

William R. Burleigh

The Literary Club

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### Dear Diary

I flunked my first college assignment. Sternly did the legendary Dean Jeremiah O'Sullivan admonish our freshman journalism class: Keep a journal! Keep a journal! Keep one not just for this course, not just as a collegiate exercise, but keep it for life. You will never regret the energy and discipline it will require of you, he said. Alas! I failed to follow his directive and have had many reasons to regret it as the years have rolled by. When I retired and endeavored to write some memoirs for my grandchildren, I keenly sensed how sparsely stocked was the cupboard of my memory and how wise the dean had been.

His advice came echoing back to me last year when the Library of America made a great gift to the American people: It issued a handsome two-volume collection, **The Diaries of John Quincy Adams**, on the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of this sixth president of the United States. Starting when he was 12 years old and stretching over 69 years until two days before his death in 1848, Adams kept an amazing diary, filling 15,000 pages in his neat, tightly lettered hand. The new edition is distilled from Adams' lifelong works that are stored in a staggering 51 manuscript volumes. Apparently even that is not all, for Adams wrote other pages in a coded shorthand which scholars are still trying to decipher.

As a committed diarist, Adams did not simply jot down a barebones recitation of events. A typical entry runs from 500 to 5,000 words. He made it a practice to get up between 4 and 5 a.m. each morning in order to keep the diary up to date, a practice that at one point stretched for 26 years in an unbroken daily string.

His entries offer an exceptional window into the mind of one of the most intriguing figures in this nation's annals. The collection is chock full of history in the making – letters, poetry, narratives, literary excursions, travelogues, religious musings, prayers, meditations, criticisms of foes and friends, and searing self-analysis of himself. There are verbatim accounts of treaty negotiations, transcripts of Cabinet meetings, congressional debates, dinner conversations, reflections on sermons, experiments in verse, scientific observations, even theater and opera reviews. Nothing in these pages suggests the dry bones of a forgotten past but rather an immediacy that can captivate even a modern reader for hours on end.

The diary has been praised as “the most valuable firsthand account of an American life and events from the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the threshold of the Civil War.” The historian Alan Nevins has called the diary “an unrivalled treasury.” Even beyond these judgments has come, with publication of the Library of America edition, a growing and perhaps surprising awareness that what Adams wrote constitutes a masterpiece in American literature – though he himself once complained that “I have filled my journal with trash, and with every whimsey that passed across my mind.”

There had been two previous stabs at unpacking the Adams diary for public viewing, but they fell short in conveying the scope and flavor of his massive legacy – one by his son Charles Francis, which tended toward hagiography, and another slimmer compilation in 1928 by Professor Nevins. The Library of America edition opens new vistas.

Although conventional wisdom awards the laurel wreath to Ulysses S. Grant for writing the best of our presidential memoirs, one would be hard pressed to match even Grant's poignant Civil War reportage with the erudition, range and literary quality of the Adams diary. There simply is no parallel.

History texts in use these days skim over the dry outlines of Adams' career in public life – ambassador, senator, secretary of state, president, congressman – but his times tend to get lost between the bookends of America's founding and the Civil War. Delving into the diary, however, opens up rich detail of a young nation and its leaders grappling toward an uncertain destiny, with Adams at the center of this often overlooked chapter of the American story. In the judgment of the historian David McCullough, no American influenced his age more than John Quincy Adams.

He was a child of the American Revolution, indeed a witness to it. He would look back in his diary and recall “the thundering cannon, which I heard, and the smoke of burning Charlestown, which I saw on the awful day.” While the fight for independence still hung in the balance, Adams, a lad of 12, set sail with his father for Europe in waters teeming with British men-of-war eager to catch treasonous rebels. When he was only 14, he served as Francis Dana's secretary on a long diplomatic mission to Russia, during which he witnessed slavery for the first time. When the young man returned home at age 18 to enter Harvard, he had crossed the Atlantic four times, had traveled at least 15,000 miles and had lived in The Hague, Amsterdam, St. Petersburg and Paris. His father called him “the greatest traveler of his age.” During his time abroad, he mastered French, Dutch, German, some Spanish and even toyed with the Basque language, while reading extensively in Latin and ancient Greek. He was clearly a polymath in the making, so much so that Abigail, his mother, had to admonish him: “How unpardonable would it have been in you, to have been a Blockhead!”

