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**“The West Wing with Wigs”?
Politics and History in HBO’s *John Adams***

Aurélie GODET

In 2008, HBO released a \$100 million, seven-part mini-series based on David McCullough’s Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of John Adams. The reviews were enthusiastic, with most people praising the cinematography, the storytelling, and Paul Giamatti and Laura Linney’s acting. Soon, however, historians started to complain about various historical inaccuracies in the show. Jeremy Stern, for example, wrote on the History News Network that *“the first episode especially is fundamentally marred by an all-too-familiar and depressingly resilient prejudice against the early Revolutionaries, one that stretches back to late nineteenth-century scholarship and its depiction of the early protests as disingenuous tax riots.”* John Bell went on to spot fibs, half-truths, and outright fabrications in HBO’s series on his website Boston1775.blogspot.com. Writer Kirk Ellis responded to these criticisms by saying that his intent was *“not to portray the ‘external facts’ of the American Revolution [...]. Rather, it was to depict an internal history, an epic of thoughts and ideas refracted through the singular prism of one man who helped shape those events”*.

Arising from Ellis’s declaration, this paper aims to explore the conflicting relationship between the “historian’s truth” and the “dramatist’s truth” in *John Adams*. Three sets of questions, in particular, will be asked:

- 1) How does the series picture the stormy birth of the young republic and how does it bring John Adams to life?
- 2) Did the second president of the United States “deserve” such a tribute? In other words, what new aspects of John Adams’s life are revealed here that are not taught in high school or university history classes?
- 3) How and when does the writer’s “poetic license” manifest itself? Is it acceptable to revise history in order to personify the spirit of the people and the politics of the times more fully? In other words, does an understanding of history necessarily come at the expense of historical accuracy?

J*ohn Adams* is a television miniseries documenting president John Adams’s political life and his role in the founding of the United States. It was broadcast in seven parts by HBO between March and April 2008. Though involving dozens of people, the project mostly arose from the combined efforts of two men: historian David McCullough and producer Tom Hanks.

- 1) Since the 1980s, David McCullough’s main goal has been to fight historical illiteracy by promoting history as “the story of people¹.” In order to translate his historical explorations for popular audiences,

¹ Quoted in Paul Giambarba, “History is the Story of People. Not Events. An Interview with David McCullough”, 1981. <<http://www.giambarba.com/mccullough/mccullough.html>>, last viewed January 2012.

he has been working comfortably within the contemporary mass media, appearing on TV whenever he writes a new book and “functioning as a celebrity in his own right².” His biography of *John Adams* (his third biography about a U.S president) was a huge critical and commercial success when it came out in 2001³. One of the fastest-selling non-fiction books in history, it stayed 3 years on the *New York Times* bestseller list and earned McCullough his second Pulitzer Prize for “Best Biography or Autobiography.” Having already offered a film rendition of his biography of Harry S. Truman in 1995, where Gary Sinise played the part of Harry Truman⁴, it was only a matter of time until HBO contacted him for an adaptation of *John Adams*.

2) Tom Hanks’s own relationship with the American past has been thoroughly described in a 2010 *Time* article by Rice history professor Douglas Brinkley⁵. Until two decades ago, Hanks’s idea of history “was just a course you were forced to take.” Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, however, the actor became “American history’s highest-profile professor” through his involvement in films such as *Saving Private Ryan* or *Charlie Wilson’s War* and his production of HBO miniseries *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Band of Brothers*. His view of U.S. history varies between idealism and realism; as Brinkley put it, “he is a Kennedy liberal with old-time values, the kind that embraces Main Street on the Fourth of July.” Echoing McCullough, who constantly rails against Americans’ historical illiteracy, Hanks exhibits deep resentment towards historical amnesia. His conviction is also that the historical experience should be a very personal one. “He wants viewers to identify with their ancestors, allowing them to ponder the prevalence of moral ambiguity, human willpower and plain dumb luck in shaping the past,” Brinkley explains⁶. Condemning those academics who view history as mere data gathering, he extols the work of popular historians like Stephen Ambrose, Doris Kearns Goodwin and, most of all, David McCullough.

