CHAPTER 1

Adamses

Late in his life, Joseph P. Kennedy would compare himself to John Adams, another Massachusetts native and former ambassador, and, like himself, a fanatical parent who cherished great hopes for his sons. Had he known more about Adams, he might have said less about him. Like the Kennedys, the Adamses had commingled glory and ruin. Few things would happen to succeeding dynasties that this first family would not foreshadow or foresee. "The Adams children were told that to be less than excellent in matters great and small meant that they were ultimately betraying their family," writes Charles Nagel in *Descent from Glory*. Kennedys were told they must win and not cry. Successive lines of Adams sons and Kennedy brothers would think themselves less than the men they succeeded. The Kennedys called themselves a "clan" or a nation. The Adamses thought of themselves as a "race." Ties within these clusters were strong and long lasting. Children

were not happy far from their parents or siblings, who were also a burden. Dreams of escape were not rare. In 1801, John Adams's youngest son, Thomas, wanted to move west, to "honest, though homely, independence." In 1961, Ted Kennedy wanted to move west, where, in a new place, with new people, he could "succeed or fail on his own." John Adams ordered Thomas to practice law in the East, where he would supplement his small income. Joe Kennedy ordered Ted to stay in Massachusetts, where he paid for his son's Senate campaign.

Dynastic pressures would shatter the life of Joan Kennedy. As Nagel writes of the wife of one Adams grandson, "The intense Adams world left Abby uncertain about who or what she ought to be." The quiet weddings planned by Joan Bennett and Jacqueline Bouvier became grand celebrations of family power. So did the small celebration planned by John Quincy's son, George Washington Adams, when he graduated from Harvard in 1819. "He wanted a small party," writes Nagel. "John Quincy would not leave it at that, but summoned the governor, the college president, and other dignitaries who, it was felt, should be acknowledging an Adams event."

The Adamses tended to massage the truth when it became inconvenient, blurring or hiding unfortunate incidents. Charles, the reprobate son of John and Abigail Adams, was hurriedly buried and not referred to thereafter. The papers of the even more scandalous George Washington Adams were burned. His responsible younger brother, Charles Francis, "tried to make respectable what little could be allowed to survive of George's story," says Nagel. "He . . . consigned most of George's papers to the flames, and in the process turned the errant brother into a pathetic but safely vague memory."

The retarded Rosemary Kennedy was passed off as "shy" and

said to be teaching at the institution in which she really was being cared for. John Kennedy's unstable back became a war injury. His Addison's disease was turned into malaria. His sister Kathleen's death in a plane crash with the man she planned to run off with became the result of a chance ride with a friend. Fixated on image, these families were also concerned with performance, which became an obsession. Children were pushed to and beyond their apparent potential by the unyielding force of parental exactions. Sometimes they found new and deep-hidden talents. Sometimes they broke.

With an odd sense of prescience, John and Abigail Adams began raising their sons to be president years before their country declared independence, and twenty years before the office itself was conceived. Growing up, three generations would absorb a message both complex and destructive that focused on two central points. One was that the Adamses were or should be superior to all other people. The other was that all the Adamses were inferior to past generations, who happened to have come before. For Adams descendants, it put them in a double bind of guilt and resentment: guilt at not living up to their ancestral glories; resentment at others who made off with the tributes—fame, office, honor, and the devotion of followers—that they thought they deserved for themselves. For over a century and for four generations, Adamses were always important, always world famous, and always significant, but they were never the greatest of their generations, never the dominant or formative figures, never the ones who gave their name to an era, a movement, a great school of thought.