Thanks to his father's prominence, John Quincy came to know the Founding Fathers and their allies. He was on hand for a George Washington meeting with Chickasaw chiefs and spent time at Mt. Vernon with Martha Washington. He lived in Paris with Benjamin Franklin. He was

mentored there by Thomas Jefferson, who treated him as a son. He got to know Madison and Monroe. He called the Marquis de Lafayette his friend.

When he was only 26, he was again dispatched to Europe by President Washington to serve in a series of diplomatic missions. As his career blossomed and he became the first U.S. minister to Russia, he took morning strolls on the quay in St. Petersburg, where he occasionally met Tsar Alexander, the emperor, and they would engage in friendly talk about everything from war to weather. He watched amid excited Parisian street crowds as Napoleon returned in a night of triumph at the outset of the 100 Days. He headed the American delegation that overcame long odds to negotiate the Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812 with England, an accomplishment he later judged his greatest achievement. He met the Duke of Wellington. He took lengthy hikes in Hyde Park with Jeremy Bentham discussing with the radical reformer how to achieve democracy short of revolution.

All of this, and much more, fills the Adams diary with fascinating detail sketched on a grand stage.

Through these pages the diary also reveals a side of Adams not often glimpsed in the history books. He was at heart a literary man – who, by the way, possessed ideal credentials for membership in this club.

From the very outset, his interests tended toward books and the life of the mind. He recalled that by age 10 he was reading Shakespeare's **Tempest, As You Like It, The Merry Wives of Windsor, Much Ado About Nothing** and **King Lear**. In his teen years spent in Europe, his tastes turned to the classical – Demosthenes, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian.

In a Christmas musing in 1820, he wrote this revealing passage: “Literature has been the charm of my life, and could I have carved out my own fortunes, to Literature would my whole life been devoted. I have been a lawyer for bread, and a statesman at the call of my country. In the practice of Law, I never should have attained the highest eminence, for the want of natural and spontaneous eloquence. The operations of my mind are slow, my imagination sluggish, and my powers of contemporaneous speaking very insufficient – But I have much capacity for and . . . a strong and almost innate passion for literary pursuits.”

On the matter of eloquence, he sells himself short because he was considered one of the finest orators of his age. While answering the demands on him from the political sphere, he occupied a chair in oratory and rhetoric as part of his life-long ties to Harvard. Not for naught did he become known as “Old Man Eloquent.”

He could hardly restrain himself when it came to writing verse. His diary is filled with poems, doggerels and random verses he composed for friends, for strangers seeking his autograph, and for his own edification. This strait-laced fellow even slipped in a saucy bit of romantic poetry a time or two wooing his wife Louisa Catherine.

He speculated in one entry: “Could I have chosen my own Genius and Condition, I should have made myself a great poet. As it is, I have wasted much of my time in writing verses; spellbound in the circle of mediocrity.”

As an example of his poetry bent, in 1831 he decided to versify the Book of Psalms from the Bible for what he termed an exercise in perseverance, even though he confessed that “I greatly doubt the usefulness of this end upon which I am now engaged.” Each day he numbered

his progression toward his goal of casting all 150 psalms into his very own verse form. He paused over Psalm 78, calling it “the longest and most difficult.”

Literary efforts surface throughout the pages of the diary. He published any number of pamphlets on matters patriotic and polemical. He stayed in the literary swim even though immersed in affairs of state. He dined with Charles Dickens, wrote a flirtatious poem to Dickens’ wife, and exchanged correspondence with Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper.

He wasn’t long out of Harvard and practicing law when he first took up pen to engage in a word battle defending his father. Writing in the style of Cicero and under the pen name of Publicola, he engaged the Jeffersonian faction in 11 long essays that became widely quoted throughout the fractious young republic. He was attacked by some for what they deemed a monarchical flavor to his argument.

