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Massachusetts Historical Society, "The Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive"- Review of *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams. Edited by Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor*

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My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams. Edited by Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. 528 pp. ISBN cloth 13: 978-0-674-02606-3, \$35.00.

Massachusetts Historical Society, “The Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive”

Correspondence between John and Abigail Adams. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/letter/>.

John P. Kaminski

The introduction to *My Dearest Friend* begins, “Abigail and John Adams’s correspondence, spanning the years 1762 to 1801, covers the most important forty years in American history.” It is hard to refute that statement. Written by a couple who were arguably the nation’s most powerful political husband-and-wife team, this correspondence paints a portrait of a lifelong romance upon a canvas of revolution, independence, and nation building. Ten years into their marriage, John expressed how important their partnership was to him: “In all the Joys and sorrows, Prosperity and Adversity of my Life” she would “take a Part with me in the struggle.”¹ A month before their wedding, he predicted that she “shall polish and refine my sentiments of Life and Manners, banish all the unsocial and ill natured Particles in my Composition, and form me to that happy Temper, that can reconcile, a quick Discernment with a perfect Candour.”² She was what he needed: “Ballast, without which [he would] totter with every Breeze.”³ No other correspondence between a husband and a wife shows better the great sacrifices that both endured for their country.

My Dearest Friend is the third published compilation of the letters of Abigail and John Adams. Charles Francis Adams edited the first compilation of his grandparents’ correspondence in 1876, the nation’s centennial. A century later, in 1975, the staff of the Adams Family Papers (Lyman H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline) edited a second collection of letters, entitled *The Book of Abigail and John*. The first compilation contains 284 letters written between 1774 and 1783; the second, 207 letters written between 1762 and 1784. The second compilation also includes diary entries and third-party letters that assist in transitions.

¹ To Abigail Adams, York, Maine, 1 July 1774. (MDF, 32–33)

² To Abigail Smith, 30 September 1764. (MDF, 24)

³ John Adams: Draft of a letter to an unidentified correspondent. (MHS)

My Dearest Friend contains 289 letters “selected from the entire corpus” of the Adams letters from 1762 to 1801 and “is meant to show both the consistency of their relationship and the evolution of the family through the entire founding era.” A three-page epilogue on the death of Abigail consists of a short headnote and two letters exchanged between John and John Quincy Adams. All but three of the letters in *My Dearest Friend* are in the Adams Family manuscript collection given by the Adams family to the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) in 1956. The letters were all microfilmed on 608 reels by the MHS in the 1950s and sold to research libraries throughout the world. The Abigail and John letters appear on the MHS Web site (www.masshist.org) at “The Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.” (See below.) Abigail and John’s letters also appear among the volumes of *The Adams Family Correspondence* published by The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Nine volumes have been published to date, covering the years through 1793. All of the published Adams volumes appear on the MHS Web site and are also digitally available on *Rotunda*, University of Virginia Press.

The editors of *My Dearest Friend* tell the readers that this volume is “to be read and enjoyed, not necessarily studied.” Readers are told to go to the published volumes for full annotation. Annotation for *My Dearest Friend* can be found in four places: (1) short introductions to chronological chapters, (2) very short headnotes to individual documents, (3) editorial insertions in square brackets within the transcriptions, and (4) brief identifications within index entries. An additional light sprinkling of footnotes to references that are unclear or unknown to most readers would have been helpful in making the letters more understandable and enjoyable.

Transcription policies reflect the times in which the compilations were published. The 1876 edition corrected errors in spelling (primarily in Abigail’s letters) and omitted matters the editor considered to be trivial, mundane, or inappropriate, or that he deemed too personal. These omissions were not repeated in the subsequent compilations. The 1975 compilation followed the transcription policy set by Julian P. Boyd in the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* and adopted by Lyman Butterfield in the *Adams Papers* volumes, in which the text is modernized. Editors Hogan and Taylor in *My Dearest Friend* chose to present a literal transcription of the text with only minor alterations in punctuation when needed for clarity. This literal transcription does not make it more difficult to understand the letters. The transcriptions in *My Dearest Friend* are very accurate.