And they resented it: John Adams looked down on George Washington (and all other founders), John Quincy looked down on Andrew Jackson, Charles Francis looked down on Abraham Lincoln, and Henry looked down on Theodore Roosevelt, all of

whom were considered by the Adamses as unlettered, ignorant, unworthy, flamboyant, or coarse. In his long career, John Adams would be a leading member of Congress, a notable diplomat, an ambassador to the Court of St. James's and other notable postings, and the first vice president, and the second president, of the United States. But he was always somehow in the shadow of others: the substitute, the also-ran, the second best. In France, he was mistaken for his cousin Sam ("le fameux Adams") and outshone by the wiles of Benjamin Franklin. Back in the States, he was once again in the shadow of Washington, who by that time had achieved demigod status, and overshadowed in the executive branch by Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, the two rising stars of the cabinet. As president, his administration was secretly run by and loyal to Hamilton, and after one term he was defeated by Jefferson, who had been his vice president, and was, unlike him, a master of popular politics.

He left office in 1801, angry at everyone, including his voters and countrymen. As Richard Brookhiser writes, "Adams found himself in yet another new situation—the first loser in American presidential history. . . . His retirement . . . was almost as long as his national career. . . . He was the first loser, and his loss, coming at the end of a long, laborious, and in many ways great career, seemed to negate it. He brooded, he remembered, he justified himself." But if he was a loser compared to the others, he was in some ways ahead of them all: Washington had no children, Madison had no children, Jefferson had been left with only two living daughters, and Hamilton had many children, but his oldest and favorite, the one he was grooming for greatness and glory, threw his life away in a duel in 1801. Adams, however, had three sons, all of whom could be raised to succeed and surpass him. He was convinced they would.

John Quincy, born in 1767, two years after his big sister Abigail, was the ideal firstborn son for an ambitious couple: bright, conscientious, driven by duty, and terribly eager to please. As a child, he blamed himself when he wanted to play and not study Latin. At six, he had secretly cried in fear and frustration when he failed to understand or appreciate *Paradise Lost.* Said his biographer, Robert V. Remini, "Johnny . . . was perpetually lectured about how he was the oldest son and had to set an example. . . . He had been born with great gifts . . . and was expected to live up to them, and become a great man." At eleven, he had become so advanced that his father decided to take him to Paris, where he hobnobbed cheerfully with Franklin and Jefferson, becoming so proficient at the French language that he was sent to Russia with the American legate without his father when he was only fourteen. Returning, he went as his father's secretary to The Hague and then London, serving until both he and his father were called home seven years later when his father was tapped to become the vice president, when John Quincy himself was twenty-one.

Having spent his youth as a small adult mingling with great men in Europe, he was unprepared for the culture shock back home in Quincy, where his parents forced him into the law via Harvard, related to their plans for his future achievement. He did not resist, but he fell into depressions that carried him close to the edge of a breakdown. As Nagel writes, "His recurring self-image, a 'mere cypher,' unemployed and without character, made him so depressed that he became frightened. His troubled sleep was interrupted by the 'most extravagant dreams.'" In 1794, when John Quincy was twenty-seven, Washington put him out of his very real misery, naming him ambassador to the Netherlands, where he launched into his adult, and his proper, career. He was now more

at home but still not free of pressure. As he wrote in his diary, "I have indeed long known that my father is far more anxious for my advancement . . . than I have ever been or shall be." In Europe in 1797 when his father at last became president, his son did not greet the prospect with unalloyed pleasure. As he wrote to the young woman he was planning to marry, it meant something more that he had to live up to. His father had gone to Harvard; he went to Harvard. His father practiced law; he too had done so, if only unhappily. His father had been an ambassador; he was an ambassador. Now, with his father as president, a new bar had risen. Would he have to be president too?

