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## A Dialogue: Peter Shaw and Robert J. Taylor on Editing the Adamses

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## A Dialogue:

### Peter Shaw and Robert J. Taylor on Editing the Adamses

EDITOR'S NOTE: This dialogue is a feature of the *Newsletter* intended to promote that exchange of ideas for which the Association of Documentary Editing exists. Mr. Shaw was asked to focus his comments both on things done well and on things that might have been done differently—the latter request being an invitation to describe those alternatives to which an editor may, rightly, have said No.

The review, with Mr. Shaw's name deleted, was sent to Mr.

#### *Papers of John Adams, The Adams Papers, Series III*

General Correspondence and Other Papers of the Adams Statesmen (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press). Vol. 1, *September 1755–October 1773*, and vol. 2, *December 1773–April 1775, Index*, ed. Robert J. Taylor, Mary-Jo Kline, and Gregg L. Lint (1977), \$50 the set. Vol 3, *May 1775–January 1776*, and vol. 4, *February–August 1776, Index*, ed. Robert J. Taylor, Gregg L. Lint, and Celeste Walker (1979), \$55 the set.

Reviews of Robert J. Taylor's first two Adams Papers volumes, *Papers of John Adams* (released in 1977) and recent volumes three and four (released in 1979) have, I believe, been uniformly favorable to the editing, which has usually been praised for maintaining the high standards set by the previous editor in chief, Lyman Butterfield. The reviews have not, however, called attention to a somewhat new approach since the Butterfield phase ended in 1974, nor for the most part have they dealt with the new kinds of problems that have arisen.

The reviews have also failed to notice the many accomplishments of the recent volumes. It may appear somewhat perverse to hold the editors responsible for this failure, but it is my impression that their editorial design has had the effect of obscuring their own contributions. These include the presentation of John Adams's earliest political writing, his newspaper exchanges in 1763 with Jonathan Sewall; an analysis of Adams's copy of the Declaration of Independence; the calling attention to the importance of Adams's 1776 Plan of Treaties; and analyses

Taylor, who was asked to comment on the observations. Again, the intention is to foster instructive dialogue. Although the etiquette of some scholarly periodicals suggests that a reply to a review is evidence of ill grace, we stress here that Mr. Taylor's reply was invited. We are especially grateful to Messrs. Shaw and Taylor for graciously accommodating our deadlines amid their busy schedules. —JK

of the influence of both the Braintree Instructions of 1765, and "Thoughts On Government" of 1775.

If there are no startling discoveries, this is in the nature of the materials, for the years covered by the *Papers* have already been chronicled in Adams's diary and autobiography, his family letters, and to some extent through his legal papers. The *Papers* deepen but do not alter the view of Adams that had been developed through 1974.

It is in the nature of the materials, too, that these volumes must depart from previous ones in their presentation of Adams. The *Diary and Autobiography* was a miscellany, containing as it did drafts of letters and essays, as well as diary entries. But its materials came chiefly from a single set of notebooks, and this circumstance conferred on them a certain unity. Taken together with the full unfolding of Adams's character for the first time—something aided by the editorial notes—the gathering that was the diary appeared as a unique human document. The new volumes, in contrast, are miscellaneous in the true sense.

Following a hiatus since the publication in 1965 of Adams's legal papers, the first three volumes of Series Three, the "papers" of John Adams, amount to an omnium gatherum. They include Adams's business, political and personal but non-family letters; letters of all kinds to Adams; letters not to Adams nor any member of his family but found among the Papers; Adams's writings, including newspaper pieces, drafts of various kinds, committee reports written by Adams, and reports of committees on which Adams served whether or not found

in manuscript and whether or not previously published; writings sent to Adams, including poetry; writings (besides letters) found among the Papers; calendars of Adams's appointments, commissions, and activities in the provincial congresses of Massachusetts and in the Continental Congresses; and, finally, newly found materials not included in previous Series. All of these are presented in chronological order. A strictly descriptive title would read: "Selected Documents and Letters From the Adams Papers Collection Plus Reprints of Related Materials and Calendars of Activities."

The *Papers* add up to a fascinating miscellany, of great value in numerous ways, but inevitably raising questions about editorial method. These questions have to do, first, with the selection and organization of the materials, and second with the editorial treatment employed.