The two men met in 2006 for breakfast in a little cafe in Ketchum, Idaho. Hanks told McCullough “This is to be David McCullough’s *John Adams*.”⁷ He had a copy of the book in which he had highlighted scenes and written marginal notes. McCullough knew the actor-turned-producer had really done his homework and that “he

² Trevor Parry-Giles, “Fame, Celebrity, and the Legacy of John Adams”, *Western Journal of Communication*, Vol. 72, No. 1, March 2008, p. 85 [p. 83-101].

³ David McCullough, *John Adams*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2001.

⁴ See the Internet Movie Database for more details on the film: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114738>>

⁵ Douglas Brinkley, “How Tom Hanks Became America’s Historian in Chief”, *Time*, March 6, 2010. <<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1969606,00.html>>

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Quoted in Bill Steigerwald, “*John Adams* Doesn’t Go Hollywood: An Interview with David McCullough”, *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, February 24, 2008.

knew exactly what he hoped to achieve”⁸. Having had enormous respect for the quality and integrity of Tom Hanks’s *Band of Brothers* production back in 2001, he therefore accepted to act as an advisor on the set.

McCullough and Hanks (aided by Gary Goetzman, who had collaborated on *Band of Brothers*) embarked on the *John Adams* project with an almost missionary spirit. Their goal was two-fold:

- 1) illustrate the founding of America in a new, more vivid way;
- 2) restore John Adams’s standing in the eyes of the American public and remind the masses that the oft-forgotten founder was a major intellectual force and an intrepid political player in the country’s early years. Indeed, Adams’s reputation and legacy are often eclipsed by those of his contemporaries, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, though he successively acted as drafter of the Declaration of Independence, diplomat, first vice president and second president of the United States.

Writer Kirk Ellis (who had already worked on historical TV series before⁹) was put in charge of the script. Though he took most of his inspiration from McCullough’s book, he also used John Ferling’s and Joseph Ellis’s monographs on Adams¹⁰. Tom Hooper (now of *King’s Speech* fame) was named director. Finally, enormous acting talent was brought to the project: Paul Giamatti (recently featured in *Sideways*) was chosen to play the title role and Laura Linney that of Abigail Adams. David Morse played the part of George Washington in a fake nose and managed to capture his character’s great skill at using reticence to convey authority. Stephen Dillane was cast as Jefferson and Tom Wilkinson as Benjamin Franklin. Most of these actors would go on to win awards for their superb performances (though Paul Giamatti would sometimes be criticized as “slogging” through the series¹¹).

The final result was a good hundred hours of footage, eventually reduced to 9. Act I (Parts 1 and 2) allows us to witness the transformation of the protagonist from politically neutral Boston lawyer into the spokesman for independence, climaxing in the great floor debate and the proclamation of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia. Act II (Parts 3 to 5), “the pathetic period” according to the series’ writer, charts the protagonist’s increasingly difficult struggle

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Most notably *Into the West* (TNT, 2005) and *Anne Frank: The Whole Story* (ABC, 2001).

¹⁰ John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010 [1992]; Joseph Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2001 [1993].

¹¹ Mary McNamara, “HBO’s *John Adams* Slogs Through History”, *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2008. See also Alessandra Stanley, “Blowhard, Patriot, President”, *New York Times*, March 14, 2008; Tim Goodman, “Boring Material Dooms HBO’s *John Adams*. Gifted Giamatti Perhaps Miscast”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 14, 2008; Robert Bianco, “HBO’s *John Adams* Oddly Lacking in Character”, *USA Today*, March 14, 2008.

to reach his goals (i.e., getting France and the Dutch Republic to help the United States during the war, mending relations with Great Britain after the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, exerting influence as the young republic's first vice president). Act III (Parts 6 and 7) sees the second president of the United States succeed in preventing a war with France but fail in his attempt to get re-elected, owing to the signing of the Alien and Sedition Acts. Only in his retirement years (1801-1826) does he manage to find some sense of appeasement at last.

Watching these three acts in quick succession, what can we say about the way the series pictures the stormy birth of the young republic and brings John Adams to life?

1. HBO's treatment of 18th-century U.S. history

The first thing any U.S. history specialist will note is how "realistic" (meaning, "seemingly accurate") HBO's treatment of 18th-century America is. Filmed in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia and Budapest, Hungary, the production design is entirely faithful to the colonial period, right down to the muted, dreary colours that dominated the New England environment back then. In particular, it captures the scale of life in the age of Enlightenment. Even a city like Boston only had 10,000-15,000 people. The first two episodes of the series depict it as bustling yet intimate.

