

Mass. Hist. Soc.



Abigail Adams

ABIGAIL ADAMS

LETTERS

TO HER SON

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

20 March 1780
26 December 1783



John Quincy Adams

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In *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams*, ed., Charles Francis Adams
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20 March, 1780.

MY DEAR SON,

Your letter, last evening received from Bilboa,* relieved me from much anxiety; for, having a day or two before received letters from your papa, Mr. Thaxter,¹ and brother, in which packet I found none from you, nor any mention made of you, my mind, ever fruitful in conjectures, was instantly alarmed. I feared you were sick, unable to write, and your papa, unwilling to give me uneasiness, had concealed it from me; and this apprehension was confirmed by every person's omitting to say how long they should continue in Bilboa.

Your father's letters came to Salem, yours to Newburyport, and soon gave ease to my anxiety, at the same time that it excited gratitude and thankfulness to Heaven, for the preservation you all experienced in the imminent dangers which threatened you. You express in both your letters a degree of thankfulness. I hope it amounts to more than words, and that you will never be insensible to the particular preservation you have experienced in both your voyages. You have seen how inadequate the aid of man would have been, if the winds and the seas had not been under the particular government of

* John Quincy Adams (13) and his younger brother Charles sailed to Europe in late 1779 with their father, John Adams, who had been appointed special envoy to Europe during the American Revolution. Their ship had to divert to northern Spain after developing a leak, landing in El Ferrol (west of Bilboa). The three Adams men and Mr. Thaxter travelled for two months to reach Paris in February 1780.

¹ This gentleman, who was a student at law in the office of Mr. Adams, at the commencement of the troubles, accompanied him in the capacity of private secretary on this mission. [C. F. Adams]

that Being, who “stretched out the heavens as a span,” who “holdeth the ocean in the hollow of his hand,” and “rideth upon the wings of the wind.”*

20 If you have a due sense of your preservation, your next consideration will be, for what purpose you are continued in life. It is not to rove from clime to clime, to gratify an idle curiosity; but every new mercy you receive is a new debt upon you, a new obligation to a diligent discharge of the various relations in which you stand connected; in the first place, to your great Preserver; in the next, to society in general; in particular, to your country, to your parents, and to yourself.

The only sure and permanent foundation of virtue is religion. Let this important truth be engraven upon your heart. And also, that the foundation of religion is the belief of the one only God, and a just sense of his attributes, as a being infinitely wise, just, and good, to whom you owe the highest reverence, gratitude, and adoration; who superintends and governs all nature, even to clothing the lilies of the field, and hearing the young ravens when they cry; but more particularly regards man, whom he created after his own image, and breathed into him an immortal spirit, capable of a happiness beyond the grave; for the attainment of which he is bound to the performance of certain duties, which all tend to the happiness and welfare of society, and are comprised in one short sentence, expressive of
30 universal benevolence, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” This is elegantly defined by Mr. Pope, in his “Essay on Man.”

“Remember, man, the universal cause
Acts not by partial, but by general laws,
And makes what happiness we justly call,
Subsist not in the good of one, but all.
There’s not a blessing individuals find,
But some way leans and hearkens to the kind.”

40 Thus has the Supreme Being made the good will of man towards his fellow-creatures an evidence of his regard to Him, and for this purpose has constituted him a dependent being and made his happiness to consist in society. Man early discovered this propensity of his nature, and found

“Eden was tasteless till an Eve was there.”**

Justice, humanity, and benevolence are the duties you owe to society in general. To your country the same duties are incumbent upon you, with the additional obligation of sacrificing ease, pleasure, wealth, and life itself for its defence and security. To your parents you owe love, reverence, and obedience to all just and equitable commands. To yourself, — here, indeed, is a wide field to

* “stretched out the heavens” — Isaiah 45:12; “holdeth the ocean” — not in the Bible; common phrase referring to power of God; “wings of the wind” — Psalm 104.

