

The Other Mrs Adams - Louisa Adams Review Article

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Todd Webb

If posterity remembered her at all, Louisa Catherine Adams probably knew that it would be as the other Mrs. Adams. She was the wife of John Quincy Adams, whose one-term presidency was arguably as disastrous as that of his father, John Adams. She was also the daughter-in-law of the formidable Abigail Adams, who, beginning in the 19th century, became a paragon of revolutionary womanhood. In her lifetime, and for a long time afterward, Louisa Catherine Adams was known as the woman who held a truly tremendous party

in honor of Andrew Jackson, perhaps the most extravagant that the city of Washington ever witnessed. As the newspaper editor and would-be poet John Agg put it at the time:

Belles and matrons, maids and madams

All are gone to Mrs. Adams.

In 1918, Louisa Catherine Adams was immortalized in her grandson's autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*. Looking back on his youth in the mid-1840s, Henry Adams vividly recalled, or reimagined, 'the Madam' as a solitary figure who 'stayed much in her own room with the Dutch tiles, looking out on her garden with the box walks'. She seemed like 'a fragile creature' even though her life had been far from easy. She was born to American parents in London, England; she married John Quincy Adams just as her father went bankrupt and fled to the United States; husband and wife travelled to Berlin, to the United States, to St. Petersburg, and back to London in pursuit of the political greatness that was the goal and expectation of any Adams, and particularly the first-born son of John and Abigail; in 1815, in the supreme adventure of her life, this other Mrs. Adams 'crossed Europe from St. Petersburg to Paris, in her travelling coach, passing through the armies, and reaching Paris ... after Napoleon's return from Elba'. In the end, 'thoroughly weary of being beaten about a stormy world', Louisa Catherine settled down with the rest of the Adams clan in Massachusetts. But, Henry Adams noted, 'try as she might, the Madam could never be Bostonian'. She was 'an exotic, like her Sèvres china; an object of deference to everyone ... but hardly more Bostonian than she had been fifty years before, on her wedding-day, in the shadow of the Tower of London'.⁽¹⁾ The five books under review demonstrate both the wisdom and the limitations of Henry Adams' view of his grandmother.

As it has come down to us in the memoirs, diaries, and letters that she left behind and in her grandson's autobiography, the life of Louisa Catherine Adams is primarily the story of a marriage. Broadly speaking, there are two ways to look at that story. We can focus on the woman who was never able to become an Adams in any true sense – who was 'an exotic', as Henry Adams put it. This was a marriage that worked best when wife and husband could put a hundred miles or more between themselves. It was a marriage that was scarred by arguments over almost everything, including wearing rouge, and by a series of miscarriages and children dying far too soon. It was a marriage that seemed to produce frequent bouts of crippling depression for Louisa Catherine Adams. Alternatively, we can focus on the woman who rose above the challenges posed by her marriage to a man rightly described by a contemporary as 'a bull-dog among spaniels' (Heffron, p. 205). In this version of the story, Louisa Catherine Adams endured more than her fair share of adversity, but she became a political asset among the royal courts of Berlin, St. Petersburg, and London – and among the factious politicians of Washington, DC. Talented and insightful scholars that they are, Michael O'Brien and Margery Heffron combine these two narratives. In the process, they give us a more nuanced picture of Louisa Catherine Adams than her grandson. They also give us a lesson in how to write a biography in both its tradition, cradle-to-grave form and in one that breaks away from the constraints of chronology.

Michael O'Brien's *Mrs. Adams in Winter* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and it certainly deserved the honor. It is a skillful and charming book. Drawing on the writings of Louisa Catherine Adams, travel guides and accounts from the time, and other sources, O'Brien constructs a post station to post station account of her sometimes-dangerous journey from St. Petersburg to Paris during the opening months of 1815. At the same time, the book's narrative travels back and forth in time, providing a fractured history of Louisa Catherine Adams and her marriage, sometimes stepping in to correct her faulty recall, while also analyzing the slippery relationship between reality and memory. Taking on the voice of a genial historical tour guide, O'Brien introduces us to any number of extraordinary figures who lived along Louisa Catherine Adams' route, such as the irrepressible Elizabeth Chudleigh, the impoverished English girl who made good, ending up with estates in Russia and France.