Using its \$100 million budget wisely, the production team was meticulous in every detail to achieve authenticity. It is not a costume pageant, though; you can see people with bad teeth and dirt under their fingernails, laconic men in rough clothes beating up rope, John and Abigail working with their children in the dirt and manure of their farm, John suffering the torments of an Atlantic passage in a small wooden ship during a storm. The audience will also experience the horror of amputation without anaesthetics and smallpox inoculation – back then it was a tricky process that required collecting pus from an infected swelling onto a thin blade and cutting it into the patient's flesh. It is indeed "realism through a dirty window,"¹² much like in HBO's *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006).

The cinematography wonderfully captures the first years of the young Republic as well. The set design for the under-construction White House in Part 6 is visually stunning. The scenes outside – slaves and artisans, camped in bleak tents, surrounded by mud and chopped down trees – powerfully suggest what a repellent backwater the new capital was.

¹² Heather Havrilesky, "Forefather Knows Best", *Salon.com*, March 13, 2008. <http://www.salon.com/entertainment/tv/review/2008/03/13/john_adams>, last viewed January 2012.



Plate 1. An under-construction White House (Part 6).

Dialogue is equally realistic: it is true to the vocabulary of the time, so that the audience feels very much transported into a different world. Most of it is borrowed from the Adamses' correspondence during long separations. But, contrary to what some reviewers said, the signature speeches in the show – notably Adams's declamation in support of independence – were largely invented. "The effort was to get beneath the text of the letters to their intellectual and emotional core and render those thoughts in the majestic language of the period," explained Ellis three weeks after the last episode was broadcast¹³. The result is very convincing, and the program's deliberate slow pace perfectly reflects that of the period it depicts, a time when people were more contemplative, more mindful of the consequences of their actions, and not afraid of patience and eloquence. A comparison with *The West Wing*, in terms of attention to dialogue rather than speed, is not unwarranted.

One word finally on the accents used in the show. As Keenan Mayo and Julian Sancton humorously remarked in 2008, "there's a general rule about period films: if a character wears a powdered wig, he's got a British accent"¹⁴. That, of course, becomes a problem if said

¹³ Kirk Ellis, "One for the Books", *The New Republic*, May 7, 2008.
<<http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/one-the-books>>

¹⁴ Keenan Mayo and Julian Sancton, "DialectWatch: Did John Adams Really Sound like Paul Giamatti?", *Vanity Fair*, March 24, 2008.
<<http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2008/03/theres-a-genera.html>>, last viewed January 2012.

character is declaring independence from Britain. From the beginning, the writing team wanted to emphasize that independence was a battle between British Americans and their brothers in England, not, as so often depicted, a conflict that pitted Crown officers with prim Oxonian accents against patriots with full-blown American dialects. Advisers in Colonial Williamsburg pointed to the fact that in written and spoken speech, America was much closer to the mother country than had been acknowledged in past dramatizations. HBO then hired a dialect coach, Catherine Charlton, who asked Kirk Ellis to provide miniature biographies of each character, from which she was able to reconstruct that person's likely accent. Charlton had had past experience in such linguistic archaeology, having had to essentially reinvent a lost Native American language for Terrence Malick's film about Jamestown, *The New World* (2005). The results of the painstaking craftsmanship are evident in the rich tapestry of accents heard throughout the series (not quite British, but not quite American either), which is as accurate an approximation as can be reached at this distance in time, without the benefit of recording.

All in all, the series manages to avoid the Hollywood approach to history (meaning, more abs than period detail). First, Giamatti's Adams is far from likeable throughout. To quote Jill Lepore's review in *The New Yorker*, "Giamatti's finely crafted John Adams is the Ebenezer Scrooge of the American Revolution, slouchy, grouchy, and crusty, but mushy on the inside."¹⁵ Then the series successfully deglamorizes the American Revolution by dispelling some founding myths (the Boston Massacre as an instance of British cruelty to a helpless American mob, the Sons of Liberty's actions as just retribution for economic and political oppression). In one of the most striking scenes of episode 1, for example, the audience sees a mob attacking an arrogant British customs officer, tearing off his clothes, pouring hot tar over his naked body, then literally riding him out of town on a rail.

