

8:00 (13) ADAMS CHRONICLES:

"John Adams: Diplomat (1776-1783)." Part 3. In search of European allies, John Adams is appointed commissioner to France. Accompanied by his son, John Quincy, Adams negotiates peace with Great Britain although he is often at war with Benjamin Franklin. Adams: George Grizzard; Franklin: Robert Symonds. (60 minutes)

(2) MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL:

Howard Cosell and gang occasionally interrupt their press box chatter to report what is happening on the field. Supporting players: New York Jets at Kansas City Chiefs.

ONICLES

t.v. viewing guide:

the adams chronicles

edward f. grier

w. stitt robinson

theodore a. wilson

clifford s. griffin

The Adams Chronicles, a thirteen episode television series, represents public television's most ambitious venture to date in exploring the American past. As part of the bicentennial celebration in 1976, WNET/13 (New York City) produced the *Chronicles* for the Public Broadcasting System with subventions from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Atlantic-Richfield Corporation. The Audio-Visual Center at Indiana University distributes films to college campuses under an NEH subsidy.

The reviewers chose three episodes for discussion: those dealing with John Adams as diplomat, John Quincy Adams as president and Charles Francis Adams II, as industrialist. In screening the programs, *American Studies* instructed the four University of Kansas critics to react as they saw fit to the programs and the series; the only constraint was limited space.

8:00 (13) ADAMS CHRONICLES:

"John Quincy Adams: President (1825-1829)." Part 9. John Quincy Adams' term as president is as difficult as his father's years in office. Although making peace with Henry Clay, he loses ground to the ascending star of Andrew Jackson. Adams: William Daniels; Clay: George Hern. (60 minutes)

(68) THE GONG SHOW:

Impressionist Joe Jones as Charlie

8:00 (13) ADAMS CHRONICLES:

"Charles Francis Adams II: (1886-1893)." Part 13. In the final episode, Charles Francis Adams II loses control of the Union Pacific Railroad to Jay Gould. The Adamses leave Quincy, Massachusetts and their luster tarnishes in the new century. Charles Francis II: Charles Siebert; Gould: Paul Hecht; Henry: Peter Brandon. (60 minutes)

(68) THE GONG SHOW:

Impressionist Joe Jones as Charlie McCarthy; Lassie family bays *The Moonlight Sonata*; Jane Doe whistles Mahler's *Third Symphony*. Gong: gong. (30 minutes)

Y NIGHT

The history of high level popularization of history, as well as of other subjects, is a complicated one. One might cite the classical epic and the Shakespearean history plays as early attempts to interpret the past for the large public, but with the almost simultaneous appearance of mass literacy, cheap printing and a new consciousness of history at the beginning of the 19th Century, we can detect a more consistent effort. It is not frivolous to view the invention of the historical novel by Sir Walter Scott as breaking the new ground. Scott and his successors popularized history for a wide public and, indeed, Scott's novels, or as they are better called, romances, had a considerable impact on the writing of professional history in the first half of the century. Beyond this, it is the formula which Scott discovered and successors like Cooper quickly adopted that had an even more powerful influence. Assuming, as his century did, that history was the product of great men, Scott realized that great men, for various reasons, may be intractable as fictional heroes and that historical events, no matter how accurately or carelessly portrayed, could best be shown through the eyes of a lesser, invented, personage. The historical costume drama of the 19th century exploited the same interest in history and used the same approach, with the added attraction of live personages and visible spectacle. In the 20th century, the film followed the same pattern. Of course, "history" was frequently merely a part of the setting and historical events or phenomena were dealt with pretty freely, for the purpose was mass entertainment—or sometimes propaganda. Nevertheless, more of us learned our history through fiction, drama or film than we might like to admit, and a recent biographer of Louis XI of France admitted that he was trying to rescue that monarch from Scott's *Quentin Durward* (1823).

As soon as films moved out of storefront theaters and nickelodeons, educators began to consider its instructional possibilities, just as they had been for years drawing up lists of suitable novels for "background reading." Although, for obvious reasons, it was economically impossible for educational groups to produce historical films on the scale of commercial studios a good number of history films, usually shorts, were and are still being made for classroom use. A much more ambitious series of films, now as forgotten as the Sesquicentennial of 1926 that brought it forth, was the Yale University Press' *Chronicles of America*, not to be confused with the book series of the same title. This was heavily promoted as a teaching aid. I dimly remember seeing at least some episodes in a school auditorium, but my only real recollection of it is that everyone wore puffy white cotton wigs on all occasions.