In addition to being a biography, *Mrs. Adams in Winter* is a political and cultural history of northern Europe

during one of the most important and exciting years of the early 19th century. With Napoleon's unexpected return from exile on the island of Elba, Louisa Catherine Adams' journey became even more hazardous than it had been before. As Parisian shopkeepers erased all signs of Bourbon rule and the troops of the kingdoms of Europe began to march, the fear of one of Mrs. Adams' travelling companions, that the Terror of the Year II was come again, was not far fetched. With a masterful touch, O'Brien conveys what it would have been like to be caught up in that chaotic moment. He describes Louisa Catherine Adams' ability to overcome her own fears as French soldiers marched beside her coach, alternatively threatening its occupants and shouting 'Vive les Américains!...Ils sont nos amis!' (O'Brien, p. 282). At such moments, *Mrs. Adams in Winter* brings together the biography of an elite Anglo-American lady with history from below in a way that illuminates both.

Mrs. Adams in Winter is also quite funny – intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, one suspects – and a convincing portrayal of a marriage that never had much of a chance of going right. O'Brien gives us wonderfully contrasting scenes, like the hapless Louis XVIII fleeing the dangers of revolutionary Paris in 1815 as Louisa Catherine Adams plunges headlong in the other direction. At the same time, it is amusing to note that she never actually met many of the people to whom O'Brien introduces us. For instance, near the end of her journey, she passed through the center of classical German culture, the city of Weimar; but, O'Brien tells us, she had no time to stop for a chat with its presiding genius, the legendarily courteous Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, or much interest in making the effort. And Friedrich Schiller was dead. By the time Louisa Catherine Adams' carriage rolls into Paris, however, O'Brien has painted a picture of a witty, resourceful, and politically astute woman trapped in a marriage to a man who was often impossible to please. O'Brien suggests that, ultimately, the married life of Louisa Catherine and John Quincy Adams was bedeviled by the fact that they came from entirely different worlds. While Louisa Catherine's family 'were metropolitan and worldly, wore silk, and saw church as an occasion for fashionable parade,' he writes, 'the Adamses were rural, mistrusted the world, wore broadcloth, and thought church was for urgent prayer' (O'Brien, p. 226). Here, as in the rest of the book, O'Brien is thoroughly convincing.

In *Louisa Catherine: The Other Mrs. Adams*, Margery Heffron generally agrees with Michael O'Brien's portrayal of Louisa Catherine's marriage. Time and again, Heffron demonstrates just how difficult it could be to live with John Quincy Adams. She also notes, however, that the match had its bright moments – it could even be a loving one, under the right circumstances. Heffron makes these points while following Louisa Catherine Adams from her birth to her husband's presidential inauguration on 4 March 1825.⁽²⁾ It is a traditional approach to biography, but no less effective for that. Having diligently sought out every scrap of evidence to be found about her subject, Heffron is particularly insightful on the psychological issues that the other Mrs. Adams brought to her marriage. Her father's bankruptcy, and his failure to pay a dowry, led to lifelong feelings of 'personal frustration and failure' that were as crippling to her marriage as the persnickety nature of John Quincy Adams. That sense of inadequacy also marked her memoirs with a 'bitterness' (Heffron, p. 5) that strikes one as being not too far removed from the ironies that were the stock in trade of her grandson, Henry Adams.

In a successful effort to balance this often-grim family saga, *Louisa Catherine: The Other Mrs. Adams* highlights Louisa Catherine Adams' abilities as a political campaigner more clearly than any other work. It turns out that, far from always being the retiring personality of Henry Adams' *Education*, Louisa Catherine Adams was a keen player in the politics of both international diplomacy and the early republic. She could charm foreign diplomats in a way that her awkward and dogmatic husband found impossible. When John Quincy Adams refused actively to campaign during his run for the presidency, Louisa Catherine Adams did it for him, becoming, 'in many respects, his campaign manager' (Heffron, p. 296). Drawing on the work of Catherine Allgor, Heffron demonstrates that Louisa Catherine Adams threw herself into the 'parlor politics' of the day.⁽³⁾ On Tuesday evenings, she hosted parties that were attended by the great and good of Washington society, extending John Quincy Adams' small circle of friends and supporters in the process. As we know, Louisa Catherine Adams also organized one of the most spectacular parties in American history. That ball was an effort to harness Andrew Jackson's celebrity to her husband's candidacy. The fact that this 'beautiful plan' did not work out – Jackson left the party early and ran for the presidency against John

Quincy Adams twice, the second time successfully – did not make it any less astute of a move (Heffron, pp. 348–50).