¹⁵ Jill Lepore, "The Divider", *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2008. <http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/television/2008/03/17/080317crte_television_1epore>, last viewed January 2012.



Plate 2. Gruesome tar-and-feathering scene (episode 1).

At its best, the storytelling manages to convey a sense of historical contingency, reminding us that American independence was not inevitable and did not happen overnight. There is something incredibly moving about watching the debates of the Second Continental Congress, where Adams undeniably shone. After the representatives of all thirteen colonies finally vote for independence (or, in the case of New York, abstain from voting for lack of proper authorization), the room sits in a stunned, “What have we done?” silence. Benjamin Franklin’s famous (probably apocryphal) line, “We must all hang together or we shall surely hang separately,” takes on deadly serious meaning. The scene avoids the usual Hollywood theatrics of wild celebration. Clever use of camera angles and movements (alternation of medium shots and close-ups, panning and zooming) reminds the audience that the Founding Fathers took great personal risk for a cause not guaranteed to succeed.



Plate 3. An ominous silence follows the Declaration of Independence (Part 2).

2. The intricacies of the biographical approach

In order to transport the audience more fully, the series avoids voice over and chooses the same approach as was adopted by McCullough in his book chosen to tell the story of the American Revolution: a biographical one.

The action starts in 1770 with the Boston Massacre and Adams's decision to defend the British soldiers in their trial. It comes to an end on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the date of Adams's death at 90 – the same day that Thomas Jefferson passed away.

John and Abigail are the only conduits through which to witness the main action, and their story takes precedence over any other. The series even includes a scene of “Founding Father” sex that opens the main action of Part 4¹⁶. John and Abigail Adams were indeed two passionate individuals, and their letters are often spiced with sophisticated sexual innuendo¹⁷. Their reunion in Paris seemed to be

¹⁶ *GQ* critic Tom Carson called that moment “the nerviest scene Tom Hanks has ever okayed.” Quoted in Kirk Ellis, “On the Fourth Hour of *John Adams*”, *The New Republic*, March 31, 2008. <<http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/exchange-ellis-the-fourth-hour-john-adams>>, last viewed January 2012.

¹⁷ Abigail's craving for affectionate attention led her into a brief literary dalliance with a ladies' man named James Lovell, with whom she exchanged flirtatious letters loaded with

the one natural place to dramatize their physical as well as intellectual ardour.

A large part of the series is also devoted to the relationships between Adams, Franklin, Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson. Far from “digressive asides,” the personal stories interpolated into the political action are meant to reveal Adams’s character. In accordance with Tom Hanks’s vision for the show, Kirk Ellis emphasizes the “inside-out” view of history, allowing his characters to lead the audience through events rather than imposing them on a grand canvass.

Merits

The merits of the biographical approach are numerous. First, it illuminates the human aspect of the American Revolution, the deep entanglement of the personal and the political in the founders’ lives. For John Adams politics was indeed “always personal,” as Stanford history professor Jack Rakove accurately noted in 2008¹⁸. John and Abigail Adams, like all of the founding generation, were not icons but creatures of flesh and blood. One of the great accomplishments of this miniseries is to restore to them some of that humanity.

Then, the biographical approach allows to rehabilitate John Adams, who played a key role in the battle for independence and yet is often forgotten by history textbooks. Throughout the series, Adams appears as a moderate, torn between his principled allegiance to the colonial cause and his fear that breaking with Britain would unleash violent anarchy.

Yet, the series does not paint too shiny a picture of John Adams either. “I have no talent for politics,” he reluctantly complains early in the film (Part 1). For the rest of the eight-and-a-half-hour show, he proceeds to prove himself, all too often, correct. Episode 5, combined with those on his years in Europe, make Adams seem like he had a few years of profound impact, followed by almost twenty years of ineffectiveness.

sexual undertones. During the winter of 1778-1779, when she lamented to him that John had been absent eleven months, he replied by congratulating her on the now-apparent fact that her partner had not, during his brief visit to Braintree the previous winter, displayed his “rigid patriotism” by getting her pregnant. “I will take pleasure in your Escape,” he wrote. James Lovell to Abigail Adams, Jan. 19, 1779, in Lyman H. Butterfield et al. (eds.), *Adams Family Correspondence vol. 3*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1973, p. 15.