** Source undetermined; not *Essay on Man*.

expatiate upon. To become what you ought to be, and what a fond mother wishes to see you, attend to some precepts and instructions from the pen of one, who can have no motive but your welfare and happiness, and who wishes in this way to supply to you the personal watchfulness and care, which a separation from you deprived you of at a period of life, when habits are easiest acquired and fixed; and, though the advice may not be new, yet suffer it to obtain a place in your memory, for occasions may offer, and perhaps some concurring circumstances unite, to give it weight and force.

Suffer me to recommend to you one of the most useful lessons of life, the knowledge and study of yourself. There you run the greatest hazard of being deceived. Self-love and partiality cast a mist before the eyes, and there is no knowledge so hard to be acquired, nor of more benefit when once thoroughly understood. Ungoverned passions have aptly been compared to the boisterous ocean, which is known to produce the most terrible effects. “Passions are the elements of life,”* but elements which are subject to the control of reason. Whoever will candidly examine themselves, will find some degree of passion, peevishness, or obstinacy in their natural tempers. You will seldom find these disagreeable ingredients all united in one; but the uncontrolled indulgence of either is sufficient to render the possessor unhappy in himself, and disagreeable to all who are so unhappy as to be witnesses of it, or suffer from its effects.

You, my dear son, are formed with a constitution feelingly alive; your passions are strong and impetuous; and, though I have sometimes seen them hurry you into excesses, yet with pleasure I have observed a frankness and generosity accompany your efforts to govern and subdue them. Few persons are so subject to passion, but that they can command themselves, when they have a motive sufficiently strong; and those who are most apt to transgress will restrain themselves through respect and reverence to superiors, and even, where they wish to recommend themselves, to their equals. The due government of the passions, has been considered in all ages as a most valuable acquisition. Hence an inspired writer observes, “He that is slow to anger, is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit, than he that taken a city.”** This passion, coöperating with power, and unrestrained by reason, has produced the subversion of cities, the desolation of countries, the massacre of nations, and filled the world with injustice and oppression. Behold your own country, your native land, suffering from the effects of lawless power and malignant passions, and learn betimes, from your own observation and experience, to govern and control yourself. Having once obtained this self-government, you will find a foundation laid for happiness to yourself and usefulness to mankind. “Virtue alone is happiness below;”* and consists in cultivating and improving every good inclination, and in checking and

* Pope, *Essay on Man* (1732-1744).

** Proverbs 16:32.

subduing every propensity to evil. I have been particular upon the passion of anger, as it is generally the most predominant passion at your age, the soonest excited, and the least pains are taken to subdue it;

80 —“what composes man, can man destroy.”*

I do not mean, however, to have you insensible to real injuries. He who will not turn when he is trodden upon is deficient in point of spirit; yet, if you can preserve good breeding and decency of manners, you will have an advantage over the aggressor, and will maintain a dignity of character, which will always insure you respect, even from the offender.

I will not overburden your mind at this time. I mean to pursue the subject of self-knowledge in some future letter, and give you my sentiments upon your future conduct in life, when I feel disposed to resume my pen.

In the mean time, be assured, no one is more sincerely interested in your happiness, than your ever affectionate mother,

90 A.A.

Do not expose my letters. I would copy, but hate it.



Braintree [Mass.], 26 December, 1783.

MY DEAR SON,

100 Your letters by Mr. Thaxter, I received, and was not a little pleased with them. If you do not write with the precision of a Robertson, nor the elegance of a Voltaire, it is evident you have profited by the perusal of them. The account of your northern journey, and your observation upon the Russian government, would do credit to an older pen.**

The early age at which you went abroad gave you not an opportunity of becoming acquainted with your own country. Yet the revolution, in which we were engaged, held it up in so striking and important a light, that you could not avoid being in some measure irradiated with the view. The characters with which you were connected, and the conversation you continually heard, must have

* Pope, *Essay on Man*.

** For two years (age 14-16), John Quincy Adams lived in St. Petersburg, Russia, serving as secretary and interpreter for the U.S. envoy to Russia, Francis Dana. In summer 1783 he returned to Paris with his father.

impressed your mind with a sense of the laws, the liberties, and the glorious privileges, which distinguish the free, sovereign, independent States of America.