Much more recently there have been serious attempts to convey recent history to a general audience from a variety of sources. Hollywood has, of course, produced a number of "War Epics" of which *The Longest Day* comes to mind as a fairly responsible attempt to convey the experience of D Day. BBC-TV has made a variety of films: compilations drawn from official film archives like *World at War*, fictionalized dynastic history like

The Fall of Eagles and the immensely successful *Upstairs, Downstairs*, which was straight historical fiction. Commercial TV in this country has recently produced the much discussed *Roots* and *Holocaust*, both of which, by partially or totally fictitious means dealt in breadth and in some depth with historical phenomena which still arouse deep and complex responses in viewers.

The serious educational purpose of all of these is and was evident, but they are all still in the "pre-scientific" era of historiography. History is no longer made by great men, except possibly in "*Fall of Eagles*," which explores high-level diplomacy, nor is it a matter of battles. A good deal of emphasis is laid on the experiences of ordinary people, if one can so refer to Lord Bellamy and his household. In this respect modern historiography has influenced historical popularization. (Or is popularization merely following newer conventions of historical fiction?) Nevertheless, in these films, history is still a narrative art and history concerns people. History as social science has not yet been popularized or has been found intractable. Walter Scott and William Hickling Prescott would be only slightly bewildered by the historiographical assumptions of the serious popularizations of the last few years.

It is not surprising, then, that the Public TV originators of *The Adams Chronicles* chose a dramatized family biography as a proper way to celebrate the Bicentennial and that ample funds were mobilized to produce it in style. I do not propose to speak of its public impact, although I suspect that it was less than one might have hoped, nor of its historicity. Since I am a student of literature and the series follows a literary (and film) tradition, I shall discuss it from that point of view.

The creators of the series deserve congratulations on their choice of the Adams family for a number of reasons. The obvious choice would have been Great Events, Great Statesmen, or Great Americans, like a series of postage stamps. The Adamses are the longest-lasting and most interesting of the very few American dynasties. Their very disappearance from public life tells us a good deal about what we are. The creators of the series also deserve congratulations for their daring in presenting a family almost totally deficient in charm or grace. Quincy was not Camelot, and no Adams has ever become a mythical figure. The scriptwriters spare us little of the unpleasant family traits: John Adams' provincial self-righteousness and John Quincy Adams' total inability to understand anyone else, and so on. It is a tribute to the judgment and skill of the producers that we can see also the qualities of the Adamses that made them admirable and interesting.

The acting is competent, but I suspect that the failure of any one actor to make a strong individual impression was a matter of directorial policy. That we are absorbed by the Adamses is probably a tribute to the technical skill on the part of the players rather than otherwise. All of the actors were held to a decent standard of American Stage English, which is as it should have been. Nothing would have been worse than

the usual variety of 20th-century twangs, slurs or drawls. Nor do we have much information on the speech patterns of Americans in the past. The dialogue is sometimes wooden, especially in the early episodes, probably because the scriptwriters were sticking close to the actual words of correspondence. The director and the cameraman have managed well to put the meager spaces of a New England farmhouse and the splendors of Versailles on the tiny screen. Costumes were both elegant and appropriate, and the wigs fitted.

The narrative method is based on the use of numerous short scenes, often requiring liveliness of mind and a fair amount of historical information from the viewer. These cohere into larger units, finally into the complete episode, although not with mathematical precision. Passage of time is not emphatically stressed and occasionally ignored. For example, we do not know how much time elapsed between John Adams' arrival in Paris and his successful floating of the Dutch loan. It is not made clear (nor is it especially important) that George Washington Adams committed suicide after John Quincy left the presidency. Charles Francis Adams, Jr. resigned from the presidency of the Union Pacific, not during the Panic of 1893, but in 1890. (This non-specialist was helped by Jack Shepherd's *The Adams Chronicle* (Boston, 1975).) Obviously, a good deal of the dialogue and many of the small incidents have been invented—on the basis of thoroughly informed historical judgment. All the incidents are treated as a species of symbol or a kind of shorthand for a more sprawling series of facts less amenable to dramatic notation. As Aristotle said, fiction is more philosophical than history. From a less elevated point of view, it is also true that what I have been describing is contemporary narrative film style.

