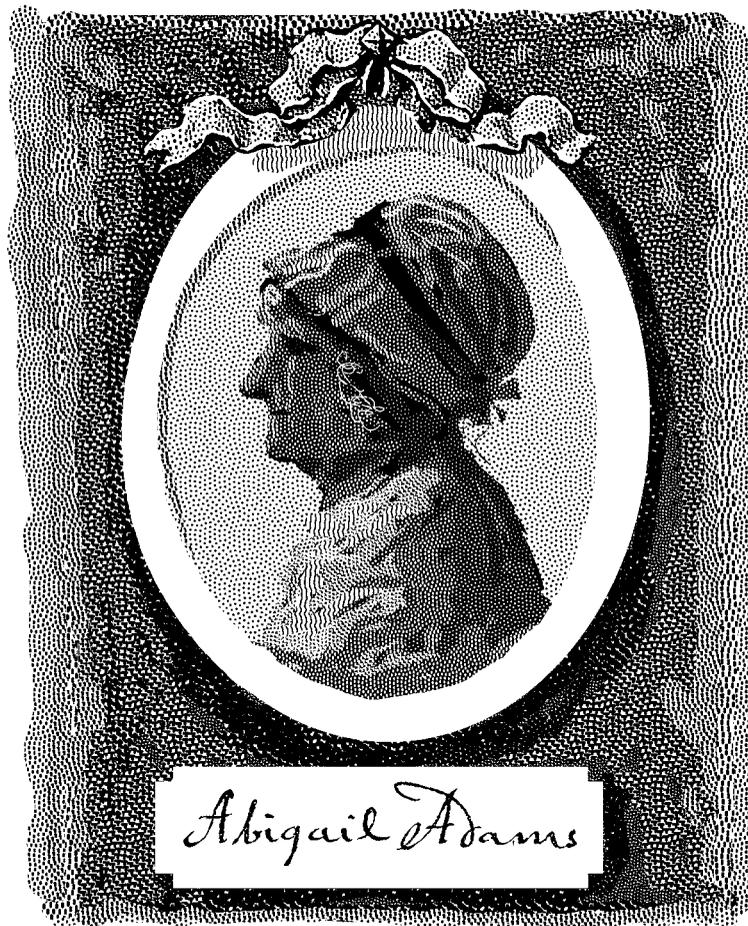
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Book Review by Dorothea Wolfson

REMEMBER THE LADIES

Abigail Adams: Letters, edited by Edith Gelles.
Library of America, 1180 pages, \$40



THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA EDITION OF Abigail Adams's *Letters* shows her correspondence moving seamlessly from the trivial to the sublime. Even her gossip offers philosophical gems and penetrating reflections on America's social and political life. The editor, Edith Gelles, a scholar at Stanford who has written two biographies of Abigail and one of John and Abigail together, has included previously unpublished letters, giving us a fresh look at many aspects of John Adams's wife and her world.

Gelles describes Abigail as "a homegrown Tocqueville," whose observations reveal as much as *Democracy in America's*. The comparison is apt. Like Alexis de Tocqueville, Adams meditates on what distinguishes America from Europe, particularly France. Both observers understood that the manners or "mores" of a democratic people, highly malleable, could either stabilize or upset self-government's foundations.

ADAMS'S LIFE (1744–1818) EMBODIED many qualities Tocqueville observed in 1831 during his trip to America, where he discerned the continuing Puritan influence. Her character, revealed in these letters, explains Tocqueville's belief that American women were superior to their European counterparts. And, finally, her marriage to her "dearest friend" John demonstrates what Tocqueville meant about the importance of the close conjugal tie in America, and how democratic love in its best sense was a union of equal minds and intertwined hearts, the surest foundation for democratic health and prosperity.

Adams mingled with America's founders and shared impressions of them in her correspondence. For example, she wrote of George Washington to her husband, "I was struck with General Washington.... Dignity with ease, and complacency, the Gentleman and Soldier look agreeably blended in him." Abi-

gail also captures the sublimated ambition of Washington when he served as president: "Yet this same [president] has so happy a faculty of appearing to accommodate & yet carrying his point, that if he was not really one of the best intentiond Men in the world he might be a very dangerous one."

She has especially interesting observations on Alexander Hamilton, disdained by her husband as "the bastard brat of a Scotch peddler." Abigail, in the wake of Hamilton's constant meddling in John's political fortunes, zeroed in on the love of fame as Hamilton's driving force. In a letter not included in Gelles's volume, Abigail called him

a Man ambitious as Julius Caesar, a subtle intriguer. His abilities would make him Dangerous if he was to espouse a wrong side. His thirst for Fame is insatiable. I have ever kept My Eye upon him.