¹⁸ Jack Rakove, “Sorry, HBO. John Adams Wasn’t That Much of a Hero”, *Washington Post*, April 20, 2008.
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/04/18/AR2008041802526.html>>, last viewed January 2012.

Limits

Biography, however, is a difficult historical genre to handle, and the problems it raises are numerous.

First, the Adams-exclusive point of view does not allow for in-depth exploration of the Revolutionary era. How can one indeed tell the story of the war for Independence from the point of view of a man who, essentially, turned up late to all the exciting and filmable moments? Kirk Ellis could have solved the problem by adding a few omniscient, expository cutbacks to the war at home. He chose omission instead. Because Adams was not a witness to the 1773 Boston Tea Party, for instance, the event is not represented in the series (it is merely alluded to in dialogue). Revolutionary fighting is also absent from the screen. Instead, what we have is a scene on a boat when John Adams picks up a gun and fires it in defence of his country, the only time he becomes physically active in his patriotism (episode 3). Even the Constitution is given short shrift – indeed, the single greatest challenge facing writer Kirk Ellis was the inescapable historical fact that both Adams and Jefferson remained abroad during the Constitutional Convention. These numerous ellipses, added to the fact that no dates or places are ever specified, make the overall chronology difficult to follow, especially for someone who has no or almost no background in U.S. history.

Another limit of the approach selected by Ellis is that it does not really permit an examination of Adams's political ideas. After criticizing the Sons of Liberty's radicalism so much during the first part of the first episode, why did Adams become a representative to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, where he was among the first to argue for a complete break with Britain? The series does not make the reason for that conversion clear. Was it only due to the Coercive Acts? At moments one wonders whether HBO, in order to fully deglamorize the American Revolution, neglected to sufficiently show the patriot side of things. By the end of the first episode, we see Adam's commitment to the cause, but we are not left fully clear on why independence was such a good idea.

Also, the series fails to illustrate one important aspect of Adams's activity, that of a political philosopher. While it is true that Adams was in London and had no direct role in the drafting of the Constitution, he was at the same time writing volumes to defend its formation as well as those of the state of the state constitutions. Adams's 3-volume *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (in which he explored the structure of various forms of modern and ancient government and described how he thought power should be distributed in the United States) make him one of America's greatest political philosophers. I realize, of course, that such theoretical matters cannot be readily dealt with in TV series,

but I think the show should at least have mentioned Adams's authorship of the Massachusetts state constitution, in which he attempted to synthesize the classical notion of mixed government with the modern notion of the separation of powers. The absence of such reference makes it hard to identify Adams's legacy and influence.

In the same way, it is hard to understand Adams's efforts to convince the Senate that America could use a little royal polish in Episode 5 if one does not refer to Adams's political philosophy and, more specifically, to his provocative "Discourses on Davila."¹⁹ His efforts by no means indicated that he desired to see America restore monarchy, as his enemies charged, including Jefferson. On the contrary, Adams had a theory of human behaviour, according to which he saw human conduct driven by emulation and the desire for recognition, and Adams worried whether a democratic republic would be able to command the same level of respect.

More importantly, I think the biographical approach often leads to overemphasize the subject's achievements and to downplay or caricature those of others. Independence, the series' motto would have us believe, was almost entirely Adams's doing: "He United the States of America." This is a daring advertising slogan to say the least, because although Adams presented the case to Congress, it was Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* which convinced the American people to support independence and Thomas Jefferson who wrote the document declaring it.

Disregarding historical evidence, the writers also make Adams appear throughout the series as *the* principled man (despite growing pressure for war, he labours for a peace with France that, in a sense, costs him his re-election), while Washington appears as a shallow though imposing figure, and Jefferson appears as a distracted, deluded spendthrift. John Dickinson, the Pennsylvania delegate and eloquent opponent of independence, was made into "a Quaker Cruella De Vil," a distortion necessary, Jill Lepore believes, to make Adams appear a more stalwart supporter of a complete severance of links with the mother country²⁰. Hamilton, played by Rufus Sewell, is also portrayed as a villain. He is wearing a tightly curled brown wig – when actually, no portraits show Hamilton bewigged –, whereas the other founders look like natural republicans. Though entirely fictional (there is no

¹⁹ In this series of newspaper essays, Adams articulated his thoughts on the French Revolution and its implications for the United States. He predicted that the revolution, having abolished the aristocratic institutions necessary to preserve stability and order, was doomed to failure. He also warned that the United States would share a similar fate if it failed to encourage with titles and appropriate ceremony its own "natural aristocracy" of talented and propertied public men. The Davila essays were consistent with Adams' longstanding belief that a strong stabilizing force – a strong executive, a hereditary senate, or a natural aristocracy – was an essential bulwark of popular liberties.

