

John Adams: A serious rendering of the American Revolution

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8 January 2009

DVD release of the 2008 HBO Miniseries

Directed by Tom Hooper, screenplay by Kirk Ellis

Although the first movie about the American Revolution, D.W. Griffith's *1776, or The Hessian Renegade*, was released one hundred years ago (1909), since that time relatively few movies on the same subject have been produced, and fewer still have been memorable. Hollywood has had a notoriously difficult time applying itself to or making sense of critical episodes of US history for a combination of reasons—ideological, cultural and purely opportunistic.

Television has been responsible for the better representations of the Revolution—for example, 2000's *The Crossing (2000)*, which focused on George Washington and his decisive victory over the Hessian mercenaries at the Battle of Trenton (1776). Even the 2002 animated series *Liberty's Kids* deserves credit for presenting the ideas that informed the revolution to children and young adults.

John Adams, first aired on HBO in early 2008 and now released on DVD, is the latest and in some ways most satisfying rendering of the American Revolution on film. The television series is based on David McCullough's 2002 biography of the same name and covers the last 56 years (1770-1826) of John Adams' 90-year life. In so doing, the series also treats the whole of the Revolution.

This is not to say that the series' depiction of its subject and period is flawless; some important events and characters are underdeveloped or misrepresented. Dramatically, the series reaches its apogee by the end of the second of seven episodes, although, given the fact that its subject's finest moments were realized during the period depicted in that episode (which covers the first and second Continental Congresses and the writing of the Declaration of Independence), this relative lessening of dramatic intensity is perhaps understandable. Nonetheless, *John Adams*, through dramatizing its subject's domestic life (especially his relationship with Abigail, his brilliant wife) and public life, manages to capture the growth of revolutionary consciousness and the internal conflict over what kind of nation America would become.

Overall, Paul Giamatti's characterization of John Adams is faithful to what we know of the real man. Intelligent, honest and capable of overwhelming his political opponents with powerful, searing oratory, Adams is also stern with his five children (three sons and two daughters) and possesses a degree of vanity that would make him appear weak and childish were it not for the fact that the series often softens Adams' insecurities by running them up against his wife's ability to teach a lesson without scolding. ("Yes, John, you too are exceptional," she assures her husband when he responds to Abigail's claim that their friend Thomas Jefferson is an exceptional man with, "Am I not exceptional too?").

Adams' contradictions do not stop there. Raised by a farmer and himself a farmer as well as a respected lawyer, he hires help because he considers slavery an abomination. Yet Adams is a firm proponent of law and order who holds an almost Puritanical belief in predestination: "People are in

need of strong governance," he tells Abigail, "Most men are weak and vicious." It is perhaps for this reason that he also, at least initially in the series, is a strong supporter of the British Crown.

That is about as far as the series goes in terms of accounting for Adams' contradictory character, and, beyond that, the bourgeois-democratic revolutionary as a social and psychological type. One wishes for more, but then one recalls that the man himself was not given much to self-reflection. Even late in the series, when he finds his son Charles living alone in a slum and ravaged by the alcoholism that would result in his early death, Adams refuses to consider the role his frequent absences and parental rigidity might have played in his son's unhappy fate.

John Adams' fidelity to the law is evident in the opening episode, "Join or Die, 1770." After British troops stationed in Boston are arrested for killing five colonists (including several children) who provoked them, one of the soldiers asks Adams to represent them in court. Adams agrees and decides to base his defense on a central question: was the crowd a lawful assembly or a mob? During questioning, Adams proves that the British Captain did not order his men to fire; instead, a member of the crowd had shouted the order, thus proving that that crowd had acted as a mob. Given that the trial audience was comprised of working people (including Samuel Adams, John's cousin and a radical member of The Sons of Liberty) who stood firmly against the British, Adams' defense of the troops not only reveals his respect for the law but a good deal of courage as well.

The series attributes the emergence of Adams' revolutionary consciousness in part to the influence of his wife's strong, independent character and in part to British colonial policies.

Compared to her husband, Abigail Adams (Laura Linney) displays a more acute consciousness of the colonists' real conditions, due largely to her harsh domestic duties and an Enlightenment education. The duties run from teaching the Adams children Latin to the backbreaking chore of scrubbing their wooden floors when the small pox epidemic envelops the colonies during the Revolution (all of the children would contract the pox, but due to Abigail's constant attention, all would survive).