The twenty-page index is straightforward and well done. Birth-death dates and brief identifications often are placed in parentheses after index entries. An informative six-page chronology precedes the index.

Like its 1975 predecessor, *My Dearest Friend* contains a beautiful collection of illustrations; in this volume they are gathered together in twenty pages in

the middle of the book. Mostly in vivid full color, the illustrations include portraits of the young and old John and Abigail Adams, portraits of their children and son-in-law, engravings or paintings of seven of their residences, cartoons, a map, and facsimiles of manuscript letters written by the Adamses. The stunning dustjacket reproduces the young portraits and the retirement residence on the front, along with a facsimile of a letter by Abigail on the back.

The correspondence between Abigail and John Adams is unique among the Founders. When George Washington died, his wife destroyed all of the correspondence between them in her possession. Only three letters now remain extant. When Martha Jefferson died in 1782, Thomas Jefferson destroyed their correspondence. James Monroe did the same when his wife Eliza died in 1830. Even if any of these three sets of marital correspondence survived, they would not have the same significance as the correspondence between Abigail and John. Few women participated in the politics of the day. John jokingly wrote to Abigail that he was guilty of a grievous sin—he had introduced “a Woman!” to politics.⁴ As the years went by and Abigail’s maternal duties subsided, her interest and involvement in politics increased until she became her husband’s chief adviser and confidante.

Although she never attended school, Abigail Adams had a remarkable education. Her letters are brilliant. They capture the events and the way life was lived over a period of fifty momentous years. They reveal a woman of truly incredible strength, of insight, and of wisdom. In 1794, while he was serving as vice president and presiding over the U.S. Senate, John told Abigail that her letters gave him “more entertainment than all the speeches I hear. There is more good Thoughts, fine strokes and Mother Wit in them than I hear in the whole Week. An Ounce of Mother Wit is worth a Pound of Clergy.” He was happy that at least one of their children (John Quincy Adams) had “an Abundance of not only Mother Wit, but his Mother’s Wit.”⁵

The letters almost always consist of a single sheet of paper folded once in half to form four pages, with on rare occasions another single sheet of paper inserted, making a six-page letter. The completed letter was then folded and tucked in such a way that the fourth page became a sort of cover or “envelope,” upon which was written the recipient’s name and address. The folded letter was then sealed with a spot of wax. (This wax seal is shown on the back of the dustjacket.)

Abigail nearly always filled the first three pages of her letters to overflowing. “My pen will always run greater lengths than I am aware of when I address those who are particularly dear to me and to whom I can write with unreserve.”⁶

⁴ To Abigail Adams, Passy, 13 February 1779. (*MDF*, 225)

⁵ John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 4 February 1794. (*MDF*, 355)

⁶ To John Quincy Adams, London, 26 June 1785. (*AFC*, 6: 194)

Short letters disappointed her because they “always give one pain as well as pleasure since a few lines only from such a distance looks as if the Friend we wrote to possessed but a small share of our attention and regard.”⁷ On several occasions she complained to John that his letters were not “half long enough.”⁸ She most enjoyed letters that he wrote on Sundays, because he seemed to have “a greater command” of his time on that day.⁹

John’s letters were usually shorter. He justified his brevity because of his busy schedule. “How I find Time to write half the Letters I do, I know not, for my whole Time seems engrossed with Business.”¹⁰

Abigail Adams’s literary legacy would have surprised her. She was embarrassed by her lack of a formal education and was aware of her shortcomings in spelling, grammar, and handwriting, which she referred to as “incorrect and unpolished.”¹¹ On at least five occasions she asked her husband to destroy her letters, once suggesting that he light his cigars with them. He responded that her letters made his “Heart throb, more than a Cannonade,” and that he “must forget” her first before destroying her letters.¹² To a friend, she confided that she would “make a bond fire” of her letters rather than “they should some hundred years hence be thought of consequence enough to publish.”¹³