With regard to organization, the category of non-family letters that accounts for most of the pages in the *Papers* proves to include two rather diverse kinds of material. First there are business, political, and official letters, and then there are personal letters very close in kind to the family letters that charmed readers in Charles Francis Adams's editions of the nineteenth century and again in the Adams Papers bicentennial volume, *The Book of Abigail and John*. In fact, the presence in the *Papers* of lately found family letters taken together with the previous inclusion in *Adams Family Correspondence* of letters from some of the close friends who figure largely in the *Papers*, further confuses the categories. As a result, one cannot be sure where to search for a given letter, correspondent, or kind of information among the three Series of Adams Papers. (This is to some extent true even of legal matters, the most clearly segregated portion of materials.)

Obviously these problems derive in part from the design bequeathed to the present editors, and partly to the chance appearance of new materials as the editing has gone along. Nevertheless, the result has been to give the *Papers* the appearance of an historical society *Collections*: say, the New-York Historical Society volumes of Cadwallader Colden papers. Both are prime historical sources, but neither is of a kind to attract a book review by a president of the United States.

The editing and publishing of stray materials that happen to have found their way into the Adams Papers collection has the effect not only of cluttering and lengthening the *Papers* volumes, but also, it would appear, of engaging the editors' valuable time while dispersing their energies. One unfortunate result that can be documented is the ten pages of text and notes appended to volume two under the title "William Gordon's Plan For An American Parliament." Presented "for its intrinsic interest and because it was preserved in the Adams Papers," this document, which turned out to have been by William Smith, Jr., and to have been printed in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 1965, seems to me to point to a less inclusive strategy in future. (It may be that

some concerted strategy is needed among all the historical editing projects likely to turn up odd documents. A joint miscellany volume might be the answer.)

With the time and space saved by eliminating unnecessary documents the editors would be in a position to offer editorial information in some areas where they have so far omitted it. For although they have maintained the project's tradition of illuminating annotation, they leave out some matters of provenance. These first volumes of selections rather than complete printing of all Adams documents, to begin with, do not contain an explanation of their principles of selectivity. Nor do they reveal which documents have been omitted. Surely the inclusion of a letter from Samuel Hopkins to Thomas Cushing, for example, which is in effect displacing one by John Adams, calls for justification.

When it comes to variant readings of a document, the editors similarly fail to specify the principles of annotation. Adams's draft of a letter, we are simply told, "shows variations, some noted below." For his 1769 Boston Instructions, "minor variations between Dft and printed text are ignored." But exactly what kinds of variations are noted and what kinds ignored?

Equally disappointing despite its extensiveness, is the annotation for Adams's manuscript version of a proclamation issued by the Massachusetts General Court in January 1776, a short essay of exceptional interest. A note very properly describes the opening of this paper as "more like a preamble to a declaration of independence than a plea for acceptance of appointed magistrates." But instead of all variants being noted—something such a document would seem to demand—only the corrected version is printed, and the superseded phrases are but partially reproduced. Note six, for example, reads as follows:

The passage "to submit: . . . Example" shows several words erased, two deletions, and three substitutions, all for merely stylistic reasons.

"Merely stylistic reasons"? Elsewhere in the edition the editors conform to the tradition of minute concern for Jefferson's style in a full presentation of the variants that appear in Adams's copy of the Declaration of Independence. That this effort leads them to the conclusion that Adams was responsible for a single changed word surely does not discredit their effort. Does it not follow that Adams's "declaration" should have received the same treatment? While arguably unlikely to yield positive findings, such deference would have much assuaged the vanity of the failed litterateur in Adams.

The letters between Adams, James Warren, and Mrs. Mercy Otis Warren offer a good example of how omitted editorial information might prove significant. These letters to Adams's closest friends of this period stand out from all others, even those to Abigail Adams, for their mixture of candor and political revelation. Illuminating annotations of various Adams letters to James Warren, for example, point in this direction by noting the first revelation of

Adams's desire for American Independence, his violation of the Continental Congress's rule of secrecy in order to keep Warren abreast of events, and his waste of precious paper by covering only half of his long sheets in frequent, hasty notes to Warren. Anything having to do with the Warrens during the Revolutionary period—not the least in view of the bitter break between them and the Adamses that was to come—is of the utmost biographical importance.

In this connection one cannot help recalling previous collections of Warren-Adams letters, and the special interest that they have always held, despite being incomplete. Which are the letters that previously appeared in those collections and which are new? Exactly how many have been added, and how many are left? Would a complete new Warren-Adams collection make sense as an editorial venture?

