Chapter 3

John Adams Aims to Become an American Cicero

THE DOMINANT POLITICAL NARRATIVE OF COLONIAL AMERICAN elites was the story of how the Roman orator Cicero put down the Catiline conspiracy to take over Rome. John Adams aspired to be the Cicero of his time—that is, the key political figure in late-eighteenth-century America.

He would come very close to achieving that vaulting ambition, which is surprising, because he was in many ways the odd man out among the first four presidents. He was the only one who spent time as a schoolteacher, working for wages. The other three were emotionally reserved, while he wore his feelings on his sleeve and tended to wallow in them all his life. They were Virginians, while he was a son of Massachusetts, a colony founded by Puritans in 1628. He was also the only one of the four never to own an enslaved human being.

Most significant of all, Adams also was the first of the four men to move toward revolt. He was entertaining radical notions while still an adolescent—and while George Washington was striving to achieve rank and standing in the structure of the British empire. Indeed, long before the adolescent Adams crossed the Charles River to Harvard, he was full of thoughts about how to better resist British authority. It helped that he was both bright and naturally irascible. He had been questioning authority for years. More than most men, he was born to do so.

The Education of John Adams

BORN IN 1735, JOHN ADAMS WAS SMART ENOUGH AS A YOUNG BOY TO learn to read at home. But when he went to the local Latin grammar school, he took a dislike to his teacher, Joseph Cleverly (Harvard, 1732 or 1733—accounts differ), whom he found "the most indolent Man I ever knew." Classes with Cleverly consisted of hours of reading and reciting Latin classics. Young Adams preferred hunting to the classroom, often skipping school to fish and to hunt ducks and geese in the nearby sea marshes. "I did not love my Books half so well as my fowling-piece, my paddles, my Skates or my Kite," he later recalled.

He knew his father was determined to send him to college, so young John took him aside and set him straight, telling him that he would rather be a farmer. His father took him the next day to the dirty work of gathering thatch in the knee-deep muck of the salt marsh. Adams that night told his father that "though the Labour had been very hard and very muddy . . . I like it very well Sir." Adams' father nonetheless sent him back to school, where the boy became angry with his teacher over not being included in the "Arithmetick" class. "I resented it," Adams wrote, so he obtained the textbook and taught himself the subject.

Nearing the age of fourteen, Adams again asked his father to let him leave school and become a farmer. "Sir," he recalled responding, "I don't like my schoolmaster. He is so negligent and cross that I can never learn any thing under him." Adams then cut a deal with his father: If his father would send him to another teacher, Joseph Marsh (Harvard, 1728), he would study hard and go to college.

Adams' assessment of his teachers, for all its brashness, likely was correct. He thrived under Marsh, even spending some of his own meager money to buy a book by Cicero. A year later Marsh declared him ready to apply to the local college.

That institution, Harvard College, had been in existence for over a century when John Adams enrolled there in 1751. It was the first American college, and the one most connected to English

traditions. By the mid-seventeenth century, some 140 graduates of British universities lived in New England, the majority of them alumni of Cambridge. Indeed, a quarter of them came from a single Puritanical college at Cambridge, Emmanuel.

When John Adams started at Harvard, students there and at Yale were still ranked by their social standing—that is, by the public distinction of their fathers and families. This arrangement was manifested in writing, in the published list of members of a given class, and also physically, by where students sat in the chapel on Sundays and on other formal occasions, ensuring that they were elbow to elbow with gentlemen of similar status.

Adams was placed in the middle of his class, ranked fourteen of twenty-five. Adams' father worked with his hands as a farmer and cobbler, but also had good standing in his community of Braintree, just south of Boston, having been a selectman and deacon for many years, as well as a tax collector and militia officer. Charles Francis Adams, in his biography of his grandfather, asserts that John Adams' class rank probably had more to do with the status of the family of his mother, a Boylston. In his preface, Charles Francis Adams attributes authorship of the chapter in question, as well as the following one, to his father, President John Quincy Adams. Zabdiel Boylston, uncle to John's mother, Susanna, was one of the most prominent physicians in colonial America, the first to perform some kinds of surgeries, and also the first to perform a smallpox inoculation—using a technique apparently learned from an African who was enslaved. He also was a member of the Royal Society.

Rank determined, among other things, where one sat in the Commons for meals. Those at the top of the table had the right to get their food first. Their repasts were simple but hearty. Breakfast was two hunks of bread with butter and a half pint of beer. The college had its own brewhouse to keep the students' mugs filled. Noon brought a dinner with meat, baked or boiled, except on Saturdays, when it was salted fish. Supper was either a meat pie or a pint of milk and a big biscuit. Students brought their own knives and forks to meals, cleaning them on the tablecloth.