HER FRIENDSHIP WITH THOMAS Jefferson, which had its ups and downs, comes alive in her letters. They shopped for each other: she requested silk slippers from France, for example, while he asked her to purchase a damask tablecloth set from England. In a letter to her sister she described Jefferson “as one of the choice ones of the Earth.” The admiration was mutual. In a letter to James Madison, Jefferson wrote that Mrs. Adams was “one of the estimable Characters on earth.”

Her friendship with Jefferson underwent great strain after the election of 1800 when Jefferson’s surrogates (in particular, the infamous Republican journalist James Callender) impugned her husband’s character. As a result, their correspondence ceased for nearly four years until she broke the ice when Jefferson’s daughter Polly died. Jefferson took advantage of the opening her condolence letter provided by reiterating how much he valued his friendship with both John and Abigail, one that had weathered deep political differences, he reminded. The only objection he ever had to John, Jefferson wrote Abigail, was the midnight appointment of Federalist judges before leaving the presidency in 1801.

For her part, Adams explained that the one offense she could not forgive Jefferson was supporting Callender, which rendered the third president a “rewarder and encourager of a Libeller.” This was too much of a betrayal for her—a “personal injury” that finally “cut asunder the Gordian knot” that had united the families in friendship. She even gloated a bit, noting how “the serpent you cherished and warmed, bit the hand that nourished it.” (Callender later turned on Jefferson by publishing stories that accused him of an affair with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves.) But Adams’s toughness was accompanied by deep wells of compassion. Citing Proverbs, she concluded her letter with the sentiment, “Faithful are the wounds of a Friend.”

Her letters invoke Proverbs frequently, and Psalms even more so. Fittingly, she is partial to Proverbs 31’s account of the “woman of valor,” whose “price is above rubies.” She refers to these verses throughout her correspondence as a template of sorts for conducting herself as a wife, mother, and, importantly, a learned woman. One letter discusses a London lecture series on the “Mechanisms and Motions of the Universe.” She writes that attending these lectures “was like going into a Beautiful Country, which I never saw before, a Country which our American Females are not permitted to visit or inspect.” Though females are limited to the “Study of Household Good,” she argues that as “rational Beings,”

they should be able to receive with “propriety... the highest possible cultivation of the mind.”

AT THE SAME TIME, ADAMS ACKNOWLEDGES that “having it all,” as we now say, is difficult. Being a learned woman is so hard, she lamented, that “I do not wonder they are considered as black swans,” since domestic duties prevent devoting time to intellectual pursuits. Yet unlike later generations of women, she did not protest a woman’s domestic role. “I shall only contend for Domestic Government, and think that best administered by the Female,” she wrote her husband.

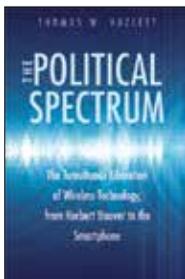
Indeed, her prodigious intellect notwithstanding, Abigail considered herself to be a wife and mother above all, roles she clearly relished. The love she felt for her husband hardly fits with today’s stereotypes of the Pu-

ritans. She described her love for John as “a spark of Celestial fire” that “will burn with Eternal vigor.” And yet for nearly half their first 20 years of marriage, John and Abigail lived apart while he served his country in Philadelphia and Europe. During the war years, her “domestic duties” included housing soldiers and refugees from Boston, managing a farm, investing in public lands (through an uncle, since women were not allowed), facing down a smallpox epidemic, losing her mother to dysentery, and burying an infant child, all while taking care of her other four young children. Her later letters depicting the death of her only surviving daughter “Nabby” to breast cancer, and her son, Charles, to alcoholism are poignant. In other words, Abigail saw herself first and foremost in terms of her relations to others—that is, as the dear wife

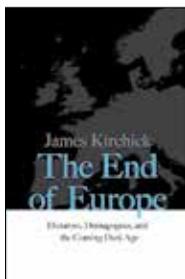
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of John, a doting mother and mother-in-law, as well as daughter, grandmother, aunt, niece, sister, and cousin.

