



The Education of Henry Adams

Henry Adams (1838 - 1918)

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The Education of Henry Adams is listed as the number one non-fiction book in the English language by The Modern Library. Henry Brooks Adams, a Harvard professor of History and a scion of the Adams political dynasty, was raised a proper Bostonian and educated in the classics, as was the tradition. He came of age at the start of the Civil War and served in government and academia during a long career that spanned a half century of astonishing growth and change in the United States, a period sometimes described as the Second Industrial Revolution and which he terms a “dynamo”. His chronicle is a unique blend of autobiography, memoir, and meditation that dwells on the social, political, intellectual, and technological changes that occurred during his lifetime. It is unusual in its third person narration and is frequently sarcastic and humorously self-deprecating. Adams makes it clear that his formal preparation was thoroughly inadequate to comprehend the emerging world,

especially in the areas of science and mathematics, and argues strongly for the value of experience and self-education. The book began as a private limited edition for friends in 1907. It was not intended for publication, which may explain why he largely ignores family life, focusing his introspection on areas likely to be of professional interest to his colleagues. It was published in 1918 after his death at the urging of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1919. Readers ever since have been transported by his canny ability to make dusty historical events and social trends come alive through his personal relationships and experiences. As such, *The Education of Henry Adams* is an indispensable document to understanding a vital period in American history and culture.

Henry Brooks Adams (February 16, 1838 – March 27, 1918) was the grandson of John Quincy Adams and great-grandson of John Adams. His mother, Abigail, came from the wealthy Brooks family and his father, Charles Francis Adams, carried the family torch as he served in the US House of Representatives and was appointed by Abraham Lincoln to serve as his Minister, or ambassador, to England during the Civil War, during which England's sympathies with the Confederacy. In England he was quite taken with the work of John Stuart Mill, who championed the notion of an enlightened elite to provide leadership to governments elected by the masses and prey to ignorance, demagoguery and corruption. After the war he returned to the United States and settled in Washington, working as a journalist with an interest in rooting out corruption. He was appointed Professor of Medieval History at Harvard in 1870 and returned to Boston. He retired in 1877, settled in Lafayette Square in Washington and worked as a journalist and historian and maintained a lively circle of friendships. After the tragic suicide of his wife Clover he traveled extensively and continued to write and publish, most notably a nine-volume History of the United States of America (1801 – 1817), considered by many to be a “neglected masterpiece”, and the novels Democracy and Esther. He served as president of the American Historical Society in 1894 and pursued a theory of history based on the second law of thermodynamics. His scholarly activities were diminished by a stroke in 1912, but he continued to travel and maintain his many friendships until his death in 1918.