It behooves me to offer some alternatives. In the first place, given the editors' decision to arrange their materials in chronological order, each volume could have been provided with a table of contents. As it is, someone looking for Adams's "Novanglus" letters, for example, must know that the work appeared between January and April 1775, must know that the editorial arrangement calls for it to be inserted in the *Papers* at the earlier date, and then must select the volume December 1773–April 1775, volume two, open it, and turn the pages until reaching January. Then, unless he knows the exact date of the first letter, he must continue turning to January 23, where the editorial introduction to "Novanglus" begins near the bottom of page 216.

"Novanglus" happens to be a work that has been published separately, in paperback, though not since 1818 has anyone seen fit to include the letters of Massachusetts to which Adams was replying. Clearly, "Novanglus" has an interest of its own outside of the sequence of collected papers among which it now appears. The same is true of Adams's other political writings. Did the editors consider publication of a separate volume for these? Departures from the original design of the Adams project, it should be noted, are not unprecedented, the late-discovered *Earliest Diary of John Adams* (1966) being the noteworthy example. Indeed, the *Earliest Diary* suggests a rearrangement that might have been attempted.

Until 1773 John Adams wrote relatively few letters besides those to his family collected in *Adams Family Correspondence*. After 1775, moreover, he produced no political writings until his *Davila* and *Defence of the Constitutions*, which are not planned for Adams Papers publication. If one were to remove the oddments of letters and documents that are interspersed with Adams's political writings through 1773 these would hardly make up a volume: in fact, volume one of the *Papers*, which runs the eighteen years from 1755 to 1773 is in its present form the shortest of the three. These oddments, however, would have made an identically thin companion volume to go

with the *Earliest Diary of John Adams*. Then, the resultantly diminished volume one would have required only the addition of "Novanglus" from the present volume two and "Thoughts on Government" from the presently distended, bulky volume four to make a unified volume of "The Political Writings of John Adams."

Such a collection, it seems safe to say, would have a broad appeal; it would be a prime candidate for paperback republication; and it might be adopted for college courses. Furthermore, far from confusing or spoiling the ordering of the Adams Papers the rearrangement would have had the effect of rationalizing them. The present volumes two, three, and four, slightly less bulky, would each have gained a clear identity. The first of these would have presented Adams just before and at the first Continental Congress; the second and third would have presented him—just as they do now—at subsequent Congresses, and in 1776 up to and just after independence. The major difference would have been that the three volumes, detached from the miscellaneous first one, could each have been given a title and an identity.

It would be superfluous to outline this rearrangement were there not something to be gained in the future. That something is the volume of political writings. Simply by putting together the already edited materials just described such a volume could easily be published. I would like to take this opportunity to ask Professor Taylor if we may expect the "Political Writings" from the Adams project in some such form. If not, will the editors authorize another publisher to bring it out?

This suggestion, along with the criticisms that I have outlined, amounts to a call for more of what the editors do well. Unobtrusive brevity is the mark of a good editor, but the Adams editors ought to consider putting themselves forward to the extent of drawing attention to their accomplishment with regard to Adams's political writings, and of organizing the volumes of his papers to correspond with their perception of the historical and personal periods of his life.

PETER SHAW  
New York City



In replying, I would like to take as my main theme the reviewer's assertion that for these volumes the editors' design "has had the effect of obscuring their own contributions," which have therefore not received proper notice in other reviews. Just as one is about to be grateful that someone has noticed, the realization sinks in that we of the Adams Papers staff, or our predecessors, have apparently planned our efforts' being overlooked. Although the editorial design was "bequeathed to the present editors," we, far from being caught in a plan not of our making, sincerely believe that the creation of the three series—diaries, family correspondence, general

correspondence and other papers— was a rational scheme that enables us to deal with the several hundred thousand manuscripts given to the Massachusetts Historical Society by the Adams Family Trust. True, the scheme results in some overlapping, and a few scholars have complained about the need to look from one series to another, although we provide help by telling where to look, but any attempt to run everything in a single series would blur the accomplishments of the three Adams statesmen, which are our overriding concern. No one, I believe, has objected to keeping the diaries in a separate series. The wisdom of that decision will be even more apparent when it is understood that John Quincy Adams's Diary alone is expected to take thirty volumes. The present reviewer seems to have most trouble with *Adams Family Correspondence*.

Part of his confusion arises from failure to understand our definition of family letters. The front matter of Volume 1 of that series states:

The letters will be principally those written to each other by members of the Presidential line, meaning John and Abigail Adams, their descendants during the following three generations, and the wives and husbands of those descendants through [1889]. But other close relatives by blood and marriage will also be represented when surviving letters of theirs, to as well as from the Adamses and even between each other, appear worthy of inclusion . . . Letters from and to the Adams wives and daughters to and from persons outside even this broad definition of the family will be printed in Series II when they deserve to be (pp. xli–xlii).