This interweaving of incidents produces sequences that are esthetically effective and historically expressive to a surprising degree. The sequence of a confrontation between Charles Francis, Jr. and a rebellious Quincy town official over extension of the granite quarries, a troubled Union Pacific directors' meeting, a futile appeal to Senator Hoar for federal help, final submission to Jay Gould and the retreat from Quincy to Lincoln enact Adams' downfall. But we know what Quincy has meant to the Adamses and we realize that Charles Francis has vulgarized the feeling to that of the Lord of the Manor, that he has felt the grandeur of his grandfather's schemes of internal improvements and that he has soiled it by his arrogance and by his weakness of moral fibre in trying to build the U.P. by the same methods for which he had self-righteously condemned Jay Gould. We realize that the end of this Adams and of the dynasty had come. One of the finer touches of the series occurs at the end of the scene of Adams' humiliating resignation when Gould, with elaborate deference, insists on showing Mr. Adams out. Another successful example of this interweaving is the counterpointing of history and biography in the episode of John Quincy Adams' presidency. Here Adams' idealism, his personal rigidity, his interest in science, his zeal for

internal improvements, the political intrigues against him and the catastrophes of his family are brilliantly combined.

Often, short contrasting scenes are used to make a point, not without humor. There are several effective passages at arms between the old and wily Franklin (not the schoolmarm Franklin) and the idealistic but rigid young Adams. There is also a series of scenes which carry the awkward bumpkin from his tongue-tied presentation to Louis XVI through the floating of the Dutch loan (that trick is never explained, only symbolized by his rather worldly interview with an unidentified lady of very high rank) and his triumphant appearance in particularly splendid suit and wig as the darling of *tout Paris*.

Each episode has its own unity, but the series is held together, not only by the survival of members of the family from one episode to another but also by the repetition of certain themes: the unpleasant family traits appear in modified form throughout as do the better traits—their devotion to the life of the mind, their stubbornness, their honesty, their awareness of personal and national destiny, their devotion to duty. As I have suggested, interest is maintained unevenly. Young John Adams was just another ambitious young man; there is an inevitable narrowing of scope in the episodes about Charles Francis, Jr. and Henry. The whole project was admirably conceived and carried out, yet there is something lacking. Perhaps the malaise of the Bicentennial, coming as it did at the nadir of our history in the last century, infected the film as well as its viewers. Yet, who better than the Adamses to call us to order? On a much humbler level, it is appropriate, but unjust to the ambitions and successes of the series, to say, “Lucky the student who sees these films in his American history survey.” They deserve a wide audience.

EFG

Emphasis upon the history of the family as a part of social history has during the last two decades received increasing attention among writers of American history, influenced to some extent by historians abroad in both French and British social history. Part of this emphasis reflects the increasing interest in turning the spotlight of investigation away from only the elite to all members of society, thereby attempting to construct a more complete view of the entire social fabric. Part of the emphasis has also resulted from the development of quantification techniques through use of computer programming of new sources of data, including census reports, tax lists, probate records, property inventories, and other statistical references. Along with these two emphases has been the greater use by historians of interdisciplinary approaches, particularly in sociology and psychology which have provided new social theories and concepts for analysis. Demographic studies have used two techniques to approach the study of the family. One has become known as family reconstitution of individual families, an approach not unknown to genealogists but one that has been perfected to record the history of all individual families in

a community or a sufficient number to give a full view of the society. The second technique is aggregate data analysis, a methodology not as extensive as family reconstitution but one that provides selective analyses of types of data such as birth and marriage rates that are examined for different time periods to provide major demographic trends, if not the complete reconstruction of the make-up of a given community.

The *Adams Chronicles*, depicting four generations of this influential New England family, was influenced only in a limited way by these recent trends. The *Chronicles* represent more the portrayal of a prominent family and its achievements with a blend of personal and professional life, eschewing the statistical approach of other studies. Beginning with the career of John Adams, the story does illustrate the social mobility of the eighteenth century as John rises to prominence as lawyer and political leader from his father's limited background as farmer-shoemaker. The emphasis, however, tends to be elitist as it deals with the leading role that the family played in American life for four generations. For the reconstitution of this family history, in contrast to less illustrious groups, there is available the massive set of manuscripts of the Adams Papers in the Massachusetts Historical Society to fill the gaps that so often exist for other less prominent members of society.

The thirteen episodes of the Adams family provide a blend of the personal and professional lives of the participants with considerable attention devoted to the role of wives and children. While this emphasis adds interest and reveals the human side of individual members, it tends to restrict within the time limits available the full dimension of the career and character of the leaders who are the major subjects of each episode. For example, episode number nine on John Quincy Adams as President becomes so involved with the problems of his wife and children, including the suicide of his son—George Washington Adams—that the full perspective of his role as President is blurred. Episode number thirteen highlighting the career of Charles Francis Jr. as president of the Union Pacific Railroad is so restricted to railroad and personal family business that his role as community leader and historian never clearly emerges.

