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Essay by Christopher Flannery

## JQA's AMBITION

*Diary of American greatness.*

IN HIS DIARY, FOR OCTOBER 31, 1846, 79-YEAR-OLD JOHN QUINCY Adams (JQA, as he refers to himself there) reflected that “[t]here has perhaps not been another individual of the human race...whose daily existence from early childhood to four score years has been noted down with his own hand so minutely as mine.” Of course, any vain nonentity could record his daily existence in mind-numbing detail, and there would not be an ounce of delight or instruction in it. But JQA is no vain nonentity, and his homerically ambitious diary is full of instruction and delight. He did not rank in greatness with his father, John Adams, or with George Washington, after whom he named his firstborn son, but he was high in the next rank of greatness, and his ambition soared even beyond the achievements of those great founders. (Speaking of rank, his father and mother were hurt and took offense at his naming of his first-born son; more, I’d like to think, because of the filial disloyalty than because of any unjust demotion in rank. He named his second son John.)

JQA’s ambition began with his parents’ ambitions for him. His mother, the formidable Abigail Adams, told him early on that he was destined to be a “guardian of his country’s laws and liberties.” He accepted that destiny. His father wrote him, when the 26-year-old was wavering a bit about his future: “You come into life with Advantages which will disgrace you if your success is médiocre.—And if you do not rise to the head of...your Country, it will be owing to your own *Laziness Slovenliness and Obstinacy*” (emphasis in the original).

JQA did rise to the head of his country, in his one term as president (1825-29), and he defended his country’s laws and liberties much more memorably in his eight years as secretary of state (1817-25). In those years, he created an American foreign policy dedicated to defending and perpetuating the American Revolution, a foreign policy that endured for the better part of a century. The spirit of it would still serve us well.

In a completely different role, JQA defended his country’s laws and liberties and strove to perpetuate the American Revolution in nine terms as a member of the House of Representatives (1831-48) after his one term as president. No president had ever served in the House after his term as chief executive, and Adams remains the only president to have done so. In those years in the House, he became known as “Old Man Eloquent” for his relentless resistance to what he called the Slavocracy. In many ways he anticipated Abraham Lincoln in taking his bearings from the Declaration of Independence and, whatever practical compromises he might feel to be necessary, insisting on treating slavery as an evil incompatible with the principles of the Revolution.

Animated by these principles, from his early 20s to his death on the floor of Congress 50 years later, he was a stalwart champion of the American Revolution in many learned, lengthy, eloquent, and influential public writings and speeches. A good recent selection is the new edition for Library of America, *John Quincy Adams: Speeches & Writings*, edited by David Waldstreicher, Distinguished Professor of History at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

JQA’s greatest ambition, however, rose above these estimable accomplishments. He pursued it privately in his diary, which he kept for 68 years, from the age of 12 in 1779 almost to his death in 1848. In

all, writing with a quill pen in a clean hand, often by candlelight, he produced 51 manuscript volumes, totaling more than 15,000 closely written pages. None seems to have been lost. The entire diary is accessible and searchable online courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society. In 2017, for the 250th anniversary of JQA’s birth, Library of America issued a two-volume reader’s edition of the diary also edited by David Waldstreicher, based on these original manuscript pages.

Samuel Flagg Bemis, whose two-volume biography (*John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* [1949] and *John Quincy Adams and the Union* [1956]) remains the best JQA biography yet written, considered JQA’s diary “the most important personal memoir in American history.” The editors of the definitive *Diary of John Quincy Adams, Volume 1: November 1779–March 1786* (1981) call the diary “the greatest diary, both in mass and substance, in American history.” This remains the scholarly consensus. If JQA were around today, he might well agree with it. But he would not be satisfied. He was so constituted that, like Groucho Marx, he was too proud to belong to any club that would accept him as a member. Any ambition he could achieve was beneath him.

THIS GENERAL APPROACH TO SELF-ASSESSMENT CAN BE SEEN in a few birthday diary entries over 25 very productive years.

July 11, 1787

“This day completes my twentieth year: and yet I am good for nothing, and cannot even, carry myself forward in the world.”

July 11, 1793

“Completed 26. Ah! to how little purpose.”

July 11, 1803

“I enter this day upon my thirty-seventh year, with sorrow to think how long I have lived, and to how little purpose.”

July 11, 1812

“I am forty-five years old—Two thirds of a long life are past, and I have done Nothing to distinguish it by usefulness to my Country, or to Mankind.”

Then, the epitome of unfulfilled ambition, in the entry with which we began, October 31, 1846, in his 80th year: “If my intellectual powers had been such as have [been] sometimes committed by the creator of man to single individuals of the species my diary would have been next to the holy scriptures the most precious and valuable book ever written by human hands.” JQA knew that “the conceptive power of mind was not conferred upon [him] by [his] maker,” so that his diary could not rise to be second only to Holy Scripture in its value to mankind. Nonetheless, he measured himself by that unachievable ambition to the end.

*Christopher Flannery is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books.*

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