Thus letters exchanged between John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren are placed in Series III, general correspondence; but the exchanges between Abigail and Mercy are in family correspondence. This arrangement has the value of giving more importance to the Adams women and separates from general correspondence letters that include a large measure of concern with domestic matters. There are no “lately found family letters” in the *Papers*. Because *Adams Family Correspondence* is even more selective than the *Papers*, a number of letters (five in volume 4) from Isaac Smith, Sr. (Abigail's uncle) to John were excluded from Series II, but the subject matter was military and political, making them useful accompaniments to other such letters, as explained in our note in the *Papers* (4:40). The only other instance, apparently similar, is the exchange of letters between John Adams and Richard Cranch in the 1750s before Cranch became John's brother-in-law and thus a relative in the broad sense.

These distinctions, the reviewer complains, result in one's being unsure “where to search for a given letter, correspondent, or kind of information among the three series.” And elsewhere, in discussing the Novanglus letters, he asserts that the lack of a table of contents means that in order to find them the reader must know that these letters appeared in 1775 and worse, must know that the

first Novanglus letter was dated 23 January. Assume that there were a table of contents and that one did not know the date of composition, one would have to skim through a list of over 100 entries in Volume 1 and 71 in Volume 2 before one hit upon the Novanglus letters. On the other hand, in the volumes as they exist, one could turn to the two indexes and find “Novanglus” in the second one, where the reader is referred to a chronological listing of Adams's published writings, under which there are just seven entries to go through to find the desired topic. The indexes to the Adams Papers volumes are highly analytical. For the four volumes of the *Papers* under review, there are 84 pages of index, which provide several alternative routes for finding what a reader is looking for. An alphabetical list of persons to whom John wrote and one of those who wrote to him are provided. Under each individual correspondent in the main entries are listed letters to and from John arranged by year, with volume and page for each. Searching in the indexes is highly recommended.

In addition to asking for tables of contents and questioning the placement of letters in two different series, the reviewer makes a suggestion for revising the grouping of documents in the four volumes in order better to reveal the contributions the editors have made. He would have a separate volume of political writings drawn from documents now scattered in the four published ones. First, as seems it be imagined, *The Earliest Diary of John Adams* is no precedent for a separate thin volume. It had separate publication because it was discovered after the supposedly complete diary and autobiography had been published. Precedents aside, however, I am puzzled by what the reviewer means by “political writings.” If he means formal, carefully considered works prepared by Adams for publication, *Thoughts on Government* would qualify. What appears under that title was a letter written to George Wythe, one of four such letters written around the same time to different men. Adams did no more than hastily sketch some ideas; R.H. Lee saw to it that Wythe's letter was published as a pamphlet. But judging by the longer length of Adams's lost fourth version, the letter to Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant, Adams' final “thoughts” remain unknown. More important, it seems to me that there would be a real loss to take political writings in the narrow sense from their context—the letters exchanged with a variety of correspondents that offer criticism of British conduct, assessments of politicians, descriptions of maneuvers in the congress, and the like. Certainly a gathering of political writings might be salable for classroom use, but if it included the Novanglus letters, these would have to be excerpted, as in the paperback edition of them. A major purpose of the Adams Papers volumes is to provide a chronological documentary record of John, John Quincy, and Charles Francis Adams's thoughts and actions. *The Book of Abigail and John*, largely a reprinting with minimal annotation of letters from *Adams Family Correspondence*, was meant for a wide

audience spawned by the euphoria of the Bicentennial. It is a useful book for the readers for whom it was intended, but it took a great deal of time from the editors' principal function.

Saving the editors' time is another concern of the reviewer. He writes of our publishing "stray materials that happen to have found their way into the Adams Papers collection." Actually, there are few such documents—not even half a dozen out of a total of several hundred in the four volumes that the reviewer would take no exception to. These third party documents, as we call them, appear because John saved them and because they relate to the themes that develop in the course of the volumes. The letter of Samuel Hopkins to Thomas Cushing is about abolition, a subject on which Adams kept mum, although his wife did not. His preservation of an anti-slavery document at a time when his public concern seemed to be only that too many Negroes might be serving in New England armies suggests something and complements the couple of other letters addressed directly to him that dealt with slavery. The reviewer has found my biggest blooper, publishing in an appendix an interesting document that I thought had been written by the Rev. William Gordon. I corrected the error in a note in Volume 3 (p. 247). The editing of such documents, for which justification is attempted in the notes, means no displacement of Adams's letters.