Abigail valued letters highly, even if they contained “nothing but an account of the Health” of those we love.¹⁴ As a young woman she wrote her fiancé how much she appreciated his letters: “I do not estimate everything according to the price the world set upon it, but according to the value of it is of to me, thus that which was cheapest to you I look upon as highly valuable.”¹⁵ A decade later, she delighted in informing her husband, then serving in Congress in Philadelphia, how their four little children “run upon the Sight of a Letter [from their father]—like chicks for a crum, when the Hen clucks.”¹⁶ She confided to him that when she received his letters her heart was “as light as a feather” and her spirits danced. Letters from him were “Like cold water to a thirsty Soul”; like “a feast to

⁷ To John Adams, 13 December 1778. (*AFC*, 3: 136)

⁸ To John Adams, Braintree, 20 September 1776. (*MDF*, 155)

⁹ To John Adams, Braintree, 16 July 1775. (*AFC*, 1: 247)

¹⁰ To Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 3 December 1775. (*MDF*, 91)

¹¹ To Mercy Otis Warren, Boston, 5 December 1773. (*AFC*, 5: 88)

¹² To Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 28 April 1776. (MHS)

¹³ To Harriet Welsh, Quincy, 9 March 1815. (MHS)

¹⁴ To Charles Adams and John Quincy Adams, 22 July 1780. (*AFC*, 3: 381)

¹⁵ To John Adams, Weymouth, 12 April 1764. (*MDF*, 13)

¹⁶ To John Adams, Braintree, 25 June 1775. (*MDF*, 68)

me.”¹⁷ When she received letters, Abigail felt an urgency to respond. “My Heart overflows, and longs to give utterance to my pen.”¹⁸ Whenever she heard of a safe conveyance, especially a ship readying to cross the Atlantic, she seized the opportunity to write.

To a great extent, the nature and number of Abigail’s letters were dictated by circumstances. When at home raising four children, she wrote primarily to her husband, who, as an up-and-coming provincial attorney, rode the judicial circuit throughout Massachusetts and Maine for almost half the year. During these early years, Abigail seldom wrote to her family because they were nearby and often visited each other. Her correspondence with John increased when he served in Congress in Philadelphia. When her husband and ten-year-old son sailed for Europe in 1778, she wrote to them whenever a nearby American ship prepared to put to sea, despite the constant dangers from the British navy. On several occasions a packet of her letters was thrown overboard so as not to allow the letters to fall into the enemy’s possession. When, after the war, Abigail joined her husband in Europe, their correspondence stopped. When they returned to America in 1788 and John left Braintree the following year to become vice president and then president in 1797, their correspondence blossomed again whenever she stayed home, as she often did. When Abigail joined John in New York City, Philadelphia, or Washington, D.C., their correspondence with each other naturally ceased while her correspondence with family and friends burgeoned. Whether at home in Braintree (or Quincy), abroad, or in the nation’s capital, she always awakened early and spent “almost every morning in writing” letters.¹⁹ When John lost his bid for a second term as president, the Adamses retired to Quincy. No longer separated, they never wrote another letter to each other.

While at home Abigail wrote about the health of family and friends. Often her letters mentioned the death of family, friends, and acquaintances—“the Infant Bud, the blooming Youth, and the Mature in Life have fallen around me.”²⁰ After a deadly dysentery epidemic, Abigail wrote of how her mother nursed her through the illness only to succumb to the disease herself. John consoled Abigail, saying “The best Thing We can do, the greatest Respect We can show to the Memory of our departed Friend, is to copy into Our own Lives those Virtues which in her Life time rendered her the object of our Esteem, Love and Admiration.” He then went well beyond simple condolences. Although he vener-

¹⁷ To John Adams, Braintree, 27 May 1776; to John Quincy Adams, Quincy, 27 February 1814. (*AFC*, 1: 416 & MHS)

¹⁸ To John Adams, Braintree, c. 15 July 1778. (*AFC*, 3: 61)

¹⁹ To Mary Cranch, Philadelphia, 19 June 1798. (MHS)