Johnny's success in the eyes of the world and his parents raised the stakes for his two younger brothers: Charles, born in 1769 and described as charming and delicate, and Thomas, born three years later and referred to as slower and shy. At age six, Thomas had started a sullen resistance, refusing to write to his parents in Europe and seeming relieved when they traveled out of the country, leaving him in the care of an aunt and an uncle, with whom he lived a quiet life on their farm. But if Thomas withdrew, Charles showed a tendency to break under pressure as his parents pushed him along in his big brother's footsteps. John Quincy had been taken abroad at the age of eleven and rapidly dazzled the great men of Europe. Charles, taken abroad at age nine, had cried, become homesick and sickly, and been forced to go home. Sent to Harvard (of course) in the wake of his brother, he had begun to drink heavily and had shown his reaction to his parents' strict lectures by joining in some kind of campus disturbance, in which he had run naked through the college square. This was not what his parents wanted to see in an offspring, and when they went to New York in 1789 to join the new government, they had Charles with them in tow. When they moved to Philadelphia the next year they

left him behind, but insisted that a reluctant Thomas live with them when he graduated from Harvard that June. An unhappy Thomas joined them in September, writing to his aunt and uncle that he wished he were back on the farm with them, and telling John Quincy that he wished he were working at anything at all but the law. His parents ignored him and put him on retainer, and began criticizing his work habits and friends. Under this barrage, his meager store of self-confidence began to unravel. "I never was much in love with myself, and I feel less so than ever," he confessed to his mother, dreaming of his aunt's peaceful farm back in Haverhill or of a new home in the West.

Temporarily, Thomas's problem was solved by John Quincy, who took him along as his secretary when Washington sent him to Holland, hoping to separate him from their parents and thereby restore his morale. But by this time, Charles had become a distraction that no amount of good intentions could rectify. He had passed the bar, and in 1795 had annoyed his parents by marrying Sally Smith, sister of the ne'er-do-well colonel who was making his sister Nabby's life miserable. Shortly thereafter, he had begun to withdraw from his family, choosing to ignore their badgering letters or making only evasive replies. Working sporadically, he had managed to squander or lose over two thousand dollars of John Quincy's money, which had caused him to drink even more. In 1799, on a surprise visit to Nabby, Abigail found she had taken in Sally and her two children because Charles had vanished. On December 1, 1800, Charles died of cirrhosis alone in New York City, becoming the first of two Adams male children to die while their father was leaving the presidency. "Little was heard about Charles after his death, for the family wanted to forget him," writes Nagel, adding that "burial in the family vault . . . was denied him." Charles's fate was seen as such an embarrassment that it was

left to Thomas to deliver his epitaph: "Let silence reign forever over his tomb."

Thomas himself had ended his European sojourn in much the same state as he had begun it, longing for a quiet life of peace, domestic tranquillity, and the "mediocre successes" his mother and father abhorred. At a loose end after being dropped from his post by President Jefferson, John Quincy invited his brother, now nearing thirty, to join him in a new life in the West. Just as Thomas warmed up to the prospect—"I am your man for a new country and manual labor," he had said to his brother—Abigail intervened and summoned him back home to Quincy. There he would stay, depressed and unhappy, for the next thirty years of his life. In 1805, his father and brother secured him a seat in the Massachusetts state legislature, hoping to give him a start in the family business. He dropped out in less than a year. His drinking increased, as did his depression. When his mother died in 1819, he and his family moved in with his father, who became their sole source of support. Six months after this, he vanished in Boston, sending John Quincy's wife and his sons on a desperate search of the city. Days later he surfaced, contrite and hungover, to crawl back to the family nest. He continued to talk periodically of the new life he still longed for, asking his brother to finance these ventures but in reality going no farther than Boston, to which he repaired in his cups. On one such occasion, his carriage turned over, but Thomas survived. His liver, however, had started to fail him, and it was a relief to him and to all around him when he died at last on March 12, 1832, the second of two Adams brothers raised to be leaders, who could not, in the end, lead themselves.

With Charles dead, and Thomas established as tactically useless, the family burdens devolved even more on John Quincy, who did more than his best to measure up. As a senator (1802),

ambassador, secretary of state, and finally president, he would emerge as someone more than fanatically driven; rising at six, five, and even four in the morning, he would walk four miles, light his own fire, and read his Bible in Greek before breakfast. He also rode horseback, swam, wrote and translated poetry, and measured the length of his stride so that he could tell, to the inch or the minute, exactly how far he had walked. "Often he shifted from project to project in silent protest against the number of projects he loaded himself with," says Richard Brookhiser. "In the mid-afternoon, he might lapse into vacancy—other people would call it resting—which made him push himself all the more. A man who was not as intelligent, talented, and healthy as he was would have destroyed himself. He did his best." To the end of his life, he believed that he had failed to live up to his father's example. It was in this spirit of compulsion and urgency that he tried to bring up his three sons.