HOW, THEN, DO WE RECONCILE ADAMS'S more "traditional" views about women with her most famous letter, written to her husband in March 1776? In it, she calls on her husband and his male colleagues to "remember the ladies." She also warns John, in a less quoted passage, to "remember [that] all men would be tyrants if they could" and that there are many "vicious and lawless" men who are not only threats to democratic government but to women, using them "with cruelty and indignity." She follows this hard-headed insight—which reflects the broader purposes of the American Revolution to defeat despotism—with a flirtatious threat of insurrection: "If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice or Representation."

The feminist consensus is that the "Remember the Ladies" letter fired the first salvo in the women's movement, and that Adams was the first in a line of American feminist thinkers extending to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem. Yet some biographers acknowledge the difficulty in reconciling the "feminist" with the Puritan, finding this juxtaposition "maddeningly contradictory." "How does one explain a conservative who advocated independence for America and equality for women?" asks one biographer quoted in "The Abigail Industry," an article by Gelles.

In fact, this collection demonstrates that Adams found no contradiction between reconciling concern for virtue with upholding women's dignity and equality. We see this especially in her comparisons between French and American women, echoes of which would later be found in Tocqueville.

In one letter, for example, Adams describes French dancers on stage in their "drawers." She writes, "I can never look upon a woman in such situations, without con-

ceiving all that adorns and Beautifies the female Character, delicacy modesty and diffidence, as wholly laid aside, and nothing of the woman but the Sex left." As immodest as the Parisian dancing girls may have been, they could not compare to the presence of so many prostitutes in the city—"52,000 licensed unmarried woman, Who are so lost to a sense of shame and virtue," she wrote, that they publicly register their names at the police station. Perhaps this was no surprise to Adams, who wrote of Paris that "pleasure is the business of life."

IN A 1785 LETTER SHE WROTE THAT IN France, the "doctrine of Reverencing thyself is little practiced among the Females of this Nation; for in this Idea if I comprehend it aright is included an incorruptible virtue joined to the strickest modesty." She tells her sister that the "American Ladies" are much admired in London and implores: "O my Country, my Country; preserve; preserve the little purity and simplicity of manners you yet possess. Believe me, they are jewells of inestimable value." One of her chief concerns was that her sons Thomas and John Quincy not marry European women when they went abroad with their father: "I hope my Dear Thomas will hold Yourself free, for an American wife." And when John Quincy wrote from London that he had fallen in love, Abigail responded that she hoped for "the Love I bear My Country, that the Syren, is at least *half Blood*," which Louisa Johnson, daughter of an English mother and American father, turned out to be.

Some of the most evocative letters in the collection are about the threat, but also the power, of French mores. In 1786, Adams made a pilgrimage to Leiden, Holland, a way station for Pilgrims journeying to America. She wrote: "I visited the Church at Leyden in which our forefathers worshipd when they fled from hierarchical tyranny and persecution. I felt a respect and veneration upon entering the Doors, like what the ancients paid to their Druids." Adams carried this spirit of her "forefathers" throughout Europe, standing apart from and judging rather harshly Eu-

ropean decadence and social hierarchy. As she wrote in one letter, "I hope however to find amongst the French Ladies manners more consistant with my Ideas of decency, or I shall be a mere recluse."

SHE WAS NOT, IN FACT, A RECLUSE IN France. She actively explored "many of the Beauties and some of the Deformities of this old World," as she wrote in 1785. She set about to study the manners of the French and surprisingly found that her puritan sensibilities were perhaps not as firm as she might have hoped. When a French lady with rouged cheeks "wraptruously put her Arms round a Gentleman and Salute him first upon one check and then upon the other, I consider it as a thing of mere course." Another letter confides, "The first dance which I saw upon the Stage shocked me [but].... Shall I speak a Truth and say that repeatedly seeing these Dances has worn off that disgust which I first felt, and that I see them now with pleasure."

Adams saw that a society's health crucially depends upon its women's equality and virtue. In Tocqueville's view, the success of the early American republic rested on its women being architects of democratic mores. These traditional values, as Adams would have pointed out, are compatible with women's full equality. Adams understood, in other words, the delicate equipoise democracy must strike between the older teachings, such as found in Proverbs 31, and the modern principle of equality.

The decadence that so appalled Adams in France—though she recognized its powerful allure—is now America's reality, where casual hookups and sex tapes engender fame, fortune, and power. It's a culture, alas, that all American women today must learn to navigate at their peril, and on which our political institutions now rest. In our context, Abigail's call to "Remember the Ladies" takes on an entirely new meaning, and could be addressed to both America's men and its women.

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