Although he was appointed to a U.S. Senate seat at age 33, he found time to compose thoughts on his reading of Montaigne’s **Essays**, Gibbon’s **Memoirs** and Pascal’s **Letters**. Not long thereafter, while in Berlin negotiating a commercial treaty with the Prussians, he busied himself in spare moments finishing for publication a translation of **Oberon** and then translating Juvenal’s **Satires** – 200 lines each, converting a six-beat unrhymed hexameter of Latin into traditional lines of English poetry.

As if not occupied enough with foreign affairs when he became secretary of state, he did extensive research and wrote a treatise, requested by Congress, on the history of weights and measures. His work became a landmark study in a misty field, with much practical application in establishing universal standards for coinage and calculations.

Perhaps his most ambitious literary effort took the form of an allegorical poem titled **Dermot MacMorrogh**, which he composed after failing to gain a second term in the White House. The idea came to him while reading a David Hume history about the 12<sup>th</sup> Century conquest of Ireland by Henry II. Modeled after Byron's "Don Juan," it consisted of four cantos in 90 rhymed stanzas which Adams composed over two months while on walks and during sleepless nights. The story involves an old king incapable of uniting the Irish people amid moral decay, precipitated partly by the treachery of Dermot MacMorrogh, a tribal chieftain who betrays his king. It took no playbook to see that Andrew Jackson was MacMorrogh and that Jacksonian democracy was the source of moral depravity. "Dermot" was published – in Ohio, incidentally – and remains in print to this day.

Throughout his life, words – sharpened, chiseled, precisely honed words – were the arrows in JQA's quiver. Once after Adams had entered Congress, the House Democratic whip, Churchill Camberleng, sought to pass a bill favoring delinquent banks, which Adams opposed. He called the language of the bill unclear and asked Camberleng to explain it. The hour was late and Camberleng thundered: "I cannot waste my time discussing nouns, pronouns, verbs and adverbs with the gentleman from Massachusetts." Adams shot back: "As language is composed of nouns, pronouns, verbs and adverbs, when they are put together to constitute the law of the land, the meaning of them may surely be demanded of the legislator, and those parts of speech may well be used for such a purpose. But if such explanation be impossible, it certainly should not be expected that this House will consent to pass a law composed of nouns, pronouns, verbs and adverbs, which the author himself does not understand."

Adams has been called the most intelligent, most prickly, most oddly passionate and most highly educated man ever elected President. All of these traits are on clear display in the two

volumes of the diary. He was possessed of a wicked tongue, filled with vitriol and billingsgate. Ralph Waldo Emerson complained that “he must have sulfuric acid in his tea.” He spewed his invective unsparingly here and abroad, often but not always within the privacy of the written journal.

When departing as ambassador to England, Adams took time to judge the prince regent “a Falstaff without the wit and a Prince Henry without the compunctions.”

Back home, he described a poor fellow congressman from Indiana named Boon as “the thickest skull, the narrowest mind and the pettiest teazle in the House.”

Even a one-time ally, DeWitt Clinton of New York, “was one of the distinguished and ambitious statesmen of this Union . . . but his mind was of secondary size deluded by success and flattery into the self-conceit that he was of the first magnitude.”

More venomous was his characterization of Daniel Webster: “Such is human nature, in the gigantic intellect, the envious temper, the ravenous ambition, and the rotten heart of Daniel Webster.”

Among Southern delegates in Congress, whom he labeled the “slave monger brood,” he did find reason to admire one of them, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. Yet he couldn’t help adding that Calhoun was “the dupe and tool of every knave cunning enough to drop the oil of fools in his ear.”

Once, watching Stephen A. Douglas get caught up in an oratorical outburst in the House, Adams described the scene: “He lashed himself into such a heat that if his body had been made of combustible material it would have burnt out.” When Douglas paused in his diatribe to unbutton his waistcoat, Adams said “he had the awkward aspect of a half-naked pugilist.”