John Quincy had been born to a provincial lawyer of no great importance, and his father did not become president until his son was twenty-nine. By contrast, John Quincy's first son, born in Berlin on April 12, 1801, was already the grandson of an American president and the son of a rising member of the political classes, who bade fair to stand in his shoes. Expectations for his sons were thus exponentially greater than those he or his brother had faced. Naming his first son George Washington and his second son John, he soon had three sons, two named for presidents, on whom he exerted the unending pressures his parents had once placed on him. His wife, Louisa Catherine, a sensitive woman with no interest in power, had tried to cushion the impact on them, protesting vehemently when John Quincy, appointed ambassador to Russia in 1807 by President Madison, told her she must leave her two older children in Quincy when they went to St. Petersburg, taking with her only Charles Francis, age two. Enraged, she

gave in, but never forgave her husband or his ambitions. "To the end of time, life, to me, will be a succession of miseries," she proclaimed as she set off for Russia. As it concerned the lives of her two older children, she would be proven all too correct.

Charles Francis, the third son, grew up self-possessed at the czar's court in Russia, learning to speak French, Russian, and German, attending schools for diplomats' children, going to fancy dress balls and parties, and thinking it normal (writes Francis Russell) that while out perhaps for a walk with his father, "they might stop to chat with the Czar." His brothers at home were less fortunate. John Quincy attempted to raise them long distance, with an unending series of hectoring letters that stressed self-control, duty, and the need to live up to their forebears' example; as he later insisted, "My sons have not only their own honor but that of two preceding generations to sustain." It was, as Doug Wead writes in *All the Presidents' Children*, "a tense atmosphere of high expectations, lonely abandonment, and sometimes well-intentioned personal rejection, meant to provide motivation" but that more frequently crippled morale.

When the family was reunited in 1815 in London and then returned two years later to Washington, the two older boys had their father again, but not as a comforting presence. When John and Charles Francis did poorly at Harvard, he refused to let them come home for their Christmas vacation, saying he would feel nothing but "sorrow and shame" at their presence, to say nothing of grief and "disgust." The "disgust" increased a year later when John was expelled and summoned to Washington, where he would atone for his sins. He would spend the rest of his life doing chores for his father, among them the running of a flour mill in Rock Creek Park in the city, which he proceeded to run into the ground. His work at the mill kept him tied to his father and to his

repeated harsh judgments. Depressed by his failures, John began drinking. It was coming perilously close to the drama John Quincy had seen play itself out in regard to his parents and brothers, but he seemed unable to change his behavior, much less to check his sons' slide.

George graduated from Harvard in 1821, in a ceremony planned as his coming-out party before the state's leading political figures, to let them know that a new Adams star had arrived. The plan, duly mapped out by his father years earlier, was to have him clerk in the law office of Daniel Webster until the time came for him to seek office, but nothing would work out as planned. Poetic and dreamy (he once won a poetry contest, beating out Ralph Waldo Emerson), George had even less taste for the law than his father and was soon spending his time in his grandfather's library, soaking up fanciful tales. From Washington as secretary of state (and after 1825 as the president), John Quincy continued the deluge of letters, similar to the ones he himself had once suffered, telling a terrified George he was obliged to burnish the name of his family.

It was becoming apparent that George could barely stand up for his own. His father's demands drove him into a state of paralysis, in which, in a direct inversion of his father's example, he slept late, worked little, drank heavily, and lost himself in an imagined world. Nagel cites a manuscript fragment from 1825 in which George confessed to "a wild imagination and no mental discipline," a "penchant for fanciful literature," including "narrations of crime, tales of terrible depravity, mysterious horror, and supernatural power," as well as a craving for stories of suicide, which he traced to his parents' desertion of himself and his brother between 1809 and 1815.