As it happened, Adams' tutor—his sole teacher—at Harvard was Joseph Mayhew. Born in 1709, Mayhew had graduated from Harvard in 1730. Nine years later, after spending some time as a missionary among the First Peoples of Martha's Vineyard, where he had been born, he returned to Harvard to become a tutor. He may have found the atmosphere at the college less civilized than that on the island. A history of the college records:

> *In the years which followed his appointment he grew accustomed to being greeted in the yard with "Contemptuous Noise & Hallowing" and to being subjected to "Heinous Insults." He was defied by drunken students and his orders were resisted with physical violence. Logs were rolled down the stairs by his study door, his door knob was broken off, and his cellar was broken open and his beer and brandy stolen.*

Given this treatment, it may not be a surprise that in 1755 he resigned his position and returned to live on his family's island farm.

The studious Adams was not distracted by such undergraduate shenanigans. Harvard awakened him intellectually, he later wrote. "I soon perceived a growing Curiosity, a Love of Books and a fondness for Study, which dissipated all my Inclination for Sports, and even for the Society of the Ladies. I read forever, but without much method, and with very little Choice."

The Centrality of Cicero

AT THE END OF HIS FIRST YEAR AT HARVARD, ADAMS WAS AWARDED A Detur Prize, then awarded to freshmen showing academic achievement in their first year at the college. Winners could choose a book as their reward, and Adams selected Conyers Middleton's popular *Life of Cicero*, first published in 1741. Adams idolized Cicero, the great Roman orator. As an old man, he would write that, "I

have read him, for almost 70 years and seeme to have him almost by heart."

It is essential to take a look at Cicero's life to understand how much he meant to Adams and to other colonial Americans. His words and his actions often provided the context for their own. Adams would write later that "the Period in the History of the World, the best understood, is that of Rome from the time of Marius to the Death of Cicero, and this distinction is entirely owing to Ciceros Letters and Orations."

Cicero was born in 106 BC in Arpinum, a small town in the hills about seventy-five miles southeast of Rome, a bit short of Monte Cassino. There was little indication that he was destined for greatness. He was a plebian, the son of a rustic "nobody," as Trollope puts it. Cicero would become what the Romans called a "new man," one who would become ennobled by eventually holding high office. As a boy he was shipped off to Rome to be educated and there he was noticed for his talent, so much so that Plutarch says the fathers of other students came to witness his "quickness and readiness in learning." Late in his teens he became a soldier for a brief time. He then turned to the study of philosophy and law. In 81 BC he began practicing law, soon becoming one of Rome's most prominent lawyers, noted for the quiet intensity of his oratory. He also steadily moved up the ladder of Roman politics.

In 63 BC he reached the top rung, becoming one of Rome's two consuls for the year. In that same year he would confront the Catilinarian conspiracy, which was at least in part the product of tensions between the aristocracy and the common people over political power. To Adams, Cicero's life must have looked like a career plan. Here was a man who, lacking wealth, noble birth, or military glory, rose to the top of Roman society through his powerful rhetorical skills.

Plutarch always balances his praise of great men by emphasizing one great shortcoming. In Cicero's case, this was vanity. "He was always excessively pleased with his own praise, and continued to the very last to be passionately fond of glory; which often

interfered with the prosecution of his wisest resolutions." Adams would also exhibit this flaw.

Most young men of privilege were introduced to Cicero's works in secondary school, so they arrived at college already familiar with his four speeches against Catiline, which was part of the standard curriculum in college preparatory courses. These orations were the powerful denunciations Cicero delivered against Catiline in 63 BC. The students would know from reading Plutarch that "Catiline has plotted a dreadful and entire subversion of the Roman state by sedition and open war, but being convicted by Cicero, was forced to flee the city." The fact that Catiline was a charismatic populist, calling for land reform and cancellation of debts, received less attention.

The first of Cicero's four great orations was delivered on November 7, 63 BC, the day after Catiline's plan to assassinate Cicero failed. Cicero was consul, and as the city was under martial law because of the political tumult, he held the powers of a dictator.

Cicero famously began his first speech against Catiline with striking urgency: "How far wilt thou, O Catiline! abuse our patience?" There was no throat clearing here, none of the customary preliminaries. He grabbed his audience by beginning almost with the climax of a speech. "How long shall thy Madness outbrave our justice?"

What kind of country had Rome become? Cicero asked. "There are here, among our fellow-senators, my lords, . . . men who are meditating the destruction of us all, the total ruin of this city and in fact of the civilised world."

Cicero then showed he knew much more about the attempted coup d'etat than Catiline realized—where the man had been, in what house he had met with other conspirators, and how they planned to burn Rome, massacre their opponents, and divide Italy between themselves. He said he knew that Catiline had sent two men to murder Cicero in his own bed—and in fact Cicero had alerted friends about their identity before those men arrived at his door. "You cannot possibly remain in our society any longer," he admonished.

