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Dear Diary, J'Accuse!

As 'calamitous' as civil war would be, Adams wrote in 1820, 'so glorious would be its final issue, that . . . I dare not say that it is not to be desired.' Robert K. Landers reviews 'John Quincy Adams and the Politics of Slavery.'

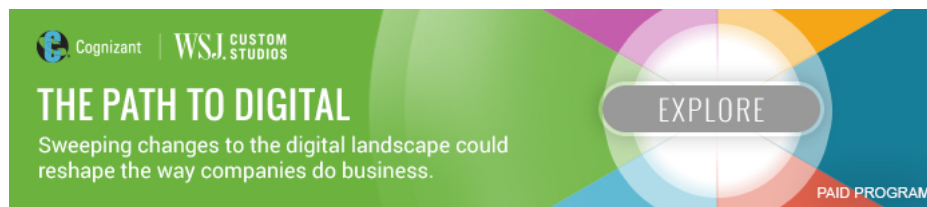
By **ROBERT K. LANDERS**

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As a young man accompanying his diplomat father in Paris, John Quincy Adams had hero-worshiped Thomas Jefferson and listened to him say that the blacks in Virginia were treated very well. But by 1800, the year that Jefferson was elected president, Adams had come to perceive "the inconsistency of [Southern planters] holding in one hand the rights of man and in the other a scourge for the back of slaves." His disillusion was such that in verse published later, though not under his own name, he would mock Jefferson's intimate relationship with his slave Sally Hemings: "Dear Thomas, deem it no disgrace / With slaves to mend thy breed, / Nor let the wench's smutty face / Deter thee from thy deed."

Yet Adams's awareness of Jefferson's flaws did not prevent him from recognizing the Virginian's accomplishments and historic role. As Adams told his diary in 1819: "Jefferson is one of the great men whom this country has produced, one of the men who has contributed largely to the formation of our national character—to much that is good and to not a little that is evil in our sentiments and manners." The Declaration of Independence, Adams added, had set forth "the first foundations of civil society." But, he added, Jefferson "does not appear to have been aware that it also laid open a precipice into which the slave-holding planters of his country sooner or later must fall."

Groomed by his parents for greatness, the precocious Adams began keeping his diary in 1779 at the age of 12. He wrote in it intermittently at first but eventually added entries nearly every day, right up to his final year. And what a wealth of experience he had to draw on: ministerial appointments abroad that included helping to negotiate the end of the War of 1812; a term in the U.S. Senate; secretary of state under President Monroe and president himself from 1825 to 1829; and, finally, U.S. congressman from Plymouth, Mass., fighting passionately against the spread of slavery.



Adams's diary is an "imperishable work of political literature," James Traub observed in "John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit" (2016), and thanks to the Massachusetts Historical Society it is now available online. Even so, not many people are likely to read all of the 51 manuscript volumes—more than 14,000 pages. Fortunately, next year the Library of America plans to bring out a two-volume edition, edited by David Waldstreicher. And right now we have "John Quincy Adams and the Politics of Slavery," consisting of pertinent diary excerpts selected by Mr. Waldstreicher and Matthew Mason. The two historians intersperse among the excerpts italicized notes of background and explanation.

Messrs. Waldstreicher and Mason evidently think, with reason, that 21st-century readers impressed by Adams's post-presidential antislavery fight may find it hard to

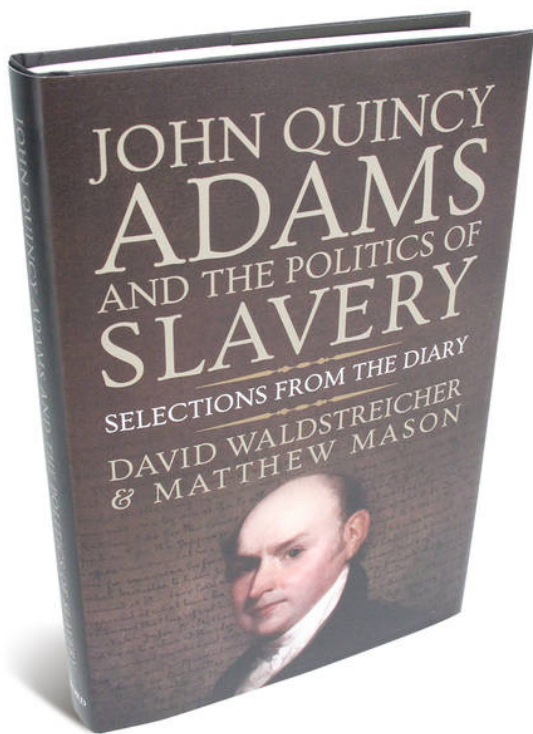


PHOTO: WSJ

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS AND THE POLITICS
OF SLAVERY

Edited by David Waldstreicher and
Matthew Mason

Oxford, 308 pages, \$29.95

grasp “why it took him so long to get there.” The diary should help them understand his conflicting commitment to the nation his father helped create and its Constitution, in which slavery was embedded. His transformation seems to have had less to do with a radical shift in his thought than with the constraints he was under while serving in executive positions.

It was only after Adams had shed such responsibilities that he was able, as a congressman, to confront the slave power in the House; move closer in public to the abolitionist position (while rejecting the extreme of demanding immediate abolition); and brood more intensely in private on what he feared would be the price of emancipation: civil war.

As early as March 1820, when he was secretary of state, Adams had told his cabinet colleagues (in connection with the Missouri Compromise) that slavery was inconsistent with the Declaration of Independence. He was not yet ready to say so publicly, still less to speak aloud the dark words of foreboding that he would record in his diary later that

year: “If slavery be the destined sword in the hand of the destroying angel which is to sever the ties of this Union, the same sword will cut in sunder the bonds of slavery itself.” As “calamitous” as a civil war would be, “so glorious would be its final issue, that, as God shall judge me, I dare not say that it is not to be desired.”

After that March 1820 cabinet meeting, Adams walked home with Secretary of War John Calhoun, the Yale-educated former congressman from South Carolina. Calhoun, Adams told his diary, said “that the principles which I had avowed were just and noble; but that in the Southern country . . . they were always understood as applying only to white men.” Manual labor was “the proper work of slaves,” Calhoun added (in Adams’s paraphrase). “No white person could descend to that.” Adams, however, said he “could not see things in the same light. It is, in truth, all perverted sentiment—mistaking labor for slavery, and dominion for freedom.”

Adams told his diary that the discussion of the “Missouri question” had left an impression on his mind: that the Constitution’s bargain between freedom and slavery “is morally and politically vicious, inconsistent with the principles upon which alone our Revolution can be justified; cruel and oppressive.” And by treating slaves not as persons “to be represented themselves” but as a reason to award “their masters . . . nearly a double share of representation,” the bargain ensured “that this slave representation has governed the Union.”

During the 1830s and 1840s, Adams argued publicly that the Declaration of Independence, not the Constitution, was the nation’s founding document—“the ark of your covenant,” as he told his fellow citizens in a famous 1839 speech. As Charles Edel noted in his intellectual biography, “Nation Builder” (2014), Adams’s contention that

the egalitarian Declaration took precedence over the Constitution would later be adopted by Lincoln, as in the Gettysburg Address. Though Messrs. Waldstreicher and Mason do not highlight that intellectual bequest, Adams's argument is often visible in the illuminating diary entries they provide.

Mr. Landers, a writer in Baltimore, posts his reviews and essays at robertklanders.com.

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