Margery Heffron also makes the important point that, in addition to her political nous, Louisa Catherine Adams was a keen social commentator. In her memoir *The Adventures of a Nobody*, the other Mrs. Adams demonstrated an ability to plumb the depths of a person's character in a few lines, though often with a particular Adams slant. Republicans and Virginians were frequent targets of her acerbic wit. Looking back on Thomas Jefferson during his presidency, Louisa Catherine Adams observed that 'his countenance indicated strongly the hypocrisy of his nature and all about him his smile and his actions indicated a sort of tricky cunning, the sure attendant of a sophisticated mind devoid of a strong basis of substantial principle'. The Virginian eccentric and *tertium quid* John Randolph of Roanoke, an even more outspoken opponent of the Adams clan than Jefferson, was given equally rough treatment. 'Ever in extremes he was at times a delightful companion; or an insolent bully', Louisa Catherine Adams wrote, 'Surrounded by admirers who loved the excitement produced by his waywardness and his brilliant rhapsodies; he appeared to be the great man of his day, for he ruled the timid and amused the weak' (Heffron, p. 163). Heffron also highlights her subject's appreciation for the ridiculous. 'The City has been extremely gay this Winter', Louisa Catherine Adams wrote in 1804 in a letter from Washington, DC, 'We are become quite dissipated, scarcely an evening without producing either large Card parties or Balls which are now quite the rage'. 'We were last evening at a Ball', she continued, 'Madame Bonaparte who makes a great noise was here...almost naked' (Heffron, p. 160). Heffron notes that this eye for a telling detail and a humorous moment helped Louisa Catherine Adams integrate herself into her husband's family, especially into the good graces of Abigail and John Adams, who both lived for political gossip and, in the case of Abigail, for news about fashion. In effect, Heffron's fine book suggests that, over time, Louisa Catherine became more of an Adams than her grandson was willing to admit.

Jane Hampton Cook's *American Phoenix* is a bird of a different feather. We should not expect it to serve as a corrective to Henry Adams' portrayal of his grandmother. Cook has another aim altogether. *American Phoenix* is an unabashed effort to turn the story of Louisa Catherine and John Quincy Adams' time in St. Petersburg, and Louisa Catherine Adams' journey to Paris, into an adventure novel. As Cook notes, in structuring her book, she drew on 'the age-old fiction structure of conflict-setback-conflict-setback-climax-resolution' (Cook, p. x). In the course of reimagining the other Mrs. Adams' life as a tale of derring-do, Cook paints a picture of the Adams marriage that does not differ significantly from that presented by O'Brien and Heffron. Making extensive use of the Adams papers, Cook does as effective a job as Heffron of highlighting the political and social insight of Louisa Catherine Adams. Even John Quincy Adams is allowed his witty moments.

Reading more like historical fiction than history, *American Phoenix* has its share of melodrama, some of which gets in the way of nuance and the facts. As Michael O'Brien points out, Louisa Catherine Adams did encounter some dangerous situations on her journey from St. Petersburg to Paris. Cook makes the most of these. In her effort to make the story as dramatic as possible, however, she frequently reduces individuals to national types. The Americans are heroic; the French are conniving; the Russians are inscrutable; and 'the Brits' (Cook, p. 59) are pure evil. Coming to grips with the complexities of the early-19th-century transatlantic world is a problem for *American Phoenix*. Cook informs us that the exiled French politician Talleyrand 'lived as a house guest' of Aaron Burr in New York (Cook, p. 269), a point that would be delightful, if it were true. No modern biographer of either man mentions such a long-term arrangement between Old and New World cynics, though it is likely that they socialized. It is also a shock to be told that there was a man named 'Joseph Listerine' who showed 'the benefits of washing one's hands with antiseptic solutions' (Cook, p. 279). And it is equally surprising to read that Albert Gallatin was born in Sweden (Cook, p. 383) when, in reality, he was Swiss.