But, Cicero added, he would not order Catiline's execution. That, he explained, would eliminate only one conspirator and perhaps leave Rome in even more danger, with the other conspirators still in place. Rather, he said, he wanted Catiline to leave the city, along with his followers. "Let the disloyal then withdraw, let them separate themselves from the loyal. . . . get you gone to your unholy and abominable campaign."

Catiline stood in the Senate and attempted to respond to this blast. An aristocrat himself, he attacked Cicero's relatively low birth, calling him "an immigrant citizen" (that is, born outside Rome). He accused Cicero of being jealous of his own noble standing. He argued that Cicero long had been his enemy and thus should not be believed too quickly. But he was shouted down and left Rome that night. He pretended that he was going into exile in Massalia, the city that is now Marseille, France. But Cicero knew that Catiline in fact was going to join and lead a rebel army gathering north of Rome.

The next day Cicero went to the Forum to tell the people this, to defend his Senate speech, and to rally them for civil war. "He is gone, he is vanished, he is escaped, he is sallyed out," he began in this second oration. There are those who say I forced him into banishment, but that is not so, Cicero argued. "Did I drive into exile the man who I already saw has entered upon Hostilities?"

He also warned that those conspirators who had remained behind in the city would not receive the indulgence he had shown Catiline. "There is not any longer room for lenity; the business itself demands severity." He described Catiline and his accomplices not as friends of the poor and the debt-laden, but as drunks and whoremongers acting only in their own interests:

> *For on the one side are fighting modesty, on the other wantonness; on the one chastity, on the other uncleanness; on the one honesty, on the other fraud; on the one piety, on the other wickedness; on the one consistency, on the other insanity; on the one honour, on the other baseness; on the one continence, on the other lust; in short, equity, temperance, fortitude, prudence, all the virtues contend*

against iniquity with luxury, against indolence, against rashness, against all the vices.

During the ensuing weeks, some of the conspirators who were still in Rome approached a Gaulish embassy, seeking their aid. The ambassadors, who themselves had come to ask for tax relief, at first were intrigued, but then grew fearful of retribution, so they went to a patron, who in turn notified Cicero. He encouraged the envoys to draw out the conspirators on their plans and to get pledges in writing. They did. The Gauls prepared to leave Rome, along with a Roman who was carrying conspirators' letters to Catiline. On December 3, as they departed the city, Cicero sprang the trap and had them captured and brought to the Senate, where their Roman fellow traveler told all, including Catiline's plan to incite a slave revolt, set fire to the city, and massacre an untold number of political opponents. Fear of a slave uprising was genuine, as the famous one led by Spartacus in southern Italy had ended only eight years earlier.

After the Senate concluded its business, Cicero summoned the people to the Forum to hear his third blast against Catiline and his group. He related how the conspirators had been confronted with the incriminating letters about the contemplated attacks. He reported that the Senate had thanked him for saving the city from fire, the citizens from murder, and Italy from war. He then took a rhetorical victory lap, noting his skill at drawing out the conspiracy and getting evidence of it in writing. But, he quickly added, his effort had worked so well that it really must have been the work of the gods. "Jupiter resisted them," Cicero said. "He saved these temples, he saved this city, he saved all of you."

On December 5, the Senate met to consider the fate of their prisoners. But Cicero, surprisingly, began his fourth and final oration instead by talking about his own demise. "If anything does happen to me, I shall fall with a contented and prepared mind; and, indeed, death cannot be disgraceful to a brave man, nor premature to one of consular rank, nor miserable to a wise man." But, he added, don't worry about me. Look instead to your

wives and children, and "attend to the safety of the republic; look round upon all the storms which are impending." He never quite called for execution in this speech. Rather, he argued that showing leniency to the conspirators would be cruel to their intended victims—you and your families. The duty of the Senate is not to be kind, but to do what is best for the Republic, he counseled. He concluded that, "You have a Consul, who, without Hesitation, will Obey your orders, and while he breathes, will, in his own Person, charge himself, with the Execution and Defense of whatever you shall decree."

As was noted earlier, Julius Caesar called for mercy, saying that the Senate should not yield to anger. Rather, he said, the conspirators should be stripped of their wealth and exiled to provincial cities. Otherwise, he warned, the Senate would set a precedent of giving a consul powers that would be difficult to restrain. Cato rose in indignant response. These men conspired to burn the city, summoned the Gauls to make war on Rome, and still have an army in the field, he said, and then asked, almost incredulously, "Do you, then, still hesitate and doubt what to do with the enemies caught inside the walls?"