In 1826, John Quincy got George a seat in the Massachusetts

state legislature, hoping to jump-start his career in electoral politics. It was the same thing he and his father had done years earlier for his brother Thomas, and once more the results were predictable: George would drop out after several months. The next crisis came with the death of John Adams, who left most of his land to John Quincy, who decided to survey it himself. He also insisted that George must assist him, a test the younger man failed. "When George faltered," writes Nagel, "his father taunted his son, embarrassing him before the strangers who made up the surveying party. . . . This was the final blow, and George collapsed, in the belief, as his mother put it, 'That he is unfit for the society or the duties for which other men are born.'"

Afraid now to move lest he anger his father, George stayed in his room, running up debts of over three thousand dollars, and became unable to pay his own rent. He refused to answer his father's letters, afraid his father had heard of his latest disaster: a maid in a friend's house had borne him a child and was threatening to let the news out. In the spring of 1829, John Quincy, having lost the presidency to Andrew Jackson some months earlier, summoned George to come down to Washington to help his mother and father move home. It was a well-meant attempt to repair their relations, but George by this time was "quivering" in fear of the reproaches he believed that his father would give. Charles Francis, who had been with him in Boston, thought George had seemed "disarranged" but not desperate. "I never suspected alienation of mind or he should never have gone," Charles Francis wrote later. "I went to his room and examined his papers. They display nothing but pain, mental agitation about his future prospects . . . but no despair."

Nonetheless, George was distraught when he boarded the

steamer *Benjamin Franklin* at Providence on April 29 for the trip down to Washington. By nightfall, he was pacing the decks, complaining of voices coming up from the engine room, and asking the captain to put him ashore. Minutes later, he jumped, or fell, into the water. Six weeks later, on June 10, his body washed up on City Island, ten miles off New York City. He was the second son of an Adams to die as his father left office, and his life had been a long series of self-induced failures. He was then twenty-eight years old.

The family member charged with winding up the tangled affairs of George Washington Adams was Charles Francis, who had taken on himself the generational role of guardian of the family image and name. He did this by burning most of George's papers, sanitizing his reputation, and settling the legal issues surrounding the illegitimate child, among them the people trying to blackmail the family. When his brother John finally drank himself to death at age thirty-one, five years later, it would put the cap on a two-generation story of ruin and privilege, in which the casualties outnumbered the survivors by a ratio of two to one. Charles, who had seen firsthand the decline not only of his brothers but also of his Uncle Thomas (whom he described as a brute and a bully), had no illusions about what ambition had done to his family. He and his mother had been appalled when his father, still smarting from the humiliation of losing his office and reeling from the terrible death of his firstborn, chose at this time to get back into politics, entering Congress as an antislavery soldier, where he stayed until his collapse on the floor of the House sixteen years later, dying in a small anteroom off the House chamber at age eighty-one. This did not appeal to the cool, private Charles, who intended to shield himself and his children from the deadly effects of dynastic

compulsion. Reconciling this wish with his own sense of family duty would be the struggle and work of his life.

When George died, Charles was just twenty-two, but he seemed in some ways an old man already, exhausted by the dramas he had seen wrack his family. He had seen two brothers and an uncle drink themselves senseless; he had watched his parents fight over his father's ambition; he himself bore the name of the first Adams loser, who had drunk himself to death at thirty-one. On top of all this, he detested politics, both for its own sake and for what it had done to his family. As Shepherd writes, "He understood the impact on the family of the political life, and he wished to avoid it." As Nagel says, "Even as a young man, [he] was restrained and contained . . . [and] determined to move through life cautiously. . . . [He] had a remarkable understanding of his family's burdens. . . . For him, life meant anxiety and tension from the start." The tension came from the disconnect between his own interests and what he referred to as "my peculiar situation" as "the third of a distinguished line." What he meant was that he did not see himself as a free man regarding his own future but someone doomed to walk a fine line between his own wishes and his fears that he would let down his family. "All his inclinations ran counter to his responsibilities, except for one: his inclination to do his duty," as Brookhiser tells us. Ambition was gone, and all that remained was anxiety. As he wrote when he reluctantly ran for the first time in 1840, "If it is to be my portion to throw away my life in politics and squabbling, I am prepared to submit to it, but not to rejoice."