Eventually Adams turned even on his one-time friend and mentor from childhood, Thomas Jefferson, just as his father had done in the historic separation between those two founders. More than once the younger Adams wrote that Jefferson's "treatment of my father was double dealing, treacherous and false beyond toleration. . . He could demolish, deface and cast down – he could not build up or preserve."

Yet, despite the spiteful spewing, the diary also records many moments of introspection when Adams could be as critical of himself as he was of others. "I am a man of reserved, cold, austere and forbidding manners; my political adversaries see a gloomy misanthropist, and my personal enemies, an unsocial savage." He did not argue with their assessments.

Despite what at times seemed a pronounced lack of charity, the man revealed in the pages of the diary essentially lived his life at the intersection of faith and reason. His spiritual moorings often dominated his writing. He frequently recorded prayers, engaged in metaphysical musings and posed bothersome spiritual questions to himself. He once wrote that "religious sentiments become from day to day more constantly habitual to my mind – They are perhaps too often seen in this Journal."

Adams was a believer. Throughout life, he spent an hour a day reading the Bible. He tried to improve his Greek by translating passages from the original Scriptures. He occupied himself at one point translating the Bible from three different languages so that he could compare differences in texts.

These interests did not, however, mar his critical, quizzical gaze at the religious practices he observed. He was bemused at a Russian Orthodox baptism when the liturgy required those

officiating “to spit on the floor.” The two hours he once spent at a Quaker meeting proved too much and he went to sleep.

Wherever his career took him, Adams regularly attended religious services and he recorded clear tastes among preachers and their doctrines. “Believing in the goodness and mercy of the Creator,” he wrote, “I disbelieve those who represent him as existing only to hurl thunder. . . . There are, however, denominations of Christians who hold different opinions, and insist on being doomed weekly by their pastors to the infernal regions.”

Even within the sect he favored, he could not help but note that “it is the general character of Presbyterian preaching to terrify rather than allure. . . .”

That was a mild observation compared to his reaction after attending an Anglican service in Little Ealing, the village where he lived while serving as British ambassador: “There is something in the dress, in the gait, in the deportment, in the expression of countenance, above all in the eye, of those clergymen . . . that imports arrogance, intolerance and all that is the reverse of humility. They will quote words of the Publican with the tone of the Pharisee, and say God be merciful to me a sinner, with an air as if they meant to take the kingdom of heaven by violence.”

Adams could be a bundle of contradictions – brilliant and incisive, yet melancholic, condescending, cantankerous. Nonetheless, private moments of sorrow revealed deep wells of feeling. The loss of his parents, the beloved Abigail and old John, was “inexpressibly painful . . . as if it had been an arrow to the heart,” which he felt as he roamed their Old House at Quincy. And he experienced an almost inconsolable agony in the loss of an infant daughter while in Russia and later, even more so in the heart-wrenching deaths of two of his three sons to alcoholism. His grief was palpable.

Adams was hardly known for a sense of humor, but some of the scenes he depicted from his life were filled with unintended hilarity. For daily exercise, he insisted on skinny-dipping in the Potomac during steamy summers. He bragged in a journal entry that at age 57, he had attained a personal record of swimming for a solid hour. Another time his leaky canoe capsized in a tidal current and, after flailing for some perilous moments, he luckily emerged from the water, his soaked drawers weighing down the presidential eminence. Still he refused to quit his daily routine, finding it “indispensable to my health.” In fact, he was in his 80<sup>th</sup> year when, “drawn by an irresistible impulse,” he hiked alone to the rock where he usually doffed his clothing, disrobed and entered the water, while some youngsters swimming nearby shouted, “Well, there’s John Quincy Adams.”

Just as the diary served as a confessional for private thoughts, Adams likewise offered in its pages rarely seen verbal portraits, often painted in lively detail, of how policies were shaping the times in which he played a leading role.