The conspirators were strangled to death the same day. When that news reached Catiline's army, his soldiers began to desert. His force soon shrank to a quarter of its size, easily outnumbered by the three Roman legions pursuing it. When the confrontation came, it was utterly destroyed, with Catiline among the battlefield dead.

This story of Catiline fascinated post-Renaissance Europe, whose artists explored it in drama, poetry, and opera. Ben Jonson tried his hand at it early in the seventeenth century. In the 1730s, Alexander Pope pondered in his *Essay on Man* how a passionate spirit can go either very right or spectacularly wrong:

The fiery Soul abhor'd in Catiline
In Decius charms, in Curtius is divine,
The same Ambition can destroy or save,
And makes a Patriot as it makes a Knave.

In eighteenth-century France, there were two notable plays about the Catiline war, both patriotically highlighting the pivotal role played by the Gaulish envoys. A drama by Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, staged in 1748, provoked a response two years later from Voltaire titled *Rome Sauvée*—that is, *Rome Saved*. In some private performances, Voltaire played the role of Cicero. A few decades later Mozart's rival Antonio Salieri wrote an opera about the Catiline war.

Cicero and Adams

ADAMS LOVED THE SPEECHES OF CICERO, READING THEM ALOUD TO himself at night. He wrote in his diary that

> *The Sweetness and Grandeur of his sounds, and the Harmony of his Numbers give Pleasure enough to reward the Reading if one understood none of his meaning. Besides I find it, a noble Exercise. It exercises my Lungs, raises my Spirits, opens my Porr, quickens the Circulations, and so contributes much to Health.*

Among all the founders, it was Adams who seems most to have consciously used Cicero as a model for his life. "Cicero, it may be said, was the one man, above all others, who made the Romans feel how great a charm eloquence lends to what is good, and how invincible justice is, if it be well spoken," writes Plutarch. Also, he taught Romans "to prefer that which is honest before that which is popular." He was so successful in office as consul that Cato, in a speech, extolled him as "the father of his country."

Like the great Roman, Adams was a largely self-made man who through his own efforts and eloquence would rise to the pinnacle of power. Both first came to public notice as lawyers. Both strove mightily, exhausting themselves at times and withdrawing from public life for a spell in order to recover their health. Both grieved

at the loss of a beloved adult daughter. One major difference is that Cicero in the course of his legal career became a wealthy man, ultimately owning at least nine villas and other properties. Adams always lived modestly, especially when compared to the other three presidents. He was accustomed to chopping his own firewood.

Cicero's faults and failings were also those of Adams, to a surprising and even alarming degree. Plutarch tells us that the Roman was known for his sharp wit and sarcasm, "but his using it to excess offended many, and gave him a repute of ill-nature." In addition, Cicero was "always excessively pleased with his own praise" and "lauding and magnifying himself." Today we would call Cicero's self-promotion efforts over the top—for example, writing to beg a historian to write an account extolling how well he put down the Catiline's conspiracy: "I have a very strong, and, I trust, a very pardonable passion, of being celebrated in your writings. . . . I hope you will excuse my impatience. . . . [I have] the most ardent desire of being immediately distinguished in your glorious annals."

Adams throughout his life would indulge his own egotism while faulting it in others. He also would nurse petty grievances, sometimes for years. He told his diary that "Bob Paine is conceited and pretends to more Knowledge and Genius than he has." It didn't help matters that Adams had been told that at a social event, Robert Paine had called him "a Numbskull and a Blunder Buss before all the Superiour Judges."

Adams was conscious of his great pride, writing in his diary in May 1756, at the age of thirty, that "Vanity I am sensible, is my cardinal Vice and cardinal Folly, and I am in continual Danger, when in Company, of being led an ignis fatuus [will-o'-the-wisp] Chase by it, without the strictest Caution and watchfulness over my self." But he would continue to let it run barely checked all his life, eventually doing great damage to his presidency.

One issue that concerned Enlightenment thinkers was who was the greater man, Cicero or Cato? Montesquieu thought Cato was. As regards to Cicero, he concluded,

His genius was superb, but his soul was often common. With Cicero, virtue was the accessory, with Cato, glory. Cicero always thought of himself first, Cato always forgot about himself. The latter wanted to save the republic for its own sake, the former in order to boast of it.

If Adams was a Cicero, Washington was a Cato—a comparison that would frustrate Adams later in life. For the Revolutionary generation, silent virtue almost always would be valued more than loud eloquence.

The Preceptor

WHILE AT HARVARD, ADAMS ALSO REPEATEDLY DELVED INTO A POPULAR eighteenth-century textbook, Robert Dodsley's *The Preceptor: Containing a General Course of Education Wherein the First Principles of Polite Learning Are Laid Down in a Way most suitable for trying the Genius, and advancing the Instruction of Youth.* It is a book that more than most fulfills the promise of its subtitle. "I read it over and over," Adams remembered. "I recommended it to others, particularly to my Chum David Wyer, and I took the Pains to read a great Part of it to him and with him."