Dealing with the numerous people eager to make political capital out of the last living Adams of his generation, Charles Francis doled himself out in small, careful doses, allowing himself to be used now and then for some noble purpose, and then going back

to his books. In 1840, he ran for the first time for the Massachusetts state legislature but became so depressed he dropped out six years later. In 1848, he ran for vice president on the Free Soil ticket, doubtless pushed on by the death of his father into making a statement of principle. In 1858, he ran for his father's old seat in the House, landing himself in the Secession Congress, one of the most crucial in history. His heart was in none of it. Faced in 1872 with the ultimate menace—being drafted to run on a reform ticket for president—he fled not only the field but the country, taking his wife on a trip to Geneva, from where he wrote home terse letters expressing lack of interest, saying that if he had to fight for the honor, he preferred to have his name withdrawn. "Not only did he refuse to campaign," Otto Friedrich, biographer of his son's wife, Clover, informs us, "but he refused to authorize anyone else, not even his sons, to organize support on his behalf."

This quiet man's claim to the notice of history rests on the six years that he spent in London as American ambassador to the Court of St. James's, the third Adams in a row to have held that position. Of course, Adams would hold it reluctantly. As his son Charles Francis II would write later, news of his appointment "fell on our breakfast table like a veritable bombshell. . . . My father looked dismayed. . . . The great opportunity of his life when suddenly thrust upon him caused a sincere feeling of consternation. He really felt that he was being called on to make a great personal and political sacrifice." Yet it turned out to be the one public post for which he was suited, combining great responsibility with great independence, great prestige, and no partisan clamoring. For once, his cold nature would work in his favor. Coolly, he worked around the inclination of the British (and their large population of mill workers) to support the cotton-rich states of the Confederacy, telling the prime minister when the British were about to sell

ironclads built in a Liverpool shipyard to the South, "It would be superfluous for me to point out to your Lordship that this means war." In the end, Britain stayed neutral, which was a huge win for the Union and for its Adams ambassador. What mattered to him was that he had at last performed an act on a par with those performed by his forebears and on the very same theater of battle. As he wrote, in the only praise he would ever bestow on himself, "The ambition I had to make myself a position not unworthy of my name and race has been gratified. All the common conditions of man's life have been fulfilled."

One area where Charles Francis parted ways with his father was in the raising of his four sons. "The history of my family is not a pleasant one," he had written. "It is one of great triumphs in the world, but of deep groans within, one of extraordinary brilliance and deep, corroding mortification. . . . I would not have any of my children particularly distinguished at the price of such a penalty on the rest." And so he did not. In his correspondence, there are no letters resembling the ones John or John Quincy had sent to their children, warning that if they failed to be great, or be president, they would disgrace their name and themselves before God. Yet the weight of the past was never absent, even if it was only inferred: Charles Francis's firstborn son, the fourth John Adams and the second John Quincy, a young man of modest gifts and more modest ambitions, was stunned as a young man to be introduced to a crowd as a "descendant of three men who either had been president or ought to have been, and as a prospective president himself." There was nothing John Quincy II wanted less. Charles Francis could lighten his touch, but he could not undo the burden of history that was to hover above all his male children, this time less a goad than an unwanted responsibility and irritant that quietly distorted as it somehow diminished their lives.