But Abigail was anything but a "dutiful wife." She exhibits both a keen awareness of her husband's vanity and the colonists' feelings toward British rule when she voices displeasure at her husband's self-serving rationale for accepting the pro-crown office of advocate general in Massachusetts. Later, when John returns home during a break from the Continental Congress, Abigail famously expands upon the principles of the Enlightenment when she admonishes him not to forget women and slaves during deliberations over independence (the dialogue for this scene, like a number of others in the series, is drawn from the correspondence between John and Abigail Adams).

When British proclamations and policies begin undermining the rule of law, Adams' own Enlightenment education forces him to reconsider his allegiances. After the crown mandates that colonists are to deal only with the British East India Co., Adams witnesses a group of colonists tar and

feather a representative of the Company. The British thereupon order the colonists to provide quarters for their troops to enforce the King's proclamation. As a result, Adams begins questioning his original support of monarchy on the grounds that Britain is behaving above the law. Shortly afterward, Adams accepts the nomination tendered by his radical cousin Samuel to be Boston's representative at the first Continental Congress, called to decide how best to respond to the King's proclamations that had stripped the colonists of many of their rights.

The episode devoted to the Continental Congress, "Independence," set in 1775, is the most emotionally and intellectually stirring of the seven episodes. One is immediately struck by the contrast between the erudition and passion voiced during the debates and the ignorant drivel one generally hears from today's Congress. As for Adams, increasingly aggressive imperialistic British policy continues to rub up against his (as well as his contemporaries') principles, with a resulting elevation in his own thinking. After witnessing a colonial militia beat back British troops at Concord, and the deplorable conditions endured by Washington (played as a soft-spoken, duty-bound man by David Morse) and his troops in Boston, Adams delivers a blistering speech to Congress on the need to support the army and formally declare independence.

Adams's rising consciousness is shared by many of his contemporaries at the Congress, among whom we find Benjamin Franklin, played by Tom Wilkinson as the wise libertine that history has handed down to us, who in one dimly lit scene instructs the impatient Adams on the finer points of winning delegates to his side.

We are also introduced to Thomas Jefferson (Stephen Dillane), who would become Adams' close friend and sometime political-ideological opponent. Known historically as a shy, private man, Jefferson is depicted as a shadowy figure throughout much of the Congress until Adams, during a break in the proceedings, feels him out concerning British policies and the need for independence. Jefferson, having just watched British troops dragooning colonists from the streets, responds plainly with, "I would lend my hand to sink the whole island [the British Isles] in the ocean." (This line actually appeared in a letter Jefferson wrote to his Tory kinsman, John Randolph, but placing it in this context does no harm to the author's intent.)

Soon after, Adams humbles himself to persuade Jefferson to write the draft of the Declaration of Independence. The scene in which Franklin, Adams and Jefferson sit alone in a room, with Franklin sitting in a revolving chair invented by Jefferson and the author of the draft sitting in a corner of the room at a school desk, is nothing less than breathtaking. Responding to Jefferson's original wording, "These truths are sacred," Franklin declares, "That smacks of the pulpit, Mr. Jefferson," and the latter agrees to change the formulation to the now familiar "These truths are self-evident." Adams sees immediately what Jefferson intends to promote in the declaration: "This is not just a declaration of our independence," Adams almost shouts, "but the rights of all men."

The conflict over what kind of nation America would become is portrayed in episodes III, IV, V and VI, which span the years 1776-1801. During this time, Adams' public life moves from two appointments—minister plenipotentiary to France (along with Benjamin Franklin) and ambassador to Great Britain—to being elected America's first vice president and finally its second president. Adams' frequent extended duties away from home place a severe strain on his family and especially Abigail, whose arduous family duties, including caring for children afflicted with small pox, are often juxtaposed to her husband's attendance at court and palace dinners. The series also establishes a connection between Adams' absence and his son Charles' ultimately fatal addiction to alcohol.

Revolutions require funding, but Adams's inability to follow Franklin's advice that if he is to accomplish much at the French court "he must appear to accomplish little" undermines any chance of receiving funding

in Paris. One scene uses a number of close-ups to emphasize the rot of the French aristocracy—both sexes have heavily painted faces and equally false smiles—and Adams' discomfort in their presence.

As a result, Adams is dismissed from his post (upon Franklin's recommendation) and is next sent to Holland, where he fares no better. At the end of his stay, he falls severely ill from fever, which is filmed in a highly expressionistic style to emphasize his distorted state of consciousness.