The Preceptor was a touchstone for his generation. George Washington owned a copy, apparently purchased for his stepson's education. In its two thick volumes, Dodsley lays out what a boy must learn to become a basically educated gentleman. Dodsley himself was an extraordinary figure. He began his life as a footman to an illegitimate son of Charles II and turned himself into a London literary entrepreneur. He went on to become a printer, publisher, and bookseller, as well as an occasional poet and playwright. He counted among his friends Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson.

To create his textbook, Dodsley drew up a twelve-part outline and then farmed out the writing of most of each section to a variety of scholars. The first edition of this innovative work appeared

in April 1748, with several more in the following years. It became enormously influential both in Britain and in the colonies, where it was published by Benjamin Franklin. It was used widely in schools and also imitated unblushingly by other producers of textbooks.

Reading it helps us recover some of the perspectives the American Revolutionary generation had on world events. One major reason to study history, *The Preceptor* explains, is that too many people hold high opinions of figures such as Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. "They never consider them as the Authors of Misery to thousands, as laying waste Countries out of Wantonness and Ambition, spreading Desolation where-ever they came, and depriving Multitudes of what they hold most dear and valuable." Here is how Dodsley captures the lesson of that most crucial of events, the fall of the Roman Republic:

> *Could Rome have been saved from Slavery, the Eloquence of Cicero, and the Virtue of Cato, those intrepid Defenders of Liberty and Law, seemed to offer fair for it. . . . Brutus and Cassius, animated by a Zeal for Liberty, endeavoured to rescue their Country from Slavery by killing the Usurper; and the Eloquence of Cicero seconding the glorious Design, gave at first some Hopes that Rome might yet see better Days.*

But it was not to be.

The history section of this huge tome ends with the beginning of the Christian era. Later, Dodsley teaches a bit of British history in explaining the nature of its monarchy. But the rest of European and world history, from Year 1 to the then-present, is ignored.

In a second volume, published in 1769, he turned to moral philosophy—which, as he presented it, was essentially the question of the public duties of the individual, what a person owes to his or her society. Here the phrasing in places feels like a blueprint for the Declaration of Independence, which would not appear for another seven years. Discussing the moral duties "Of the People," Dodsley states, in two ponderous sentences, that it is the duty of the people to resist tyranny. This passage, while long and wordy,

should be read with the patience that people in the eighteenth century were accustomed to give to the printed word. If read slowly, considered clause by clause, it can convey great power:

> *As the People are the Fountain of Power and Authority, the original Seat of Majesty, the Authors of Laws, and the Creators of Officers to execute them; if they shall find the Power they have conferred abused by their Trustees, their Majesty violated by Tyranny or by Usurpation, their Authority prostituted to support Violence or screen Corruption, the Laws grown pernicious through Accidents unforeseen or unavoidable, or rendered ineffectual through the Infidelity and Corruption of the Executors of them; then it is their Right, and what is their Right is their Duty, to resume that delegated Power, and call their Trustees to an Account; to resist the Usurpation, and extirpate the Tyranny; to restore their sullied Majesty and prostituted Authority; to suspend, alter, or abrogate those Laws, and punish their unfaithful and corrupt Officers. Nor is it the Duty only of the united Body; but every Member of it ought, according to his respective Rank, Power, and Weight in the Community, to concur in advancing and supporting those glorious Designs.*

Here were the seeds of the Revolutionary sentiment that would become so potent in the colonies in the 1770s. Sovereignty flows from the people, who have the power to withdraw it, and the duty to do so if the delegated authority abuses it.

But a gentleman needed to know more than just philosophy and history. Dodsley also included a section on how to write a letter. In this, he relied in part on examples from Cicero and Pliny. That inclusion is hardly surprising. The name of Dodsley's bookstore and also of his publishing imprint was Tully's Head, a reference to Marcus Tullius Cicero, whose supposed image was painted on the store's sign. Other eighteenth-century London bookstores boasted similarly classical names: Homer's Head, Horace's Head, Virgil's Head, and Seneca's Head.

For all its inclusiveness, one subject that is absent from the book's twelve areas of learning is religion. Christianity simply did not loom

as large in colonial America as it would a century later, or indeed does now in much of the United States. As the intellectual historian Darren Staloff puts it, part of understanding the Enlightenment is seeing that to its thinkers, there was a "fundamental irrelevance of religious revelation to the great issues of public life." A cultural historian, Howard Mumford Jones, concludes that from 1775 to 1815, religion had less influence in American life than it did in any later such forty-year period. This would change in the decades after the Revolution as elite control of American culture weakened.