The over dramatization of some aspects of the careers of family members leads to distorted interpretations of their contribution. Episodes number one and two, for example, stress the role of John Adams as a radical to such an extent that John appears to be more of a rabble-rouser than his cousin, Samuel Adams, with his Sons of Liberty and other associates. This view is not supported by the historical records that are available. Episode number ten featuring John Quincy Adams in Congress as the opponent to the "Gag Rule" on the discussion of slavery correctly emphasizes his major concern, but it fails to put into proper perspective his other contributions during this same period.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the production of the *Adams Chronicles* under the sponsorship of the National Endowment for the Humanities makes a valuable contribution to our study of American

history and was most appropriate as a major project for the nation's Bicentennial.

WSR

Contributing to a review of this kind has been somewhat akin to taking part in a taxonomic examination of an elephant by four persons, each of whom is blindfolded, earmuffed, has only slight previous knowledge about mammals and none about pachyderms, and is assigned a minute segment of elephantine epidermis to explore. Accidental and largely disinterested observation of several episodes of *The Adams Chronicle* during their premiere presentation by the Public Broadcasting Service and careful scrutiny of the three segments under review last spring hardly qualifies me as an expert witness either to the efficacy of *The Adams Chronicle* as drama or to their faithfulness to historical reality. Nevertheless, the experience has provoked some modest observations about the assumptions that infuse the "history" which (at least in this instance) is transmitted to us via the tube.

One presumes that *The Adams Chronicles* was brought to television for two reasons: to tell the story of a family about which more is known for a longer period of time than perhaps any other American family, and to use the opportunity thus afforded to convince several million Americans that the past was relevant to their lives. Coincidentally, of course, there was the chance to exploit the Bicentennial-generated enthusiasm for safe revolutionary themes. It would seem that neither of these goals was achieved. Unfortunately, the curators of *The Adams Chronicle* chose to present their subjects as cardboard figures lodged for eternity in the same stuffy drawing rooms. Much—most—of what is vital and fascinating about the Adams family was discounted in favor of focus on superficially important events. Who cares, really, about the convoluted maneuvers that surrounded John Adams' service as a diplomat during the peace negotiations of 1781-1783?

More significant, however, was the failure of *The Adams Chronicles'* writers (and the historians who served as consultants) to confront basic questions about the material with which they were working. It is inappropriate to discuss *The Adams Chronicles* in terms of the fascinating scholarly advances in the field of family history. The careful reconstruction of family relationships, evaluation of birth and death records, and analysis of such issues as kinship, work, sexual roles, bears no relation to the unfolding saga of four generations of Adamses. Nor should there be any connection necessarily. But we are required to examine the possible relationship between history as pseudo science and history as pseudo entertainment, because *The Adams Chronicles* have been touted as bridging this dizzying abyss. Claims as to its success in "bringing to life" the "stuff" of history were bruited widely at the time of its premiere showing. To consider such a notion on the basis of this effort however, is to dismiss it. That is a regrettable conclusion, for there is a connection, an impor-

tant one that is, ideally, adaptable to a visual, dramatic medium. People can be made interested in the lives of those who lived before them, both their own ancestors and persons from very different backgrounds. They are curious about how “ordinary” Americans lived, how they earned livings, raised their children, dealt with joy and sorrow. These concerns, reflecting fascination with the questions “Why am I as I am?,” can be extended to include the larger context within which occurred the sharp, small dramas of daily life. However, sensitivity to both the charm of the unique and the power of pattern is essential. Regrettably, *The Adams Chronicles*, as the best known U.S. effort thus far to “dramatize” history, failed to demonstrate the sense for evocative detail, the anecdote—drawn from familiar experiences—that transcends time and place. In this as in numerous other matters relating to television, the British have far outstripped us in both perception and execution. Although not founded on historical fact, *Upstairs, Downstairs* offered a splendid sampling of Edwardian social history. Indeed, *I, Claudius* could only have been done—because of its historicity—by and for the British. A still more precise sense of the flaws in *The Adams Chronicles* derives from their comparison with a “mini-series,” *When The Boat Comes In*, presented on BBC in 1976 and regrettably never shown by U.S. television. It is the story of an alienated, ambitious Yorkshireman and his involvement with a school teacher and her coal mining family from the time of his mustering out in 1918 to the 1926 general strike. It is fiction (though clearly based on actual experiences); but the viewer’s understanding of England after the First World War is historically accurate and incredibly vivid. In a word, such a series is authentic in a way that *The Adams Chronicles* or any production embodying its approach to historical actuality cannot be, because it deals with experience and not significance.

