Obituaries

JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS

The death of James Truslow Adams on May 18, 1949, is a reminder that history itself is a transitory and human thing. At the height of his fame he was hailed as the greatest living historian, but a few years later he was excoriated by professional patriots, academic historians, and New Dealers. He was as out of sympathy with the political regime of his last days as he was with what he called the theocracy of early Massachusetts.

Adams was born in Brooklyn, New York, on October 16, 1878, into a family whose origins went back to colonial days in Virginia and Spanish America. He had early inclinations toward the theater, but after the performance of an operetta which he had written, he was advised, he later said, to take up engineering. After being graduated from the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn in 1898, he decided to become a professor of philosophy and to that end enrolled at Yale, where he took an M.A. in 1900. Discouraged by this encounter with the academic world, he went to work for a New York stock broker. In this business he was no mere salesman of securities, for he traveled widely throughout the United States and had a varied experience. In 1912, being still unmarried, and having made a modest fortune, he decided to retire from business and to devote the rest of his life to letters. He kept this resolution, although during World War I he was drawn into government service which finally sent him to Paris on the advisory staff of the peace conference.

The first fruit of Adams' literary labors appeared in 1916 as the *Memorials of Old Bridgehampton*, which he described as "a poor history of the village where I lived," but which will, with the *History of the Town of Southampton* which followed it in 1918, be useful and valuable tools generations after libraries have consigned to the discard the best-selling output of his later career. In 1921 he was rather surprised to find that a commercial publisher would take his *Founding of New England* without a subsidy; but the publisher was right, for the book sold 9000 copies and won a Pulitzer prize. *The Founding* was followed in rapid succession by *Revolutionary New England*, *New England in the Republic*, and *Provincial Society*, which established his place among historians. The appeal of these books lay in their style and their attitude. They were entertaining, a quality which was lacking in the historical works of the previous generation, which were now as out of favor as were the Victorian novels. Adams' works were the more popular because their tendency, if not their purpose, was to debunk early New England. The generation which was then buying books had been brought up in an ethical, moral, and religious atmosphere, and its conscience was troubled by its own failure to live up to the standards of its youth. So these books, which showed that the Founders were no better than their descendants, were very popular. They were influential as well, for, as it happened, the textbooks of that generation were being written by men who had no opportunity to do research in the source material of New England, and who therefore accepted Adams' thesis and incorporated it into their own books.

The thesis that the New England Puritans were brutal despots and foes of all of the virtues which they had hitherto been supposed to personify, was not new. James Truslow Adams had found it in the works of Brooks Adams and other Yankees. What he never realized was, that when a New

Englander beats his breast and shouts what a sinner he is, or his ancestors were (which in this case amounts to the same thing), he is exposing an uneasy conscience rather than a knowledge of history. Adams' method of research was suited to the development of striking rather than sound theses. He would take a single quoted sentence from an unripe doctoral dissertation and, without tracing it back to its source, blow it up into such a generalization as that the school system in colonial Massachusetts never amounted to much. He did do a great deal of research, and his correspondence with Clarence Brigham was voluminous, but his sampling of the sources was unhappy. Unfortunately he never investigated closely the early history of the other sections of the country, so he had no frame of judgment to give him a perspective of New England history.

So far as the period of the Revolution was concerned, Adams fared better, for here he was treating with social phenomena much more like those of his own generation. Shocking as his attack on the Revolutionary Fathers was to the public, it contained nothing which had not been brought out in the drowsy meetings of the Massachusetts Historical Society during the preceding century. His attacks on New England were not inspired by a jealousy of the royal Adams family, whom he treated very fairly in the collective biography which he brought out in 1930. This book made the best-seller lists, as did his *Epic of America* which appeared the next year, sold 358,000 copies, and was translated into eight foreign languages. In spite of the *Epic's* distortion of the picture of seventeenth-century America, it was the best one volume history of the United States then available.

The year 1931 marked the height of Adams' fame as an historian. The many volumes which he wrote in the years which followed found less and less favor with the public. In part this was due to his attitude toward his work. When he

retired in 1912 his small income provided a very comfortable living, but it was soon cut by inflation and dwarfed by the earnings of his associates who had remained in business. His standard of living was much above that of the ordinary professor of history, and his attitude toward his profession was different. The professor rarely sees any direct relation between his income and his work; he searches out and teaches truth, trusting to his college and the ravens to keep him alive. Adams, like most writers of fiction, worked with an eye toward the sale of his output. The honoraria which were offered for encyclopedia and dictionary articles he regarded as a wage, and he ground out many such articles in such unlikely places as transatlantic steamer cabins where, to say the least, the opportunities for research were not great. His later books made no contribution of fact or interpretation, and lacked the literary charm of his volumes on New England.

Another reason for Adams' decline in public favor was his dislike of the New Deal, which was expressed forcibly in his later books and in public dicta. Moreover the New Deal generation, unlike that which preceded it, was not worried by its sins and so had no need of debunking books to reassure it.

Adams had his first contact with the American Antiquarian Society in 1917 when he was working on a projected historical atlas of New England. He was elected to membership in 1922 and was so impressed with the resources of our library that he proposed to settle in Worcester, and to this end set Mr. Brigham house-hunting for him. He was interested in "our" Society, as he called it, and at the time of the fund drive of 1927 he urged us to gather our roses before the inevitable market crash, which he clearly foresaw. He had little contact with professional historians other than a single term on the executive council of the American Historical

Association. It was typical that his interest was rather with the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which he served as treasurer and chancellor. He was indeed, in the usual American sense, a man of letters rather than an historian.

C. K. S.

WALLACE WALTER ATWOOD

Wallace Atwood, internationally known educator, geographer and geologist, died at his summer home at Annisquam, Massachusetts, on July 24, 1949. He was born in Chicago, October 1, 1872, the son of Thomas Green and Adalaide (Richards) Atwood. He entered the University of Chicago in its opening year, and was active in athletics, dramatics, and fraternity life. In his Sophomore year he enrolled in a University field-course given in the Devil's Lake region in Wisconsin. It was then and there that his interest in geography and allied subjects was first aroused, and there was born the intense love of the outdoors which remained with him throughout his life. He returned to college, took as many courses in geology as he was allowed to do, and was graduated with the degree of B.S. in 1897. He received his Ph.D. degree in 1903.

After graduation Dr. Atwood participated in various fields of geology until 1899, when he returned to the University of Chicago to enter its department of geology, and served as instructor and associate professor for fourteen years. In 1913 he was called to Harvard where he followed William M. Davis as professor of physiography. In 1920 he accepted an invitation to come to Clark to establish the first graduate school of geography in the country, to continue his teaching, and to assume the full duties of presidency of the institution. Previously the administration had been divided between Dr. Edmund C. Sanford and Dr. G. Stanley Hall.