Charles Francis had opened the door for his children to back their way out of the family enterprise, and in differing ways they all did. Only one—John Quincy Adams II—ever again held public office, and all of those that he held were minor because he preferred to run races he was likely to lose. His real wish, like that of Thomas, his great-uncle and John Quincy's brother, was to live a quiet life in a bucolic setting, and for the most part he did so, troubled by the feeling he was supposed to want more but not enough to disturb his tranquillity. "I want to be left alone," he said frequently. "I will not be a public man, or lose my life in a vain struggle for nothing. . . . I am determined to live my life to please myself."

It was a different story with the second son, Charles Francis II, who steered his ambitions out of the family channel, determined to do nothing done by his forebears and everything they did not do. "Out of his ambition, his hunger for attention, . . . his need to dominate, and his desire for material success, he would stand apart from his family," Nagel informs us. "[He] undertook to be an Adams on his own terms." He took pleasure in shocking his fastidious parents when he joined the Union Army in 1861, a life they considered too coarse for an Adams, and appalled them still more when he came out of the army and went, not into the law or writing or politics, but into commercial and business endeavors. Unfortunately, his acumen failed to match his ambitions, and his main creation in business was debt. Having become president in 1884 (not of the United States but of the Union Pacific Railroad), he was forced to resign six years later, handing over the reins to Jay Gould. He then turned his eyes to the family fortune, bequeathed to the boys by their very rich mother, borrowing more than two million dollars to purchase new lands in the West. Then came the crash of 1893, which cost the family hundreds of thousands of dollars, its unit cohesion, and even

some cherished ancestral holdings, which Charles had used as collateral. "Rather than leading the Adamses to a glorious career, he had created a nightmare," says Nagel. "Every member of the fourth generation . . . carried financial and emotional scars."

It was after this that Charles was forced to retreat to the family business of writing, usually about his family members, although with a style more lively, more brusque, more skeptical, and therefore more readable than the turgid approach of much of his family. Of this retreat he said with his usual candor, "I go out of the present world, which I can't manage, into the past, where I am master." This became the byword of his whole generation as it continued its measured decline.

Escaping from the world to the assessment of it became the approach of the two younger sons, Brooks and Henry, who made their careers out of efforts to venerate the family legacy and then to explain, to themselves and to others, why they had failed to come up to the mark. The answer they reached was that the culture had failed them: the world had declined so much since the days of their forebears that great careers such as theirs were not possible. Brooks explained in a series of treatises that civilizations, like humans, have a determinate life span, and theirs was approaching debility. This approach had the benefit of allowing him to lift his failure to act from his own shoulders, or, as Nagel tells us, "His theory that civilization suffered from diminishing energy allowed him to blame the decline of his family line on forces beyond his control."

Henry had the harder job of reconciling his belief that he deserved to hold power with the fact that he lacked the will to fight for it, and with his resentment of people who did. Raised to believe, as he wrote, that "a president was a given in every respectable family," he gave rise to stories while he was at Harvard

that he sat in his room waiting for someone to draft him for office. When nobody did so, he sulked. "Adams held no office," he wrote in his memoir, referring to himself in the third person, "and when his friends asked him the reason he . . . preferred to answer simply that no president had ever invited him to fill one. . . . Adams saw no office that he wanted and he gravely thought that . . . he was more likely to be a useful citizen without office. . . . He felt quite satisfied to look on." What he saw when he looked on caused him to shudder. Along with his father, he thought Lincoln a boor who was over his head in the social milieu of the White House, and Grant distressed him still more. "Grant fretted and irritated him," he wrote. "He should have been extinct for ages. . . . He had no right to exist." Returning from Harvard, where he had waited out the Grant administration teaching history courses, he settled into a house on Lafayette Square across from the White House and set himself up as a writer and critic, with his wife, Marion (Clover) Hooper, a difficult woman from an overbred family, who dabbled in photography. His great-grandmother Abigail had run a farm and looked after the family interests during a war, and his grandmother, Louisa Catherine, had traveled alone with her infant son through a fierce Russian winter. Clover, however, could not stand up to the death of her father, and she killed herself by drinking developing fluid, alone in her darkroom, while Henry was out for a walk.