His eight years as secretary of state took place during the Monroe administration. Thanks to his adept negotiating skills and his focus on continental expansion, his efforts were paramount when Spain ceded Florida to the United States, when the country’s western border was extended along the 41<sup>st</sup> Parallel to the Pacific Ocean, and when American foreign policy for the following century was forged in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. On page after page, Adams chronicled the bruising Cabinet debates and the testy diplomatic daring that led to these landmark events. Historians have been unable to agree whether the Monroe Doctrine was actually the product of President Monroe or of his secretary of state. Likely it was both. Adams confided that the draft he submitted to the President had toughened language that Monroe was reluctant to use until pushed to do so, but which became the animating spirit of this fundamental foreign policy

pronouncement. “America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy,” Adams explained in urging the band of neutrality.

Behind the scenes at this point in his career, while he was occupied dealing with foreign dangers, he began to struggle with the slavery issue that tore at the internal fabric of the young nation. His father’s generation had founded a country but could he and his peers maintain it, he asked himself. He went so far as to question whether America had been ill-founded, compromising its ideals of freedom and equality for a system that allowed one man to own another. “The bargain between Freedom and Slavery contained in the Constitution is morally and politically vicious,” he wrote. What was becoming more and more evident to him was that the Declaration of Independence and the reality of slavery were in fact incompatible. Like his father before him, he had staked his very life on the idea of the Union but now he had to ask himself, at what price?

In his role as secretary of state, he was in no position to directly influence the debates Congress was having over whether to approve the Missouri Compromise of 1820, but the dispute crystallized in his mind the inherent evils of slavery. In a prophetic passage, recording a conversation he had with a Pennsylvania congressman, he reasoned:

“If acquiesced, (the Missouri Compromise) would change the terms of the Federal compact – change its terms by robbing thousands of citizens of their rights – And what citizens – the poor – the unfortunate – the helpless – already cursed by the mere color of their skin – already doomed by their complexion to drudge in the lowest offices of society, excluded by their color from all the refined enjoyments of life accessible to others, excluded from the benefits of a liberal education; from the bed, from the table, and from all the social comforts of domestic life. This barbarous Article deprives them of the little remnant of right yet left in them – their rights

as citizens and as men. Weak and defenseless as they are, so much the more sacred is the obligation of . . . the states . . . to defend their lawful rights – and I would defend them should the dissolution of the Union be the consequence. . . .and if the dissolution of the Union must come, let it come from no other cause but this. If Slavery be the destined sword in the hand of the destroying angel, which is to sever the ties of the Union, the same sword will cut in sunder the bonds of Slavery itself.” The events he feared were still four decades in the future.

When time came for the country to pick its sixth President in 1824, five men vied for the prize, including Adams, who tried without success to hide his ambition. The selection process became engulfed in partisanship. A midnight bargain struck with Henry Clay, one of the other aspirants, produced a narrow plurality for Adams with Clay as his secretary of state. He became one of only two U.S. Presidents prior to the Civil War who never owned slaves, the other being his father. Although the new President approached his task with a worthy agenda of building the nation’s infrastructure and its commerce and toughening its defenses, he faced bitter enemies in Congress – both those who considered him hapless and those Southern forces which despised him. Many later scholars have depicted Adams as an elitist left behind in the populist wake of emerging Jacksonian democracy. Some of the challenges which beset him he doubtless brought on himself. The realities of political life challenged his high-minded beliefs. Like his father before him, he did not believe in political patronage. High offices was a gift to be bestowed, not sought. “I make no bargains,” he wrote. “I listen to no overtures for coalition. I give no money.”

Four years passed and the Adams administration had little to show for his strenuous efforts. Although he was a candidate for a second term, he foresaw the inevitable and resigned

himself to a life of retirement in Quincy. When the votes were counted, the popular embrace of Andrew Jackson sent him packing.

Ever since, history books have called the Adams presidency an abject failure. In these circumstances, though, it is useful to recall the wise words of David McCullough: “It’s all too easy to stand on the mountaintop as a historian or biographer and find fault with people for why they did or didn’t do that, because we’re not involved in it, we’re not there inside it, we’re not confronting what we don’t know, as those who preceded us were.”