Adams and the Enlightenment

MOST OF ALL, AT HARVARD, JOHN ADAMS LEARNED TO BE A CHILD OF the Enlightenment. What does that mean?

It is probably a mistake in emphasis to focus on the "ideas of the Enlightenment," as Bernard Bailyn, one of the leading American specialists on the Revolutionary era, does repeatedly. The cultural historian Robert Darnton, in an aside about the philosophes of the French Enlightenment, comments that "only rarely did they develop ideas undreamed of in earlier generations." It is an error because what was distinctive about the Enlightenment was not a system of political thought or a set of new philosophical notions. Rather, the Enlightenment was more a process than a result. Its core was a cast of mind, or to revive a useful term from the mid-twentieth century, a frame of reference. Immanuel Kant, when asked in 1784 to define "enlightenment," called it a "true reform in ways of thinking." To be sure, there were commonalities in what was thought about. Enlightened types tended to place their faith in progress, freedom, and the improvability of mankind. As the intellectual historian Caroline Winterer put it, "To be enlightened was to be filled with hope." The opposite of enlightenment, states her predecessor Carl Becker, was "superstition, intolerance, tyranny."

In sum, to be enlightened was to have an energetic way of examining the world with skepticism and self-confidence. "What was

most important and really new about the Age of Reason was the sublime confidence of the intellectuals and societal leaders in the power of man's reason," writes the scholar William Goetzmann. "Human nature, like all other nature, was a constant that yielded to rational inquiry." In other words, they thought it possible to use reason and observation to discern the eternal laws of nature and then to use that understanding to aid human progress. This sounds airy, but it could be quite practical. Indeed, the foundations of the Industrial Revolution were put in place by Enlightenment thinkers exploring new technologies such as steam power.

By having the self-confidence to apply the methods of scientific inquiry to human situations, they developed several new scholarly fields. In his magisterial study of the Enlightenment, Peter Gay states that Montesquieu invented sociology in *The Spirit of Laws*, that Edward Gibbon founded the modern writing of history with *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and that Adam Smith did the same for economics with *The Wealth of Nations*. (Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* might from its title appear to claim to be a foundational document, but it really is about how to manage a household, which is what the word means in Greek.) Gay does not mention it, but Hume's essay on "The Populousness of Ancient Nations" also was an early venture into creating the field of demography. Another Scot, James Hutton, came up with an astonishing new way to think about time, and so invented modern geology, a subject to which we will return. It is noteworthy that several of these innovative scholarly ventures—the ones by Montesquieu, Gibbon, and Hume—were rooted in the studies of the history of Rome.

Mayhew, Political Power, and the People

THE ANCIENTS PROVIDED A GENERAL BACKGROUND FOR THIS NOVEL way of thinking, to which Adams was receptive even while in his teens. Such views were invigorated by revived attention to

ancient republicanism. One of the leading proponents was a dynamic young preacher whom Adams often went to hear, Boston's Jonathan Mayhew. It was a small world—Mayhew was a cousin of Adams' tutor at Harvard. This Mayhew had graduated from Harvard in 1744 and then voyaged to the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, where he earned a divinity degree in 1749. A son of Experience and Thankful Mayhew, this Mayhew is remembered today as the man who devised the brilliant colonial rallying cry "No taxation without representation."

In one sermon, Mayhew discussed how his education politicized him. "Having been initiated in youth, in the doctrines of civil liberty, as they were taught by such men as Plato, Demosthenes, Cicero, and other renowned persons among the ancients; and such as Sydney and Milton, Locke and Hoadley, among the moderns, I liked them; they seemed rational."

There was a rich background to that powerful thought, reaching back two centuries. Scottish philosophers long had maintained that it is natural and right for there to be limits on the power of monarchs. In 1579, George Buchanan, a humanist Scottish philosopher who taught in Scotland, Portugal, and France (where the great essayist Michel de Montaigne was one of his students), stated emphatically that kings must earn and retain the consent of the governed: "It is right that the people confer the political authority upon whomsoever they will." John Locke took up the idea and explicated it about a century later in his *Two Treatises of Government*. An eighteenth-century Scottish poet summarized the thought,

> *Of pow'r THE PEOPLE are the source,*
> *The fountain-head of human force;*
> *Spurn'd by their Subjects, WHAT ARE KINGS,*
> *But useless, helpless, haughty things?*

The view that there are limits to the powers of rulers traveled with the colonists to New England, where the relationship between church, state, and the people became a subject of intense discussion.