²⁰ Jill Lepore, "The Divider".

evidence that Samuel Adams and John Hancock, who were opposed to mob violence, were ever present at a tarring and feathering), the torture scene of Episode 1 also manages to tarnish the reputation of John Hancock and Samuel Adams. According to Princeton historian Jeremy Stern, the scene is used to highlight a schism between Samuel and John Adams that never existed, which is another way of saying that its purpose is to increase the standing of the eponymous hero²¹ As for Franklin, he appears as a debauched hypocrite, falling prey to French aristocrats' mastery of flattery. The series nicely captures Adams's disgust for the French's lascivious ways – including the scene where Ben Franklin plays chess in the bathtub with famous Parisian hostess Madame Helvétius (played by Judith Magre).



Plate 4. John Adams finds Benjamin Franklin in a bathtub with Madame Helvétius (Part 3).

Did John Adams really deserve such a laudatory treatment? Was he really “the most misconstrued and unappreciated ‘great man’ in American history,” to quote biographer Joseph Ellis²²?

John Adams certainly was a remarkable figure. His leadership in arguing for independence, in securing the Dutch loan that kept the American cause alive, in ending the war through the treaty of Paris, in acting to prevent war with France, and in supporting women's education should be both remembered and praised.

²¹ Jeremy Stern, “What’s Inaccurate About the New HBO Series on John Adams”, *History News Network*, March 18, 2008. <<http://www.hnn.us/roundup/entries/48493.html>>

²² Joseph Ellis, p. 12.

But the man also suffered from serious defects. Barely two months after the battles of Lexington and Concord, at the very moment when feelings of patriotism were at their highest, he was already fretting about whether his countrymen and history would treat him fairly, whether his contribution to the “common cause” would be justly recognized:

I, poor Creature, worn out with scribbling, for my Bread and my Liberty, low in Spirits and weak in Health, must leave others to wear the Lawrells which I have sown; others to eat the Bread which I have earned – A Common Case²³.

His temper and vanity were mentioned by many of his contemporaries. No sooner did he arrive in France, for instance, that he irritated the French by suggesting that he should immediately tell the British of his arrival and by pushing for additional French naval support for the U.S. though Congress had sent him no instructions to that effect. His behaviour eventually led Franklin to support Vergennes’s request that Adams be recalled. But Adams had many supporters and when they let him know that Franklin wanted to send him away, Adams decided that his former friend was now his personal enemy. The quarrel dogged U.S. diplomacy for years and also fuelled Adams’s persecution complex ever after.

Furthermore, Adams was transparently jealous of his fellow founders, even Washington. Of the former general, whom everyone else except Aaron Burr seemed to admire, Adams complained that he had the distinction of always being the tallest man in the room, as if his height were the sole reason for his prominence. So there was indeed an Adams problem, “and much of it was of his own making” as Jack Rakove justly reminds us²⁴. HBO is keen to usher him into the canon, but Adams did a great deal to earn the devastating assessment that has trailed him ever since Benjamin Franklin first quipped it in 1783: “He means well for his country, and is always an honest man, often a wise one, but sometimes and in some things, absolutely out of his senses²⁵.”

Later, during his one and only term as president, Adams supported the iniquitous Alien and Sedition Acts, which intentionally silenced the opposition and set a precedent for government-sponsored attacks on immigrants and radicals. The series barely touches this aspect of Adams’s presidency, except to suggest that his much-beloved Abigail encouraged him to do so, as McCullough himself suggested in

²³ John Adams, letter to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, June 23, 1775. <<http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?id=AFCo1d156>>, last viewed January 2012.

²⁴ Rakove, “Sorry, HBO. John Adams Wasn’t That Much of a Hero”.

²⁵ Benjamin Franklin, letter to Robert Livingstone, July 22, 1783.

his own biography²⁶. After his failure to win a second presidential term in the election of 1800, Adams spent much of his time worrying about how history would treat him and hysterically attacked those who, like Mercy Otis Warren, downplayed his role in the creation of the Republic.