²⁰ To Louisa Catherine Adams, Quincy, 30 September 1815. (MHS)

ated his mother-in-law, he hoped Abigail would forgive him when he said that “her Talents, and Virtues [were] too much confined to private, social and domestic Life. My Opinion of the Duties of Religion and Morality, comprehends a very extensive Connection with society at large, and the great Interest of the public. Does not natural Morality, and much more Christian Benevolence, make it our indispensable Duty to lay ourselves out, to serve our fellow Creatures to the Utmost of our Power, in promoting and supporting those great Political systems, and general Regulations upon which the Happiness of Multitudes depends.” Abigail and John had to elevate their concern from the personal level to “the great Principles of Virtue and Freedom of political Regulations” in order to “secure whole Nations and Generations from Misery, Want and Contempt.”²¹

She wrote of domestic matters—the farm, servants, field hands, the weather, and financial concerns—and politics at the state, national, and international levels. When John served in Congress, she advocated independence, criticized the delay in calling for it, and urged the adoption of laws to protect women from their abusive husbands. He responded that America was “a great, unwieldy Body,” which he compared to a convoy in which the “fleetest Sailors, must wait for the dullest and slowest” and like a “Coach and six—the swiftest Horses, must be slackened and the slowest quickened, that all may keep an even Pace.”²² When John served abroad, she admonished him to guard his health and to come home as soon as possible. When John served as vice president and president, she advised him on all matters, repeatedly advocating the passage of alien and sedition laws that would restrict the subversive activities of Americans and immigrants (mainly Frenchmen, who, according to Abigail, all became Jeffersonians) who threatened the stability of the government. (Unfortunately the editors of *My Dearest Friend* did not include any of the letters in which Abigail advocated alien and sedition laws or the prosecution under them.) After admonishing her correspondents, Abigail regularly reinforced her admonitions with a quotation from the Bible (heavily citing Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Book of Matthew) or from such literary favorites as Alexander Pope (especially his *Essay on Man*) and Shakespeare. She acknowledged “Common Sense’s” (Thomas Paine’s) reference to the “use of quotations [only by] those who are destitute of Ideas of their own,”²³ but felt comfortable reinforcing her own often pithy admonitions with appropriate reinforcing quotations.

It was through her voluminous correspondence that Abigail sustained herself when so often separated from her family and friends. During their first

²¹ To Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 29 October 1775. (*MDF*, 87–88)

²² To Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 17 June 1775. (*MDF*, 60)

²³ To John Adams, 2 April 1777. (*AFC*, 2: 193)

twenty years of marriage, Abigail and John were separated more than half of the time. Household matters, the education of the children, and family business affairs fell to her. Early in the Revolution, she wrote John that “I know not How I should support an absence already tedious, and many times attended with melancholy reflections, if it was not for so frequently hearing from you. That is a consolation to me, tho a cold comfort in a winter’s Night.”²⁴ To her husband she confessed that “I have scarcely ever taken my pen to write but the tears have flowed faster than the Ink.”²⁵ She told John that “I love to amuse myself with my pen, and pour out some of the tender sentiments of a Heart over flowing with affection.”²⁶ Although she knew that “Many things may be said, which it is improper to commit to paper,”²⁷ yet she also found that her pen was “always freer than my tongue.” She told John that “I have wrote many things to you that I suppose I never could have talk’d.”²⁸ Sometimes she approached eroticism, which embarrassed her more prudish husband, who advised her to be more cautious. She would have none of it. She could relieve “the anxiety of my Heart” only by “a frequent intercourse by Letters unrestrained by the apprehension of their becoming food for our Enemies. The affection I feel for my Friend is of the tenderest kind, matured by years, sanctified by choise and approved by Heaven. Angels can witness to its purity, what care I then for the Ridicule of Britains should this testimony of it fall into their Hands, nor can I endure that so much caution and circumspection on your part should deprive me of the only consolor of your absence.”²⁹

After John left a second time for diplomatic service abroad, Abigail wrote, “My candle and my pen are all my companions. I send my thoughts across the broad Atlantick in search of my associate and rejoice that thought and imagination are not confined like my person to the small spot on which I exist.”³⁰ It was the correspondence she received from loved ones that sustained her throughout a life filled with illness and “the pangs of seperation from near and dear Friends.”³¹ It was from her frequent, regular correspondence that her husband remained close though separated by miles and time.