As early as 1644, Roger Williams (Cambridge, 1627), the colonial Puritan dissident, had argued in a book that "the Soveraigne, orginal and foundation of civill power lies in the people." Hence, he added, governments were entitled to exercise power only as long as they held the trust of the people. So, he continued, if the government controls the established church, then the church ultimately must answer to the people. Thus, he concludes, the people "have the power to governe the Church, to see her do her duty, & to correct her, to redress, reform, establish, & c." Notably, the word "liberty" appears some fifteen times in his book.

The next step from there was to actively oppose their government as a matter of religious conscience. That is, if the people are ultimately responsible and if they are faithful Christians, they must oppose the government when they see its actions conflict with being a good Christian. In 1750, Mayhew, fresh from receiving his Scottish divinity degree, preached a sermon in Boston celebrating, somewhat shockingly, the hundredth anniversary of the execution of King Charles I. One of the lessons, the radical young man noted, was that "no civil rules are to be obeyed when they enjoin things that are inconsistent with the commands of God." Indeed, such resistance to authority was "a duty, not a crime."

Adams was paying attention to such thinking. He would later note that this was the sermon that made Mayhew's reputation. He studied it repeatedly before he went off to college. "I read it, till the Substance of it was incorporated into my Nature and indelibly engraved on my Memory," he told Thomas Jefferson decades later. "It was read by every Body, celebrated by Friends, and abused by Enemies."

Adams the Schoolteacher

SOON AFTER HE FINISHED COLLEGE, ADAMS TRADED THE GLORIES OF studying Enlightenment thinking for the drudgery of teaching school in a small town. Three weeks after graduating from Har-

vard in the summer of 1755, he rode forty miles west to Worcester, where he became the teacher at the Center School. The town had just one church and no newspaper; it didn't even have a post office to enable him to easily stay in touch with friends. He would not be happy in this job, but he had little choice. Unlike the other early presidents, he had to live off his labor.

He was lonely in Worcester, then a town of about 1,500. From the beginning he seems to have sensed that the schoolmaster's life was not for him. "I have no Books, no Time, no Friends. I must therefore be contented to live and die an ignorant, obscure fellow," he wailed in his diary one rainy day in April 1756.

He does not seem to have been particularly interested in his work. He records almost nothing in his diaries about what he taught, or even what books he used. The day before that previous entry, he grumbled that "I never have any bright, refulgent ideas. Every Thing appears in my mind, dim and obscure like objects seen thro' a dirty glass or roiled water." That last sentence hints at persistent depression.

As a teacher, he may have assigned to his older students two of the most popular and influential textbooks of the time—Charles Rollin's *Ancient History,* as well as his old college favorite, Dodsley's *Preceptor.* Both were in his library. While at Harvard, he had noted in his diary that he had spent "a Clowdy morning" reading Charles Rollin's *Method of Teaching and Studying the Belles Lettres,* which is basically an introduction to education by the rector of the University of Paris.

Rollin was even better known for his *Ancient History,* which was published in French in sixteen volumes from 1730 to 1738, with the first translation into English appearing a year after that. It, along with his later work on Roman history, soon became what one historian terms "a principal medium through which they [colonial Americans] learned about classical heroes." Adams thought Washington had gotten most of his knowledge of the ancient world from that text, stating that, "Rollins ancient History, you know is very generally diffused through this Country. . . . From Rollins I Suspect, Washington drew his Wisdom, in a great

measure." Rollin was so popular that later in the century, Ezra Stiles (Yale, 1746), the president of Yale College, would write to Thomas Jefferson that he had grown weary of such predigested material: "I have heretofore gone over the greater part of the Latin and Greek Historians, in their Originals . . . for I am very sick of your Gibbons's, Robertsons, Rollins the best of them. They are at best but Manuductions [that is, guidance] and should be read with a Constant Recourse to the Original Authors."

Like many histories written in the eighteenth century, Rollin's works were not just records of events, but also instruction manuals about how to live, and especially how to acquire virtue. Adams found Rollin's books "worth their weight in gold.—for his excellent reflections on every remarkable event that occurs in history he informs his readers of the true source of every action and instructs them in the method of forming themselves upon the models of virtue to be met with in History." This was the first time Adams used the word "virtue" in the classical sense of public-spiritedness that would be so central to his generation.

But John Adams was not made for the classroom, and he knew it. In mid-1756, he decided to study under a Worcester lawyer, James Putnam. Later, when launched on a legal career, he allowed himself in his diary briefly to glance back at his teaching days, remembering only "the Mischievous Tricks . . . and the stupid Dulness of my scholars." In his new life, he was advised by one of his legal seniors to spend less time reading the ancient Greeks, whom the older man dismissed as a "meer Curiosity."

