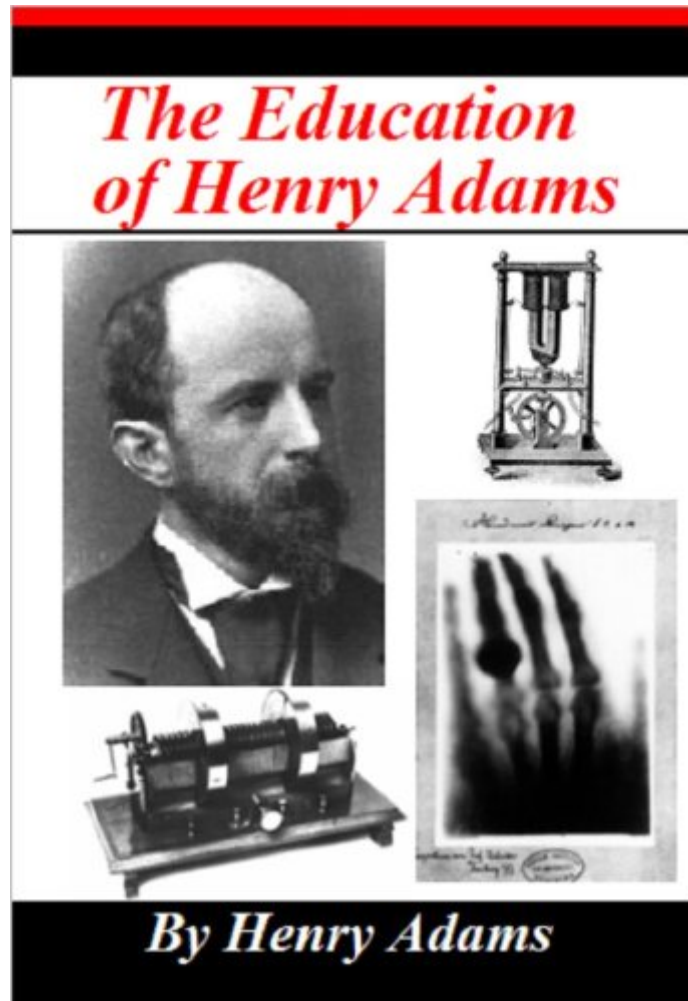




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# The Education Of Henry Adams



## Synopsis

The Education of Henry Adams records the struggle of Bostonian Henry Adams (1838-1918), in early old age, to come to terms with the dawning 20th century, so different from the world of his youth. It is also a sharp critique of 19th century educational theory and practice. In 1907, Adams began privately circulating copies of a limited edition printed at his own expense. Commercial publication had to await its author's 1918 death, whereupon it won the 1919 Pulitzer Prize. Many aspects of the contemporary world emerged during the half-century between the Civil War and World War I, a half-century coinciding with Adams's adult life. An important theme of The Education is its author's bewilderment and concern at the rapid advance in science and technology over the course of his lifetime, sometimes now called Second Industrial Revolution but incarnated in his term "dynamo." The Education mentions the recent discovery of x-rays and radioactivity, and shows a familiarity with radio waves in his citation of Marconi and

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## Customer Reviews

The Education of Henry Adams is rich in personal observations and nineteenth-century history. Even his mile walk to school at age 6 has historical interest, because the 77-year-old man who held his hand and walked with him was the sixth US president, John Quincy Adams, Henry's grandfather. For the record, Henry's great-grandfather was the second US president, John Adams (signatory of the Declaration of Independence), then his grandfather John Quincy Adams the sixth president, and his father the US ambassador to England during the Civil War. His maternal grandfather Peter Chardon Brooks was one of the 100 wealthiest Americans, a merchant millionaire, which was rare in the 1700s and early 1800s. Adams was alive twenty-two years before the Civil War, and from his earliest years was appalled at slavery and the retrograde violation of human dignity in the southern defense of slavery (100). He met presidents from, of course, his grandfather John Quincy, through Zachary Taylor, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, and many more, through twentieth-century presidents McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt. He died in 1918, the same year that World War I ended. It was a long way from the early American pioneer days of 1838 when he was born. When Adams was born, transportation and communication had not changed in 10,000 years. When he died he had seen the introduction of new transportation and communication that the twentieth century took for granted. Henry served as assistant to the ambassador to England for eight years when he was fresh out of Harvard University. Returning to the US around 1869 he started a career he loved as a journalist. But his family, friends, and professors he respected, persuaded him to take the position of history professor at Harvard. He did it for seven years. One of his students was Henry Cabot Lodge. Other than the friends he made during this period, he hated teaching and considered it a waste of seven years. He had little faith in standard teaching methods and outcomes. He valued the active mind and to "know how to learn" rather than the stuff that people spend most of their time studying (314). He believed in slower-paced learning to more fully and deeply absorb subjects as opposed to fast-paced surface learning. On the other hand, he felt a little guilty after Harvard had greeted him as an adult with open arms: "Yet nothing in the vanity of life struck him as more humiliating than that Harvard College, which he had persistently criticized, abused, abandoned, and neglected, should alone have offered him a dollar, an office, an encouragement, or a kindness" (305). He returned to his writing career, which over his lifetime included novels, the eight-volume *History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*, historical and legal essays, the two books I've reviewed, and many others. He was one of America's most esteemed historians though he spent his life with a sense of personal failure and a low estimation of his own education. His lifelong pursuit was to extrapolate and understand the trajectory of human evolution,

