His own man: 'The Remarkable Education of John Quincy Adams' by Phyllis Lee Levin

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By Glenn Altschuler

On July 11, 1803, his 36th birthday, John Quincy Adams noted in his diary “with sorrow to think how long I have lived and with how little purpose.” He would live a lot longer and would serve his country as Secretary of State, President of the United States, and from 1831 to 1848, as one of the most outspoken opponents of slavery in the U.S. House of Representatives.

And Adams would never lose his puritanical adherence to duty, his vaulting ambition, his sense of moral and intellectual superiority, his demand for independence, and his self-doubts.

In “The Remarkable Education of John Quincy Adams” (Palgrave Macmillan, $35), Phyllis Lee Levin, a journalist and the author of a biography of Abigail Adams, examines her subject’s personal and professional life before he joined the Cabinet of James Monroe in 1817 (and crafted the Monroe Doctrine).

Drawing on Adams' diaries and his correspondence with his parents, siblings, and his wife, Louisa Catherine Johnson, Ms. Levin focuses on his emotional and intellectual development. She succeeds, to no small extent, in humanizing Adams, who famously characterized himself as “a man of cold, austere, and forbidding manners,” derided by his political adversaries as “a gloomy misanthropist” and his personal enemies as “an unsocial savage.”

Ms. Levin reveals, for example, the price Adams paid (in loneliness), starting at age 11, for crossing and re-crossing the Atlantic Ocean and serving as an apprentice diplomat. And she shows what it meant to John Quincy to be the son of a famous father.

Mindful of his son’s pride, yet protective of his future, Ms. Levin writes, John Adams sometimes argued with his son “at the top of his lungs.” His disquiet at being nominated by his father for a diplomatic post, the president maintained, “is founded on a principle which will not bear the test ... it is well understood that Mr. Washington appointed you not only without my solicitation, but without my desire as the creature of favor; because you stand exactly as you did, and there is no favor in it.” The younger Adams
allowed himself to be persuaded.

That said, Ms. Levin often makes too much of “in the moment” epistolary expressions of feelings. A letter to his mother on the subject of past and future “connections,” which Ms. Levin deems “possibly the most moving and personally revealing letter of his entire life,” appears, in essence, to be little more than a reminder that he was, at least for the present, determined on an affair of the heart rather than a marriage of convenience.

More importantly, Ms. Levin’s account of John Quincy Adams’ temperament and personality does not lead to a penetrating analysis of his politics. She notes that Adams opposed adoption of the U.S. Constitution but does not explain why. She sheds little light on Adams’ take on the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans (and their take on him).

And her claim that “compromise was not in his vocabulary let alone his character” does not accurately capture his positions on the purchase of Louisiana by Thomas Jefferson or on the Missouri Compromise of 1819, which Levin acknowledges, was based in part on his “unwillingness to put the Union at risk.”

Ms. Levin does not address the controversial election of 1824, Adams' term as president, and his tenure as “Old Man Eloquent,” the conscience of the House of Representatives. Although she suggests that by then he had come to understand – and accept – that he would never be judged a popular man, she leaves you wondering what, if anything, he had learned about himself and how, if at all, he used that knowledge to inform his singular vision of America’s place in the world.

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