A Critical Response to

John Adams, For the Record: Vol. I,

and a Visit to Adams National Historical Park

By

[Your Name]

Professor [Instructor Name]

History [Course Number and Section]

[Date]

1. *John Adams by McCullough* and *For the Record by Shi and Mayer*: Examples of the Best and Worst of Humanity

In *John Adams*, the human best is revealed when Adams defends the British soldiers amidst the Boston Massacre. As McCullough puts it, Adams was not driven by popularity but instead by principle and based his case on evidence, not anger (45-46). His famous line, "Facts are stubborn things" (McCullough, 46), embodies moral courage since he championed due process in times when the masses were angered, and such a stance was risky.[1] The reason I have chosen the episode is that justice is most important when it is used to safeguard the unpopular. The actions of Adams indicate that a free society can never live on the feeling of patriotism alone, but it must maintain a fair process when the emotion calls out for revenge. His stand in court in that aspect is human element at its finest as it combined bravery, restraint, and justice.

The worst of humanity in McCullough is seen in the bloodshed that the Terror of the French Revolution caused. In the world described by McCullough, the political ideals were corrupted to mechanical murder, and Adams warned that "unbridled majorities are as tyrannical and cruel as unlimited despots" (McCullough, 335).[2] He also narrates about the carnage that took place at Lyon and Nantes, where mass murder was used to conduct ideological cleansing (McCullough, 337-338).[3] The example I have chosen shows how the freedom of action can easily turn to cruelty when the power lacks moral discipline. The Terror is more than a tale of political extravagance. It is a caution that man can persuade himself that killing is an act of virtue in the name of the people. McCullough, then, demonstrates that limits are necessary to civilization as much as ideals.

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[1] David McCullough, *John Adams* (Simon & Schuster Audio, 2005), 46,
[2] McCullough, *John Adams*, 335.
[3] McCullough, *John Adams*, 337–38.

In *For the Record*, humanity at its finest is evident in the form of the "Petition to the Assembly of Pennsylvania against the Slave Trade," which was signed in 1780 by Pennsylvania citizens. The petition applauds the gradual emancipation and requests legislators to put an end to practices that do not conform to justice (Shi and Mayer, 138). Its greatest appeal is the one that demands the passage of a law that would abolish the trade and afford "benevolence and justice to an oppressed part of the human species (Pennsylvania Citizens, 138).[4] I have selected the source because it demonstrates the use of revolutionary principles, not as slogans by common people. They demanded, instead, that the plight of Africans must be addressed, morally and legally. The petition shows humanity at its finest by transforming a feeling of sympathy into a matter of social obligation and placing Americans to task to match their own declared principles with their institutions.

In the case of humanity at its worst in For the Record, I selected one primary source, 'Family Letters on Revolutionary Matters (1776–1783), specifically Abigail Adams's observation that "the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to depriving their fellow Creatures of theirs (Shi and Mayer, 126–127).[5] Her argument is powerful, as it references slavery as moral hypocrisy as the epicenter of revolutionary America. The choice of Shi and Mayer explains that although Americans were talking the language of freedom, they were comfortable with domination in both their personal and communal lives (Shi and Mayer,127).[6] The moral of the two main sources is obvious: human beings are most what they should be when they always extend rights, and most what they should not be when they protect liberty for themselves, and not others.

[4] David E. Shi and Holly A. Mayer, eds., *A Documentary History of America, from First Contact Throught Reconstruction*, 6th ed. (W W Norton & Co Inc, 2016), 138.
[5] McCullough, *John Adams*, 127.
[6] Shi and Mayer, *For the Record*, 127.

2. *John Adams of McCullough* John Adams tells us the story of the most enduring contribution of *John and Abigail Adams to the American Liberal Democracy* and the Search for Wisdom

The most enduring impact that John Adams had on American liberal democracy was that liberty needed a constitutional arrangement. McCullough demonstrates that Adams not only demanded independence but also a long-lasting republican frontier, where he suggested that the new nation required "a republican form of government built on a foundation of checks and balances (McCullough, 119).[7] The contribution is significant since rights do not live long when the power is not divided and controlled. Without internal restraints, a government may be as harmful as a monarchy. It is the inclusion of freedom as a secure provision and not as a hope that has made his constitutional thinking enduring. McCullough shows that Adams believed structured government was essential to preserving liberty (119).

The greatest work of Abigail Adams was her aggressive extension of the moral discourse of the Revolution. In the retelling, McCullough gives of her letter dated March 1776, she challenges John to "Remember all men would be tyrants if they could" were they to have a say and a voice in law, and that laws need to be made where women are given a voice and a presence in law (McCullough, 74).[8] McCullough clarifies that Abigail was not a spectator of nation-making; she was a political mind who, in her letters with her spouse, had a political connotation (73-74). I picked the example because at the start of the liberal democracy, Abigail revealed a contradiction within it. Subsequent researchers have claimed that revolutionary constitutionalism

[7] McCullough, *John Adams*, 119.
[8] McCullough, *John Adams*, 74.

had declared equality and retained a gendered political structure that disenfranchised women.[9] The intervention of Abigail is important as she forced the logic of the Revolution itself to go against that exclusion. McCullough portrays Abigail Adams as an active political thinker whose ideas challenged the limits of early democracy (73–74).