TAW

I wish I liked *The Adams Chronicles* more than I do. I certainly like the Adamses. For four generations—from John through his great-grandsons Henry and Brooks—the Adamses, both of the blood and by marriage, were most attractive people: independent, principled (but only up to a point, which makes them more attractive and interesting still), cantankerous, contrary, knowledgeable, productive of new and shrewd insights into the nature of both their fellow Americans and the development of the Western world. They loved equally well their native land of America and their family land of Quincy, Massachusetts: in them mingled a sense of national destiny and a sense of particular place—a fertile combination. (The Quincy scenes are especially lovely.) The Adams men were statesmen, politicians, lawyers, businessmen, intellectuals, pundits. But whatever their vocations, they were always in search of the grander: the grander meaning of America, the grander future for the nation, the grander dignity of human beings. In addition, the men married marvelous (which is not to say perfect) women, and the couples

produced marvelous—though sometimes disturbed and overshadowed—children.

The television programs I saw were, in a manner of speaking, well done: reasonable look-alikes as actors and actresses, good color, appropriate dialogue, authentic props and secondary characters, considerable attention given to broad political and social themes. Also there are two semi-lavish historical volumes and *A Student Guide* for people desiring from the programs some kind of academic credit. The whole production, as they say, has been done with skill and taste.

I would like to like *The Adams Chronicles*. But I can't . . . at least not very much. The obstacle is that despite the obvious sincerity of the producers at WNET/13, New York, to introduce the Adamses to the viewers—or vice versa—through these thin television slices of American history, the series is a pandering to the illiterate: to people who don't, or won't, or can't read. If people would read, *The Adams Chronicles* would be unnecessary and superfluous. Jack Shepherd's *The Adams Chronicles: Four Generations of Greatness* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), which was published in conjunction with the series, has an excellent bibliography of both primary and secondary sources. The Adamses were nothing if not verbal: they were absolutely obsessed with the word. Their virtue (or their disease) has inspired (or infected) their biographers and historians. There are Page Smith's two enormous volumes on John, and Ernest Samuels' three volumes on Henry, and one- or two-volume studies of every other significant Adams. Both the primary and the secondary sources make excellent reading. In words the Adamses were vigorous, imaginative, and frank. So are their biographers and historians. Every literate American either has read or plans to read something from the Adams family cornucopia or at least a biography or two. What then can the main purpose of *The Adams Chronicles* be, other than to try to induce people to read what they would not read without first seeing the WNET/13 version of history on the tube? The idea of the series seems to be: show the illiterates that history can be *interesting*—colorful clashes, conflicts, encounters: John in European capitals, John Quincy embattled by both the Jacksonians and his society-conscious (and slightly crazy) wife, Charles Francis II struggling to create a national railroad and then save it from the tawdry machinations of Jay Gould—and then the viewers will actually want to *read* about history. This has to be the reason that the television *Adams Chronicles* is accompanied by three volumes of reading matter. The idea is: from the tube to the book, from the pictures to the words.

This idea is another sign of the times: the cheapening of intellect; history as fake pictures and fake dialogue instead of real ideas; reductionism instead of completeness; the simple instead of the complex; the boobtube come-on to culture. We live in a world of "visual aids" that distort whatever reality—past or present—they touch. Well, words do that too: no biography can fully portray a life; no historical account is

fully the past or even a full account of what the historian knows of the past. But the question is one of relative fullness and relative truth. Through words on the printed page and through the ideas that they convey, we can get closer to historical reality than through the contrived images and foreshortened accounts on television and movie screens. Inevitably—the viewing public being what it is (its society being what *it* is)—the television watchers will demand the simple, the concise, the overly dramatic. But the reality of the past is complex and elaborate—and often the more so precisely for being ordinary and prosaic. To believe that the viewers will go from *The Adams Chronicles* into the enormous richness and variety and ambiguity and tensions of the Adams writers is to believe in a miracle: a reversal or suspension of nature. Along with the Adamases, I do not believe in modern miracles. To try to present four generations of an amazingly varied and intellectually fecund family in only thirteen (count 'em: 13) half-hour shows is an intellectual sin of the first order. The penalty in hell will probably be to watch all those awful movie and television productions of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* while reading those magnificent novels at the same time.

CSG