²⁴ To John Adams, Braintree, 17 April 1777. (*MDF*, 168)

²⁵ To John Adams, Braintree, 21 October 1778. (*MDF*, 211)

²⁶ To John Adams, Sunday Evening, 27 December 1778. (*MDF*, 222)

²⁷ To John Quincy Adams, Quincy, April 1808. (*MHS*)

²⁸ To John Adams, Braintree, 22 October 1775. (*MDF*, 86)

²⁹ To John Adams, Braintree, 12–13 November 1778. (*MDF*, 215–16)

³⁰ To John Adams, June–July 1779. (*MHS*)

³¹ To Louisa Catherine Adams, Quincy, 22 September 1810. (*MHS*)

The correspondence between Abigail and John Adams appears on the MHS Web site. A total of 1198 letters are available—430 from Abigail and 768 from John. The letters are arranged chronologically into six groups: the courtship and early marriage, 1762–74 (56 letters), the Continental Congress, 1774–77 (339 letters), John Adams’s first diplomatic mission to France, 1778–79 (59 letters), the second diplomatic mission to Europe, 1779–89 (199 letters), the vice presidency, 1789–97 (346 letters), and the presidency, 1797–1801 (199 letters).

For best results, users need to access the Web site with a standards-compliant browser that supports Cascading Style Sheets (see below). Microsoft Explorer 5 or higher or Netscape Navigator 6 or higher is recommended. Arranged by year, transcriptions appear on the left side of the screen opposite a small image of the manuscript on the right side. By right-clicking on the manuscript, a new window appears with a full-page image of the manuscript. An additional click further expands the image, allowing the viewer more closely to examine individual words and letters that might be difficult to decipher. The user can then toggle between the manuscript image and the transcription. A search mode allows the user to locate passages from the entire collection by bringing up excerpts of all the letters that contain the searched-for string of words. Once found, the user can click to the full document, enter another search, return to the browser listing all of the years of correspondence, or return to the home page.

The Web site makes use of Cascading Style Sheets with color-coded features throughout. Names of persons and places with additional information are placed in bold. Crossed-out text appears in cancelled type within square brackets. Unreadable crossed-out text is indicated by the word “illegible” in cancelled type within square brackets. Additions and interlineations made by the author are placed in gray superscript. Editorial insertions added to clarify, correct, or complete passages in the manuscripts are placed within square brackets. Explanatory notes appear in italic red type within square brackets. Links to other documents appear in bold green type within square brackets. A help icon (a question mark within a shaded circle) located in the upper right-hand corner of the transcriptions can be used to show the colors and formatting used in the display of the transcriptions. Most print-outs of a single letter are four pages long. The transcriptions and the images of the manuscripts are to be used for study purposes only. Permission from the MHS must be obtained in advance to reproduce or publish the transcriptions and/or the images of the manuscripts.

The MHS electronic archive of the Adams family papers is not intended to be a documentary edition. Letters from before 23 December 1786 were proof-read and the same texts appear in the project’s first six volumes of the *Adams Family Correspondence*. For letters between Abigail and John written after 23 December 1786, the texts were derived from the unverified transcripts from the Adams Papers project’s files and must be used with care. However, the accompa-

nying manuscript image on the Web site can be used to check the reliability of the transcription. The Web site complements the many published volumes of the *Adams Family Correspondence*, which should be consulted for the full apparatus of a modern documentary edition. *My Dearest Friend* falls somewhat in between. Prepared by scholars who are well-seasoned documentary editors, the aim of *My Dearest Friend* is to allow a diverse audience easy access to the correspondence of a couple deeply in love with each other and with their country—a country that demanded incredible sacrifices from them both. *My Dearest Friend* is a testament to the legendary partnership of Abigail and John Adams.