socially, politically, industrially, scientifically, theologically, and technologically. One of his comments on human evolutionary development sounds very modern. As history students know, Ulysses S. Grant had been a great general, but was corrupt as president. Speaking of Grant, Adams cuts to the chase: "He had no right to exist. He should have been extinct for ages. That, two thousand years after Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, a man like Grant should be called the highest product of the most advanced evolution, made evolution ludicrous. Darwinists ought to conclude that America was reverting to the stone age" (266). The Education is rife with insightful commentary on the world spinning around him, sometimes moving too fast to comprehend, sometimes moving incomprehensively backwards. He saw paradigm-shift inventions from telegraph and trains, to telephone and automobiles (he even bought a car in his later years), steam then electricity, inventions like photography, then film and the early Hollywood silent films, finally airplanes and the discovery of radium and radiation. Adams traveled more than most Americans in the nineteenth century. He spent many years throughout Europe, Russia, Asia, Africa, the Pacific islands and the Caribbean. He was an early observer of the merging of Western Cultures, noting "Hamburg was almost as American as St. Louis" (414). The Education has hidden treasures, offhand observations that end up being the most memorable. For example, he notes the affectation of eccentric behaviors in people considered highly eccentric. Eccentricity itself becomes a convention. He observes that "a mind really eccentric never betrayed it. True eccentricity was a tone—a shade—a nuance—and the finer the tone, the truer the eccentricity" (370). Adams' final thoughts show his disappointment: "He saw his education complete, and was sorry he ever began it" (458). He abhorred the ever-worsening "persistently fiendish treatment of man by man; the perpetual symbolism of a higher law, and the perpetual relapse to a lower one and principals of freedom deteriorating into principals of power and the despotism of artificial order" (458), referring to the rise of corporate dominance over society. He particularly disliked the growing influence of corporate power: "The Trusts and Corporations stood for the larger part of the new power that had been created since 1840, and were obnoxious because of their vigorous and unscrupulous energy. They tore society to pieces and trampled it under foot" (500). Adams had good friends who met tragic fates, his wife committed suicide at a young age, and as he grew older, found himself "A solitary man of sixty-five years or more, alone in a Gothic cathedral or a Paris apartment" (460). So this is The Education of Henry Adams. You may wonder why I liked it so much, and recommend it. The book is a retrospective provided by one of our most observant students of life, with access to the most interesting places and people in their

most interesting times. The book itself is a fascinating education for anyone who reads it. Robert Rose-Coutre Author of *Call of the Active Mind*

Still reading it. Saw it was the #1 book on the Modern Library's top 100 non-fiction books and a Pulitzer Prize winner and yet couldn't find it in a number of local libraries. A wonderful run through America 1938 (Henry's birth year) to the beginning of the 20th Century by John's great-grandson and John Quincy's grandson. Served as Secretary to his father Charles Francis when he was Minister to Great Britain during the Civil War, an unenviable job as the Confederates sought recognition from the Crown as a legitimate State.

Henry Adams carries on the talents of the Adams family. John Quincy enjoyed writing poetry. This poetic style permeates Henry's biographical writing. Little was said about the role that Elizabeth Sherman Cameron played in his "education". His description of the British involvement in the American Civil war was enlightening.

Quite a philosophical autobiography that was never intended to be published. I found it only at times interesting except for the amazing reveal that he made about how close the English had actually come to recognizing the CSA during the American Civil War. During that time Henry's father Charles Frances Adams was the ambassador to England for the United States. Charles took Henry with him to serve as his personal secretary. Thus Henry became "the mouse in the corner" for all his father's diplomatic endeavors. This part of the book alone makes it a must read for anyone interested in American History.

It's a real oddity as an autobiography but as a look at critical events in American history - from one of our greatest family of presidents and thinkers - and as a philosophy of history, it is outstanding.

The "Education of Henry Adams" (listed erroneously as an autobiography) was written over 100 years ago. Henry Adams was President John Adams great grandson. The book traces his life from Massachusetts to Washington, DC and Europe. Initially, a few private friends received 100 copies to read and comment. Thankfully, it was later given wider distribution before it became inconsequential. It provides meaning to the political spectrum from someone who viewed it up-close, took lessons from this experience and immersed himself in the day-to-day issues. The information covered in the book is excellent however, the authorship is questionable . It seems surreal that

persons of national and international stature, during the nineteenth century, are viewed today as iconic figures. Other occurrences involving political actions are revealed that are indelible in our nation's historical past. Henry's personal anecdotes of the "Adams" family political lore, the relationship of his grandparents, great grandparents and the public perceptions of suspicion, mistrust and intractability were not missed. His university education; extensive travels, together with close and involved contact with political luminaries, developed his outlook on life as an educator. The written tense varied as the author lumbered on about the political involvement of well-positioned people. This was an immense history lesson dealing with the great thinkers of Europe, America, and the mind games played by members of the Court of Saint James. I thought the book contained some crucial defining moments in international relations. His duties as private secretary to his father, who was US Minister to the Court of Saint James, were somewhat dubious although he had numerous contacts with foreign diplomats and other social and political associates. This book is out-of-print and available only as a "Classical Reprint Series" however, it is still worth reading. It contains a treasure trove of comments and assessment of people we have read about in history books: presidents, foreign diplomats, cabinet members, and military officials, etc. These candid expressions were his personal views. This is a book of nineteenth century history and could serve as a reference guide to other books of historical achievements. Another interesting book is "Henry Adams and the Making of America", a compendium of nine volumes, expertly written and reviewed by Gary Wills. Bruce E. McLeod, Jr. Las Vegas, Nevada 14 July 2013

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