Jane Hampton Cook's love of metaphor gets the better of her sometimes. Describing an American ship being intercepted by the Danish and English navies while making its way to Russia, Cook writes that, 'though the *Horace* was as independent as the bald eagle, to Danish and English sharks, this eagle might as well have been a seagull – prey to be devoured, not respected as an independent creature' (Cook, p. 56). Do sharks

respect eagles, but not seagulls? Cook also transforms John Quincy and Louisa Catherine Adams into ‘Adams and his Eve,’ who ‘were not naked when they landed in Russia,’ but who ‘were ashamed nonetheless – of their fig leaves’ (Cook, p. 87) and then makes the same pun repeatedly. None of which is to say that *American Phoenix* is a bad book. There are readers who will find its melodrama and its wordplay delightful. Cook’s study is certainly an interesting attempt to popularize what is fundamentally a story of high politics, though it is perhaps fair to say that it does not always hit its mark.

Products of the Massachusetts Historical Society’s ongoing Adams Papers project, the *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams* and *A Traveled First Lady: Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams* live up to the scholarly standards set by the other volumes in that series. The latter is a selected version of the former, aimed at a popular audience. It contains Louisa Catherine Adams’ more approachable writings, such as her memoir of her journey from St. Petersburg to Paris, and a selection from her diaries and the journal letters that she wrote to John Adams and other recipients. Both of these editions help fill a gap left by O’Brien, Heffron, and Cook, none of whom cover the period after March 1825 in any detail. Indeed, Louisa Catherine Adams’ post-1825 writings suggest that a study of her daily life in the White House and afterward would be difficult to construct. As her editors note, she seems to have kept no diaries between January 1824 and October 1835. How to explain this lacuna, with its haunting resemblance to the twenty years that Henry Adams passed over in complete silence in his *Education*? In the case of Henry Adams, he was likely either unable or unwilling to relive the years of his greatest success as an historian, his marriage, and the aftermath of his wife’s suicide. He chose to cast that period as a practical application of his education, rather than education itself, and so not worth mentioning.⁽⁴⁾ In the case of Louisa Catherine Adams, her editors provide a characteristically logical solution to her puzzling silence. Her years as First Lady were not happy and neither were the ones that followed. Her husband’s opponents constantly questioned the legitimacy of his presidency and they accused her of being a foreign-born Tory. While Louisa Catherine Adams may have been upset when the majority of American voters rejected John Quincy in 1828, she was relieved to leave public life. But then, two years later, John Quincy was elected to Congress. National politics once again became unavoidable. As all of this was going on, the family life of the Adamses went through a series of crises. Two of Louis Catherine and John Quincy Adams’ sons became alcoholics and died in the late 1820s and early 1830s. When Louisa Catherine Adams returned to diary writing in the autumn of 1835, it was on an irregular basis; but the insight that makes her earlier writings so fascinating is still much in evidence. Like others at the time, Louisa Catherine Adams saw that the slavery issue would end badly. ‘God in his judgment alone can prevent the calamity which sooner or later must end the strife’ between free and slave states, she wrote in December 1835. She was also troubled by the federal government’s treatment of the Native people, noting, in April 1836, that ‘the splendor of this Country originated in the persecution and extermination of a large portion of the aboriginal owners of this Country: and now see them rising in their strength, and struggling to maintain themselves upon the last remnants of their mighty possessions still unjustly coveted.’ Such qualms may have been colored by the rumors that the man who had defeated her husband in the 1828 presidential election, Andrew Jackson, intended ‘to take command of the Army, and go against the Indians’ (*Traveled*, pp. 331, 336, 338). These passages, so ably presented by the editors of these two collections, demonstrate that, in her latter years, the mental world of Louisa Catherine Adams was as fascinating as her earlier, more public life.

Thanks to the five books reviewed here, the other Mrs. Adams has stepped firmly into the historical limelight. It is difficult to say whether or not she would have been entirely comfortable with that role. We do know that she was as witty, insightful, resourceful, and politically astute as any other member of the Adams clan. Yet, despite the best efforts of biographers and editors, that powerful image created by Henry Adams lingers – Louisa Catherine Adams as the ‘exotic’ who, for better or worse, never quite fitted in.

Notes

1. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Oxford, 1999), pp. 19–21.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Margery Heffron died of pancreatic cancer before she could take the story of Louisa Catherine Adams any further.[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, VA, 2000), pp. 147–89.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ernest Samuels, *Henry Adams* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), p. 388.[Back to \(4\)](#)

Other reviews:

New York Times

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Washington Times

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/mar/19/book-review-mrs-adams-in-winter/> [7]

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