The despondent and defeated JQA sought solace in outside scientific interests. He had taken up the study of botany as a diversion from his presidential duties, importing seedlings of 20 species of trees for the White House grounds and sponsoring live oak plantings in Florida. Now he became a real amateur horticulturalist, organizing and working his own orchards back home, meticulously recording their growth and writing in the pages of his diary about his successes and failures – mostly the latter.

He had no way of knowing that the past was but prologue. At the age of 64 and two years out of office, Adams was approached by an old friend about standing for Congress from the Eighth District of Massachusetts. Against his family’s wishes, he said yes. He won easily, reflecting happily that “my election (as President) was not half so gratifying to my inmost soul. No election or appointment ever gave me so much pleasure.” Thus, when the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress was organized, Adams took Seat #203, becoming the first and only ex-President in America’s history also then to hold office as an elected congressman. There he would serve for the next 18 years, often as the lonely voice of a nation’s conscience in the moral questions embroiling the years leading to civil war.

Looking over the troubled national landscape, he mused: “Oh, if but one man could arise with a genius of understanding, a heart capable of supporting, and utterance capable of communicating those eternal truths that belong to this question, to lay bare in all its nakedness that outrage upon the goodness of God – human slavery.” It was not long before he himself became that man.

Even though control of the House was held in the steel grip of pro-slave interests, Adams gloried in his new job. He attended every session, worked long hours, and seldom missed a debate. He tried to be a collegial member and to avoid becoming a common scold. Soon, however, the majority increasingly viewed him with annoyance because he kept finding ways to pick at the slavery question. A fellow congressman called him “the acutest, the astutest, the archest enemy of Southern slavery that ever existed.” It seemed that the major issues in session after session bore in one way or another on what he saw as the moral evil of slavery – whether states could nullify national laws; whether Texas should be annexed into the Union as a slave state; whether protectionist tariffs should stand; whether fugitive slaves could be captured and returned; whether the House could muzzle a member from introducing a petition, the so-called gag rule. Adams was usually found at the center of these controversies. He complained in an 1837 diary entry, “This subject of slavery, to my great sorrow and mortification, is absorbing all my faculties.”

So vexed was the pro-slave majority with his wily parliamentary skills and his bear-trap mind that he grew into a hated figure throughout the South. Twice the House itself tried without success to censure him. His family worried he would be assassinated or spark racial rioting. Yet he stood fearlessly in the face of the torrent.

During a dinner, he was asked by the visiting Alexis de Tocqueville, “Do you regard slavery as a great blemish on the United States?” “Yes, certainly,” he replied, “it is responsible for nearly all our present difficulties and fears about the future.”

To others, he gave open voice to those fears. He warned that the tide of events could lead to “the most fatal of catastrophes – the dissolution of the Union by a complicated, civil, and servile war.”

He put more than words into his unremitting positions. Poor men and women of color came to the door of his home on F Street pleading for his help. When he learned that a slave named Dorcas Allen, driven mad by her plight, had slain two of her four children and was now to be sold at auction with the other youngsters, he pledged personal funds he could ill afford in an effort to emancipate them. “I have an abhorrence of Slavery, but how bad it is no one can imagine without understanding the details,” he wrote.

Later, when 53 captured Africans mutinied aboard the ship **Amistad**, were wrecked off the tip of Long Island and were claimed as Spanish property, Adams saw them as martyrs to the evils of the slave trade and agreed to argue their celebrated legal case before the U.S. Supreme Court. “No one can imagine what I suffered,” he wrote, in his exhaustive preparation of their defense. He argued their cause before the justices for 4 ½ grueling hours in one session and 4 more hours in another, ultimately convincing the court -- “with gratitude to heaven” – that they be set free.

Although the legislative battles against slavery dominated his waking hours, Adams’ reserve of energy and interests still found other outlets. He remained fascinated with matters scientific.