Two charges are made with respect to selectivity: we do not explain our "principles of selectivity"; our choices leave something to be desired. In the front matter of Volume 1 we note that "notes of hand and brief memoranda of various kinds have been routinely excluded without notice to the reader except as they may be useful in annotation"; and we remind readers that excluded Adams Papers materials can be found on film. We go on to explain in a paragraph our treatment of documents concerning Adams's legal career. Finally, looking ahead to future volumes, we explain that "letters substantially identical but written by Adams to several different correspondents or routine letters of transmittal, acknowledgment, or acceptance will be handled in annotation" (pp. xxxi–xxxii). No formal statement, however, can cover every decision about exclusion. In Volume 3 a brief statement describes the nature of omissions made, but room is still left for editorial judgment (p. xxi). For example, we decided to include the correspondence between Adams and Nathanael Greene, even though *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene* also included them. We did so because we felt that they complemented the dozens of letters between Adams and other generals. We face similar problems with letters by other projects—those treating Jefferson and Franklin, especially. We are framing some general guidelines, but we want to leave room for *ad hoc* decisions, as we have stated in print. Readers of this *Newsletter* will probably be interested to know that we exchange views with these other projects from time to time.

A related question is whether we ought to calendar or at least list the letters and documents excluded; even the Adams Papers staff is divided on what is best. We have calendared omitted documents which are already published in modern editions, including our own, but we provide no listing of other omissions, most of them mentioned in footnotes, on the ground that with each volume the omissions will grow in number because John's official duties will multiply the documents he is concerned with. In later volumes we have begun to resort to sampling such documents as petitions from sailors stranded abroad. By the presidential years mere listing of omissions would probably take a volume in itself.

The reviewer is dissatisfied not only with our statement on selectivity but also with some of our inclusions besides the third party documents mentioned above. Calling the *Papers* an *omnium gatherum* suggestive of historical society *Collections*, he mentions poetry (actually, one poem by Mercy Otis Warren addressed to Adams and apparently included in a letter now lost) and seems to frown upon reprinting of committee reports not found in manuscript and perhaps upon calendars of appointments and committee activities. These last are intended to give a picture in some detail of John's multifarious activities in the congresses that he attended. This also is our justification for including printed committee reports and drafts of such reports not in his hand. The choice of the particular method of inclusion—whether calendaring or reprinting—is explained at some length in the front matter to Volume 1 (pp. xxxii–xxxiii). The "presently distended, bulky" Volume 4 owes its bulk (550 pages) not to inclusions but to our decisions on where to break volumes at appropriate points, keeping the convenience of the reader in mind. Volume 4 opens with a collection of documents covering Adams's service in the congress from February through August 1776. All other documents for this period are in the volume.

The reviewer generously acknowledges the illumination our annotations afford, but some of our editorial practices come in for criticism. We are said to "leave out some matters of provenance." I am not entirely sure what is meant. We do not mention in our descriptive notes, for example, that a Warren or Adams letter was not printed in the *Warren-Adams Letters*. We see no reason why this collection should be singled out among many other collections of printed letters. Nor do we list in descriptive notes every version of a letter or other document whether in manuscript or print. We do examine them, but we list only those that will be mentioned in annotation because they show significant differences. Except when a critical point is at stake, we do not even mention when our transcription of a word or phrase differs from that given in another edition.

Words like "critical" and "significant" plainly indicate that we leave much to editorial judgment. We do not subscribe to the Tanselle view that every interlineation,

deletion, and mark of punctuation must be accounted for. I confess that we are arrogant enough to believe that we can distinguish stylistic from substantive alterations. In the proclamation referred to by the reviewer, we record within the text and comment upon eleven changes made by Adams in his draft aside from the stylistic ones that we call attention to but do not give. John Adams would have been the first to admit that he was no penman, although his choice of word and economy of phrase sometimes cut right to the heart of a matter, leaving echoes in the reader's mind. Such passages almost never have alterations; their force derives from their spontaneity.

We appreciate the opportunity to try to explain ourselves. I am only sorry that these volumes often are referred to as Robert Taylor's. Economy and order often require that footnotes omit names of other editors and that card catalogs file works under the name of the principal editor, but the ADE *Newsletter* can be more generous. Gregg Lint, Mary-Jo Kline, and Celeste Walker, whose names also appear on titlepages, all made important contributions. I take full credit only for the mistake about Gordon.

ROBERT J. TAYLOR  
The Adams Papers

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