Is this the kind of man that needs to be reappraised? Clearly, by focusing on John Adams and softening his major faults or mistakes, the miniseries contributes to “Founders’ chic” – which, as Trevor Parry-Giles and David Waldtreicher convincingly demonstrated in 2002, is nothing but an instance of political nostalgia²⁷.

3. Historical “truth” and poetic licence in John Adams

John Adams’ formal conservatism certainly impairs any claims to innovative historical writing it might have had. Its subtle blend of attention to detail and poetic licence, however, make it a very successful educational medium.

In the weeks following the *John Adams* premiere on HBO, American historians scrupulously dissected the show in magazines, newspapers, and professional websites such as *H-Net* or George Mason University’s *History News Network*. Most of them deemed it a success, praising the cinematography, the storytelling, and Paul Giamatti and Laura Linney’s acting in particular.

In general, the craftsmanship – from the theme music to the sets to the makeup – is consistently breathtaking. Making history into good TV, especially without the benefit of numerous battle scenes, is yeoman’s work, deserving of public support,

wrote Steven Waldman, author of *Founding Faith*, in *The New Republic*²⁸. Others, however, begged to differ. Their criticism mostly focused on the issue of “historical inaccuracies.” To them, the series distorted the “facts” of John Adams’s life and therefore compromised

²⁶ “[Abigail] could well have been decisive in persuading Adams to support the Alien and Sedition Act [while] Adams appears to have said nothing on the subject at the time.” David McCullough, p. 507.

²⁷ “Perhaps it is because of the jarring events of September 11, 2001, or perhaps it is a lingering legacy of the Bush prevarications, but the United States is in a period of Founders nostalgia. [...] The Founders are everywhere.” Trevor Parry-Giles, p. 83. “Given current interest in historical biography and in the ‘character issue’ – an interest encouraged by the right – it seems that the best way to ignore the critical scholarship on John Adams is to swoop down to the personal level through biography.” David Waldtreicher, “Founders Chic as Culture War”, *Radical History Review*, Issue 84, Fall 2002, p. 189 [p. 185-194].

²⁸ Steven Waldman, “On the Final Hour of *John Adams*”, *The New Republic*, April 18, 2008. < <http://www.tnr.com/print/article/books-and-arts/waldman-the-final-hour-john-adams>>, last viewed January 2012.

the ideal of objectivity that has guided historians since the professionalization of their discipline in the late nineteenth century²⁹. In other words, it was “bad history.” Jeremy Stern, for example, dismissed the first episode of the series as “*fundamentally marred by an all-too-familiar and depressingly resilient prejudice against the early Revolutionaries, one that stretches back to late nineteenth-century scholarship and its depiction of the early protests as disingenuous tax riots.*” Historian John Bell went so far as to offer a comprehensive catalogue of fibs, half-truths, and outright fabrications in HBO’s series on his website [Boston1775.blogspot.com](http://boston1775.blogspot.com)³⁰. Among them, five especially were deemed “serious mistakes”:

- In Part 1, Captain Preston and the British soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre are tried in a single trial in the middle of what appears to be winter and declared not guilty of all charges. Captain Preston’s trial actually took place on October 24 and ran through October 29, when he was found not guilty. The other eight soldiers were tried separately in November. Six of them were found not guilty but two, Hugh Montgomery and Hugh Killroy, were convicted of manslaughter. They were both branded on their right thumbs as way of punishment.

- In Part 2, the Battle of Bunker Hill is shown taking place before the nomination of George Washington as Commander in Chief, when in reality, it was the opposite. Also, General Henry Knox’s ox-driven caravan of cannon is depicted passing by the Adams’ house en route to Cambridge, Massachusetts, though it almost certainly did not pass through Braintree, Massachusetts.

- In Part 4, Abigail Adams is depicted reprimanding Benjamin Franklin for cheating on his wife while in France, but Deborah Read had died seven years earlier in 1774 and Franklin never re-married.

- In Part 6, John and Abigail Adams moves into the new Executive Mansion in Washington, D.C., and the building appears to be white. This is inaccurate, as it was not painted white until 1817, i.e. three years after the British took control of the capital and burnt the building together with other government offices. It was not labelled “The White House” until 1901.