After her death, Henry's mood darkened, as if the world, which rejected his claims to preeminence, had overwhelmed and then taken his wife. He burrowed still further into his cocoon of a house, surrounded by beautiful objects and rancorous thoughts. Oliver Wendell Holmes noted his tendency to turn everything to "dust and ashes." "He lacks generosity," writes Edmund Morris, finding him "contemptuous of politicians and practical achievers,

paranoid about Jews, and above all, mistrustful of himself." "I regard the universe as a preposterous fraud, and human beings as fit for feeding swine," he once uttered. "Hating vindictively as I do our whole fabric and conception of society, I shall be glad to see the whole thing destroyed and swept away." The reverse of the passion that drove his forebears to create a great nation, this attitude perhaps was its residue. "As democracy in America progressed, the capacity of the Adamses for national leadership declined," Daniel Boorstin writes cruelly. "Men of large talents found themselves conspicuously unable to come to terms with their noble inheritance. . . . By the end of the nineteenth century, these most articulate Adamses had begun to luxuriate in their own decadence. They made a literary profession of saying nay to the world." Now and then, this bile would break out in what Brookhiser calls "pustules," which still contain an honest account of Henry's failings: "Not a Polish Jew from Warsaw or Cracow—not a furtive Yaccob or Ysaac still reeking of the ghetto, snarling a weird Yiddish to the officers of the customs—but had a keener instinct and intenser energy and a freer hand than he."

Henry lashed out not only at immigrants come to "corrupt" his own country, but also at the native born who had dared to rise. As his entire family had despised Andrew Jackson, they had also looked down on Abraham Lincoln, and of course on Grant, a failed president who nonetheless was also a great writer and general. Even among their own social equals, they were quick to condemn those with the ambition and energy they had so come to lack. Henry was appalled and repelled by the young Theodore Roosevelt, whom he described as "repulsively fascinating." Roosevelt's sin was his "chronic excitement," his drive, and his sheer will to power. But Henry might have said the same thing of

the younger John Adams, a blunt middle-class man of no social standing and, of course, no inherited wealth.

Increasingly at odds with the world they lived in, the Adams brothers turned ever more inward, "fascinated," as Nagel had put it, with the prospect of their own dissolution. "Do you think I deserve to stand with the rest of my family?" Brooks would ask plaintively. At other times, he took note of his private futility. "I leave nothing behind . . . I go out like a candle," he said. Henry meanwhile had gone backward in time, into the past that had always consoled him since he had gone to England with his father during the Civil War. During the Grant administration, he had sought solace at Harvard, immersed in the medieval world that he found more compatible. Now he went back into it again, seeking "a world that sensitive and timid souls could regard without a shudder" because he could not now look at his own. As it was, the Middle Ages were themselves reeking with squalor and violence, but in looking at history one can choose one's own pieces, and the past he evoked was his mental cathedral, of Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres. It was his final escape from the family industry. "By giving time, talent and money to venerating the world as it had been 800 years before, Henry went as far and as boldly as possible from the Adams legacy," Nagel informs us. "[He] had to run away from the family's policy of doing something, as well as from Boston . . . finally trading the tawdry present" for the imagined, less challenging past.

This had all been foreseen, years earlier, by none other than John Adams himself. "I must study politics and war, so that my sons may have the liberty to study mathematics and philosophy," he had written. "My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy . . . commerce and agriculture, in order to give their children

a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain." The Adamses had suffered a surfeit of porcelain, becoming refined at the cost of their vigor, moving from fundamental to marginal preoccupations, from the essential to the ornamental, and from the sublime to the ridiculous. In the process, they had been marginalized, by nobody but themselves. "Probably no child, born in the year, held better cards than he," Henry wrote of his birth as the grandson and great-grandson of presidents. But "he lost himself in the study of it, [and] never got to the point of playing the game." The game would go on now, absent his family. But others were in the wings.