Following Britain's surrender, Holland finally agrees to loan \$2 million to America, and a fully recovered Adams is named Ambassador to Britain, where his plain-spoken, direct approach to politics, as well as his disapproval of French society, gains King George's approval.

Adams, Franklin and Jefferson reunite at the Treaty of Paris, where a striking conversation takes place. Debating the purpose of the US Constitution, Adams' insistence on law and order as a means of controlling the "mob" is sharply contrasted to Jefferson's faith in man and reminder to Adams that the revolution was not meant to stop at the American borders. Herein is miniaturized the future conflict between Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans over the purpose of governance. Jefferson's response, reflecting his Enlightenment education, also looks forward to his involvement in the French Revolution of 1789 (he would co-author the French Rights of Man and Constitution), as well as prefiguring, in its own way, the international perspective of socialism.

The conflict between Adams and Jefferson increases during the former's eight-year tenure as vice president under George Washington (1789-1797). His ambition and vanity unfulfilled by the largely perfunctory role of vice president, Adams argues to Congress that the title "president" is not "magisterial" enough (which draws a rebuke from both Congress and Abigail) and inveighs against the violent, mob behavior of the French Revolution. Jefferson, as secretary of state, believes that Washington is behaving as a monarch in all but name and continues to advance his belief that the revolution must be global in scope.

The debate over America's role in the world intensifies during Adams' term as president (1797-1801). Once again, his ambitions are thwarted by opposing factions. "Hamilton's men," as now Vice President Jefferson calls the cabinet led by Federalist Alexander Hamilton and inherited by Adams from Washington, envision America becoming an empire. With this purpose in mind, Hamilton promotes war with France and a national standing army, while Jefferson sees empire-building as undermining all that the revolution stood for. At this, point, Adams exclaims to Abigail, "I am left without counsel."

When Adams signs the Alien and Sedition Act, which includes suppression of and punishment for pro-French writings in America (Adams explains his rationale for this inclusion with, "A mob is still a mob, even if it's on your side"), Jefferson strongly rebukes him: "Why damage your fragile reputation by denying the very rights for which we fought?"

One wishes for a more realistic, less simplistic characterization of Alexander Hamilton (Rufus Sewell). It is true that Hamilton did see America's growth as being inextricably tied to empire and the creation of credit, but he saw both actions as being in line with patriotism, and he was known for refusing favors. In the series, he seems little more than a spoiled child (albeit a highly intelligent child).

Also underdeveloped is the reason for the famous split between Adams and Jefferson. In the last episode of the series, "Peacefield," Abigail reads a newspaper article penned by Jefferson in which the author attacks Adams' recently published memoirs as "political heresies." His vanity stung to the quick, Adams refuses to respond to Jefferson in any manner.

Not mentioned (but included in McCullough's book) is that Jefferson had recently received an early copy of Thomas Paine's pamphlet *The Rights of Man* (a scorching response to Edmund Burke's pro-monarchical book, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*) and sent it along to a

Philadelphia printer with a note promoting the book as an answer to the political heresies contained in Adams' memoirs.

As McCullough argues in his work, the division between the two would have a profound effect on national politics, for the public came to see Jefferson and Adams as the embodiment of the emerging split in American politics. Given the implications of the Jefferson-Adams division, one wonders why the filmmakers chose to delete its impetus.

With Adams now retired from public life, the rest of the final episode is fittingly devoted to his personal affairs. Having already endured his son Charles' death, Adams is now forced to witness the death of his eldest daughter, Abigail, from cancer (the episode includes a graphic representation of a mastectomy) and his beloved wife.

Bereft of his companion, Adams resumes his correspondence with Jefferson; and while one is privileged to hear a few of the letters that constitute a truly magnificent correspondence, these selections are of a personal nature, leaving one wishing for passages from those letters in which Adams and Jefferson continued to share their thoughts on the purpose of the revolution and the future of America.

As if scripted in a drama, the two friends and Founders die within hours of each other on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

John Adams is essential viewing. Incomplete and flawed though it might be, the series contains images and, more importantly, words that need to be seen and heard at a time when a massive economic crisis is creating the conditions for social revolution in America and worldwide. Everyone needs to be reminded that, as the wordsmith for the revolution, Thomas Paine, wrote in *Common Sense on Independence*, "The sun never shone on a cause of greater worth."



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