My initial personal lesson about John Adams by McCullough is that doing the right thing is more important than getting applause. Early in the biography, McCullough quotes Adams's conviction: "while conscience claps, let the world hiss!"[10] The quotation remains in my memory since Adams made several decisions, which cost him popularity, whether it was by defending British soldiers, or acquiescence in political isolation when he believed principle dictated (23, 46). Instead, it is the science of achievement through integrity and not approval in the here and now. Individuals face the temptation of forfeiting conviction to acceptance in their lives in society and their personal lives. The example of Adams teaches that moral steadiness may be a lonely yet more enduring principle than acclaim.

The second thing that I learned about McCullough is that wisdom should entail intellectual self-peace and disciplined self-control. Adams advises his son, "Never defraud yourself of sleep, nor your walk" (McCullough, 274).[11] On another occasion, he suggests the discipline of practicing moderation: when a man is listening to someone, he should remember that "he has a right to his opinion, as I to mine" (McCullough, 81).[12] I selected them, as they portray Adams at his most human and useful. He knew that the judgment is weakened by vanity,

[9] Ruth Rubio-Marin, ed., "The Constitutional Establishment of the Gender Order: Revolutionary Times and Exclusionary Constitutionalism," in *Global Gender Constitutionalism and Women's Citizenship: A Struggle for Transformative Inclusion*, Cambridge Studies in Constitutional Law (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 26,
[10] McCullough, *John Adams*, 26.
[11] McCullough, *John Adams*, 274.
[12] McCullough, *John Adams*, 81.

fatigue, and unnecessarily long debate.[13] McCullough then gives a moral lesson: a republic must have men who can think straight, sleep well, and think differently without appealing to dominate (Goldstein 204).[14]

3. Field Visit to a Historic Site/Museum

Location: Adams National Historical Park in Quincy, Massachusetts

Figure 1: Selfie at Adams National Historical Park

I came to Adams National Historical Park to visit a place where the ideals of McCullough's biography are very real and practical. According to the National Park Service, the site is the tale of heroes, statesmen, philosophers, and learned women whose ideas contributed to uniting the Thirteen Colonies into a single nation. It was more like entering a family realm composed of letters, labor, discipline, ambition, sorrow, and quarrel. That equilibrium predisposed me to find the site particularly significant since *McCullough in John Adams* demands that the Revolution was not merely fought out in Congresses and capitals, but maintained as well in houses and marriages and modes of thought. I was left with an understanding that American liberal democracy was created not just via documents and speeches but also daily effort, domestic sacrifice, and constant contemplation of power, virtue, and duty.

The Old House at Peacefield was the first aspect I chose. It was a modest stature of dignity before which I stood in awe of its ability to convey political meaning. It was important to me since McCullough reiterates that Adams mistrusts grandiose, and he wants something of

[13] Leslie F. Goldstein, "Chapter 14-The Declaration of Independence and Women," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Declaration of Independence* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 204,
[14] Goldstein, "Chapter 14-The Declaration of Independence and Women," 204.

substance, more than just theatrics.[15] It was the house, then, that made my mind see that republican leadership, at least as developed by Adams, was to be based on independence of mind and not luxury.

The second feature that I chose was the Stone Library. It revealed more than any other aspect why ideas were so important to the family. McCullough introduces the reader to John Adams as a book-made, letter-made, and argument-made man at the start of his career, and the library makes that intellectual life visible.[16] A republic cannot rest on its laurels; it requires citizens and leaders who read, compare, judge, and revise.

The third feature that I chose was the way Abigail Adams is interpreted throughout the site. She is not a decorative wife but a fundamental political collaborator, stewardess of the domestic economy, and moral judge of masculine authority.[17]

The site provides a perspective on American history as it unveils the founding as both an achievement and an argument. It maintains the contributions of the Adams family to independence, constitutionalism, and service to the people, yet reveals the confines of early American freedom, particularly with gender and power. It illustrates the making of rights, institutions, and memory within actual human lives. The visit also explained why historic sites are important in the present: they transform what is in the textbook into a contentious memory and in the process, they put the question to the visitor: will democracy continue to be a language inherited or be a practice of civic renewal, built by learning, modesty, inclusivity, and accountability to the rising generations who still own the revolutionary lineage?

[15] McCullough, *John Adams*, 8.
[16] McCullough, *John Adams*, 7–8.
[17] Rubio-Marin, "The Constitutional Establishment of the Gender Order," 26.

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