110 Compare them with the vassalage of the Russian government you have described, and say, were this highly favored land barren as the mountains of Switzerland, and covered ten months in the year with snow, would she not have the advantage even of Italy, with her orange groves, her breathing statues, and her melting strains of music? or of Spain, with her treasures from Mexico and Peru? not one of which can boast that first of blessings, the glory of human nature, the inestimable privilege of sitting down under their vines and fig-trees, enjoying in peace and security whatever Heaven has lent them, having none to make them afraid.

Let your observations and comparisons produce in your mind an abhorrence of domination and power, the parent of slavery, ignorance, and barbarism, which places man upon a level with his fellow tenants of the woods;

120 “A day, an hour, of virtuous liberty
Is worth a whole eternity of bondage.”*

You have seen power in its various forms, — a benign deity, when exercised in the suppression of fraud, injustice, and tyranny, but a demon, when united with unbounded ambition, — a wide-wasting fury, who has destroyed her thousands. Not an age of the world but has produced characters, to which who human hecatombs have been sacrificed.

130 What is the history of mighty kingdoms and nations, but a detail of the ravages and cruelties of the powerful over the weak? Yet it is instructive to trace the various causes, which produced the strength of one nation, and the decline and weakness of another; to learn by what arts one man has been able to subjugate millions of his fellow creatures, the motives which have put him upon action, and the causes of his success; — sometimes driven by ambition and a lust of power; at other times, swallowed up by religious enthusiasm, blind bigotry, and ignorant zeal; sometimes enervated with luxury and debauched by pleasure, until the most powerful nations have become a prey and been subdued by these Sirens, when neither the number of their enemies, nor the prowess of their arms, could conquer them. History informs us that the Assyrian empire sunk under the arms of Cyrus, with his poor but hardy Persians. The extensive and opulent empire of Persia fell an easy prey to Alexander and a handful of Macedonians; and the Macedonian empire, when enervated by the luxury of Asia, was compelled to receive the yoke of the victorious Romans. Yet even this mistress of the world, as she is proudly styled, in her turn defaced her glory, tarnished her victories, and became a prey to luxury,

* Joseph Addison, *Cato: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, 1713.

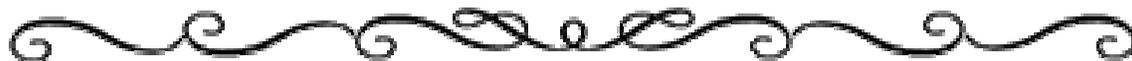
ambition, faction, pride, revenge, and avarice, so that Jugurtha, after having purchased an acquittance
for the blackest of crimes, breaks out into an exclamation, “O city, ready for sale, if a buyer rich
140 enough can be found!”*

The history of your own country and the late revolution are striking and recent instances of the
mighty things achieved by a brave, enlightened, and hardy people, determined to be free; the very
yeomanry of which, in many instances, have shown themselves superior to corruption, as Britain well
knows, on more occasions than the loss of her André.** Glory, my son, in a country which has given
birth to characters, both in the civil and military departments, which may vie with the wisdom and
valor of antiquity. As an immediate descendant of one of those characters, may you be led to an
imitation of that disinterested patriotism and that noble love of your country, which will teach you to
despise wealth, titles, pomp, and equipage, as mere external advantages, which cannot add to the
internal excellence of your mind, or compensate for the want of integrity and virtue.

150 May your mind be thoroughly impressed with the absolute necessity of universal virtue and
goodness, as the only sure road to happiness, and may you walk therein with undeviating steps, — is
the sincere and most affectionate wish of

Your mother,

A. ADAMS.



* Jugurtha: king of Numidia (ancient kingdom in northwest Africa) in the 2nd century B.C., who bribed Roman senators to avoid retribution from Rome for his treachery and murders. As he leaves Rome unpunished, according to Roman historian Titus Livy, he voices the line quoted by Abigail Adams.

** André: British officer John André, who was hanged as a spy in 1780 for his involvement in Benedict Arnold's plot to turn West Point over to the British.