

Obituaries

JOHN ADAMS

Some of us when faced by the words "President John Adams" have to glance at the context to remind ourself which man is meant, so nearly has our friend of the Massachusetts Historical Society eclipsed his ancestor for those of us who worked with him. Our John Adams was a son of Charles Francis and Mary (Ogden) Adams, and was born at Quincy on July 17, 1875. He grew up on the Bay in the last days of the great square-riggers, spent six years at Groton School, and graduated at Harvard in 1898. After a bicycling trip through Europe with his brother Henry and their father, he and Henry went to the Northwest to manage business interests which their father had acquired during the building of the Union Pacific. They had been about a year at Lewiston, Idaho, when the panic put an end to all business. John "cruised about the West" for a time before settling in 1902 in Kansas City in the employ of the United Zink and Chemical Company. Having worked up to the presidency of this organization by 1913, he returned to the East, established his residence in Lincoln, and served as the treasurer of several concerns, particularly oil companies whose business called him repeatedly to the Southwest. Under these circumstances Mr. Adams had all too little time sailing with his boys along the New England shore before the depression of the thirties postponed his hopes of retirement and travel. His Louisiana oil companies went by the board, but by furious industry he cut away the tangled rigging and rode out the storm.

Now Mr. Adams turned more to reading, which had always interested him, and more particularly to history, of which he had seen so much made. He was keenly aware of the fact that the environment of his early years had been completely swept away by urbanization, and its Yankee people swamped by later immigrants. "I know just how the American Indians felt," he used to say with a smile. Like so many Adamses, he looked as cold and dry as last year's cornshock, but in fact he was a man of the keenest sensibilities, and of the quickest apprehension of the meaning of changes. He felt that even those which were most unpleasant to him were necessary progress. So untrusting of his own literary abilities that he would never use the slightest art in his writings, he wrote for the *Proceedings* of the Massachusetts Historical Society accounts of his childhood and early manhood which in their sharpness of comprehension and economy of phrase are the despair of the professional historian who would write well.

As president of the Massachusetts Historical Society from 1950 to 1957, Mr. Adams effected a complete revolution in its affairs. A convinced "common stock man," he preferred the risks of change and did not hesitate to take them. The changes which were accomplished in the Historical Society under his administration were as great as those resulting from the urbanization of Quincy, which he deplored, but they put the Society back into the front rank of organizations of its type. As an executive he was never autocratic. He believed that it was his place to find the best possible professional subordinate, and then to find the means to execute that professional's ideas. When on occasion the Council of the Society rose up and voted him down, his eyes would twinkle with pleasure at this show of interest in the business of the institution. He never took much part in the affairs of the American Antiquarian Society, to which

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