In late 1835 the United States received a mysterious bequest of \$500,000 – in the form of 105 sacks of gold sovereigns – from an unknown British scientist named James Smithson, who wanted it used “to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an Establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.” How exactly should this idea take shape? Scores of proposals were floated. Adams made sure he was in a position to oversee a suitable resolution. He complained at one point that the funds were falling “into private interests and sordid passions.” After a decade of cajoling and lobbying, though, Adams – by then crippled by a stroke -- was able to shepherd the legacy to his desired end. He summoned his strength in the spring of 1847 to attend the laying of the cornerstone of the “Castle,” the original Smithsonian building on the Washington Mall. How dazzled the dour old man would be to see that the Smithsonian is now a 19-member family of institutions dedicated to the causes of learning, a goal so dear to his heart.

Four years earlier Adams could not resist an invitation to advance his favorite field of science, astronomy, in which he had been promoting the idea of creating a series of “lighthouses of the skies,” observatories for viewing the heavens. The invitation came from Cincinnati, asking him to be on hand for laying the cornerstone for an observatory in the Queen City. It would be the furthest west ever travelled by the former President, this man who played such a key role pushing the young nation’s borders westward. He was 75 years old, growing feeble and with winter approaching. Part of the journey was spent aboard a canal packet boat crammed with 20 other passengers for three nights and four days and sharing sleeping quarters crowded feet to feet with three strangers. Once in Cincinnati, he felt worn down with fatigue and anxiety. He stayed up most of the night polishing a three-hour speech on the history of astronomy, only to learn the next day’s outdoor dedication had been rained out. He had to wait another day to

deliver thankfully shortened remarks inside the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Afterward he groused that “my strength is prostrated beyond anything I ever experienced before.” He was, however, not sorry he made the long journey. In a diary entry, he hoped he had drawn “a lively and active attention” to astronomy. He even entertained the notion that his name would perhaps be “ostentatiously connected” to this effort. Little could he have imagined that his name would indeed be connected to this arduous trip when Mt. Ida, the hillside site of the observatory, would henceforth bear the name Mt. Adams.

Returning from Cincinnati, Adams seemed to his House colleagues to be depressed, dogged in his determination to keep fighting but more and more pessimistic about his chances. “My conscience presses me on,” he had written. “Let me but die upon the breach.” Once again he embarked on a series of parliamentary maneuvers seeking to eliminate the hated gag rule, which for eight frustrating years had prevented petitions against slavery from reaching the House floor. Two months of fiery, contentious debate ensued. At one point, goaded by the slavery crowd, Adams erupted: “It may come in peace or it may come in blood, but whether in peace or blood, let (the day of redemption) come! Though it cost the blood of millions of white men, let it come. Let justice be done though heavens fall.” Adams had entertained such thoughts in his diary but never before in so public a forum. To the astonishment of his enemies, the Massachusetts congressman had finally amassed just enough support to end the gag rule. “Blessed ever blessed be the name of God,” he wrote in a prayerful passage after the most significant victory in his long battle.

It was not long before Adams’ strength began to ebb. His diary entries grew fewer. After suffering a stroke, he could only dictate to his wife or granddaughters what he wished them to record in his journal. He had them insert a strange heading that read “Posthumous Memoirs.”

He compared himself to “a plant withered at the root, a tree dying downward from the top.” He did, however, realize what he had accomplished. He wrote, “I have but a few more days to live . . . there has perhaps not been another individual of the human race, whose daily existence from early childhood to fourscore years has been noted down with his own hand so minutely as mine.”

Despite his infirmities, he remained a regular figure at Seat #203 on the House floor, but more and more he kept an uncharacteristic silence during the proceedings. It was February 21, 1848, when a vote was being taken to bestow honors on generals from the Mexican War, a war he had bitterly opposed. With firm voice, he joined a young Abraham Lincoln in the minority voting no. Moments later, he slumped over his desk. Someone shouted: “Mr. Adams is dying.” He was carried in a coma to the Speaker’s chambers, where his life ended, still in the People’s House where he had labored so long for the causes of freedom.

An abolitionist minister offered a fitting eulogy:

“I know of few things in modern times so grand as that old man, standing there in the House of Representatives, the compeer of Washington, a man who had borne himself proudly in kings’ courts, early doing service in high places, where honor may be won; a man who had filled the highest office in any nation’s gift; a President’s son, himself a President, standing there the champion of the neediest of the oppressed.”

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