Adams criticized himself constantly in his diary. One reason for this may have been that throughout his life, he seems not to have acquired any genuine mentor or personal lodestar. Washington had his older half brother Lawrence, and later Christopher Gist on the frontier. Jefferson had George Wythe. Madison in turn had Jefferson. But Adams seems to have been too querulous to be taken on by such a moral sponsor. Putnam, who taught him law, did not even give him letters of recommendation when Adams rode off to Boston. "Now I feel the Dissadvantages of Putnams Insociability, and neglect of me," he wrote as he began his law practice. "Had he

given me now and then a few Hints concerning Practice, I should be able to judge better at this Hour than I can now."

This persistent absence in Adams' life of a mentor may explain why he was so self-admonishing. For example, one day in January 1759, he reminded himself: "Let no trifling Diversion or amuzement or Company decoy you from your Books, i.e. let no Girl, no Gun, no Cards, no flutes, no Violins, no Dress, no Tobacco, no Laziness, decoy you from your Books." The books on which he needed to concentrate, he continued, are, "Seneca, Cicero, and all other good moral Writers. . . . Montesque, Bolinbroke, . . . &c. and all other good, civil Writers, &c." Multiple similar passages suggest that Adams, lacking the guidance of an older friend, was trying to mentor himself.

The American Cicero

AS ADAMS PURSUED A CAREER IN LAW, HE SET OUT TO MAKE HIMSELF A Cicero of the new world. He would look to the Roman for how to become respected both as an orator and as a public man. "Reputation ought to be the perpetual subject of my Thoughts, and Aim of my Behaviour," he told himself in March 1759. "How shall I gain a Reputation! How shall I Spread an Opinion of myself as a Lawyer of distinguished Genius, Learning, and Virtue." In his own time, this likely was seen more as a noble goal than as overweening ambition. In the same entry, Adams wrote that despite studying law, he didn't really know much about local Massachusetts laws: "I know much less than I do of the Roman law." He immersed himself in the works of Cicero and other ancient Romans—Horace, Ovid, Lucretius, Marcus Aurelius. His library eventually would amount to over three thousand books, with the ancients looming much larger than did modern writers, of whom he appears only to have dipped into Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Addison, and Swift.

He set out on his way to become a great man—certainly a lawyer, perhaps a judge or other high official, perhaps a commentator

on government—and may not have been shy about saying so. One of his closest friends, Jonathan Sewall (Harvard, 1748), wrote to Adams when he was twenty-five years old that "who knows but in future Ages, when New England shall have risen to its' intended Grandeur, it shall be as carefully recorded among the Registers of the Leterati, that *Adams* flourishd in the second Century after the Exode of its first Settlers from Great Brittain, as it is now, that *Cicero* was born in the Six-Hundred-&-Forty-Seventh Year after the Building of *Rome*?" Gordon Wood suspects this was gentle spoofing among friends, but Adams seems to have taken it to heart as a goal. One scholar puts it well when he comments that Adams "always wrote for the public as if he had a toga on."

On July 6, 1760, Adams noted in his diary that he had gone to listen to the sermon of Jonathan Mayhew. He offers no comment on what he had heard. But he was influenced by the radical views of Mayhew, who died young, in 1766. In an open letter to the people of Massachusetts written on the eve of the War for Independence, Adams referred to Mayhew as "a clergyman equalled by a very few of any denomination in piety, virtue, genius or learning."

He would later state that he had felt the first breezes of the Revolution stirring around then. There was, he wrote, "in 1760 and 1761, An Awakening and a Revival of American Principles and Feelings, with an Enthusiasm which went on increasing till in 1775 it burst out in open Violence, Hostility and Fury." He considered Mayhew to be among the five leading figures in this movement, the people who were "the most conspicuous, the most ardent and influential." It was during this time as well that Adams drafted an essay on power that restated ancient Greek views on government—that monarchy degenerates into despotism, aristocracy into oligarchy, and democracy into anarchy. He never published that piece, but other of his commentaries began appearing in Boston newspapers.

The most remarkable aspect of John Adams' early years is that he succeeded in the improbable goal he set then of becoming a great man. Twenty years later he would be among the most important participants in the Continental Congresses. He would nom-

inate George Washington to lead the nation's new Army. And he eventually would become the second president of the United States.

Yet he remains an odd figure. If Washington is the most remote of the founders, Olympian in stature, Adams is his opposite, the most modern—quirky, striving, self-obsessed, vibrating with anxiety and vanity. An observation by the novelist Anthony Trollope also applies to Adams: "Cicero was a man thoroughly human in all his strength and all his weakness. . . . He was very great while he spoke of his country, which he did so often; but he was almost as little when he spoke of himself—which he did as often."

For Adams, education was always a means to an end. For a smart, driven young man from a modest background, books about government, politics, and law were the road to reputation, honor, and power.