- In Part 7, John Adams’s daughter Nabby undergoes a mastectomy, as indeed happened in 1813, and later dies in her father’s home at Peacefield, apparently because her husband has abandoned her. Actually, she died there only because she wanted to be surrounded with her family, knowing that her cancer had returned and would kill

²⁹ On American historians’ perennial ambition to relate the past “as it really happened,” see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

³⁰ See for example “John Adams on Trial”, <<http://boston1775.blogspot.com/2008/03/john-adams-on-trial.html>>, last viewed January 2012.

her.

Writer Kirk Ellis responded to these criticisms by saying that his intent was

not to portray the “external facts” of the American Revolution [...]. Rather, it was to depict an internal history, an epic of thoughts and ideas refracted through the singular prism of one man who helped shape those events³¹.

In other words, Ellis felt that a real understanding of history would necessarily come at the expense of historical accuracy. And indeed, history is not just a collection of facts – although, as Adams (quoting Jonathan Swift) notes in his Boston Massacre summation in episode 1, “facts are stubborn things.” History is a narrative constructed by historians from traces left by the past. Historical enquiry is often driven by contemporary issues and, in consequence, historical narratives are constantly reconsidered, reconstructed and reshaped. The fact that different historians have different perspectives on issues means that there is also often controversy and no universally agreed version of past events.

Well-told history is also drama. I, for one, fully concede the occasional appropriateness of fudging history for dramatization. One has to make choices from the historical record to tell the story that best suits one’s purposes. The line between “history” and “drama” is a fine one, indeed. It is in the intersection between those two different, but not always mutually exclusive, that a film exists. Rather than condemning the series for its “inaccuracies,” therefore, one should seek the rationale behind such distortions and focus on what they bring to the narrative.

Conflating both Boston Massacre trials (with two separate verdicts) into one or reducing John Adams’s two trips to France to one, decade-long sojourn, certainly falls within the range of the acceptable distortion. A screenwriter should always seek economy in storytelling. Similarly, depicting Sally Hemings as sitting, lonely, at Jefferson’s death bed in Part 7 (though there is no evidence for it) provides a subtle way to acknowledge the relationship without giving it undue emphasis.

Admittedly more problematic is when in Part 5, Adams is shown breaking a Senate tie vote over ratification of the Jay treaty. That never happened: the treaty passed with a two-thirds majority, as required by the Constitution. Kirk Ellis’s justification for this “manufactured drama” is, however, quite convincing: through this scene, he wanted to illustrate the fact that Adams did cast more tie-

³¹ Kirk Ellis, “One for the Books”.

breaking votes than any other president of the Senate (29, to be exact) and was therefore deeply involved in legislative matters.

One might also take exception to the depiction of the Adams family as a modern nuclear family when in fact, Abigail had a strong kinship network she could rely on and supervised four household servants³². Seeing her alone frantically scrubbing her bedroom windowpanes is particularly annoying, since we're talking about the woman who wrote a famous "Remember the Ladies" letter³³. But again, Kirk Ellis's defence is persuasive: such a display of anguish shows how worried Abigail was during John's long absences (he was missing for six out of the first twelve years of their marriage) and highlights the special emotional bond that united husband and wife at a time when most few New England matches were based on convenience or economic interest.

Finally, to those who wonder why Dr. Benjamin Rush returns from the grave to perform a mastectomy on Abigail's daughter (an operation he never even accomplished when he was alive), or why, in the same episode, Rush encourages Adams to start a correspondence with Thomas Jefferson after the death of Abigail Adams when Abigail's death occurred in 1818 and the Adams-Jefferson correspondence actually started in 1812, one may respond that: (1) the "surgical scene" illustrates the violence that 18th- and 19th-century bodies underwent on a regular basis, even at the hands of the best doctors; (2) introducing the Adams-Jefferson letters later in the series allows to separate John Adams the turbulent politician from John Adams the reflective scholar, while preparing for the climax of the series: the death of both founding fathers on the same day in 1826.

Far from "betraying" history, therefore, Kirk Ellis' "distortions" maintain the audience's interest and heighten our understanding of the period. No scene captures more this inherent irony of scriptwriting than the "Trumbull scene" of episode 7. There, Adams is shown inspecting John Trumbull's painting *Declaration of Independence* (1817). He laments the fact that he and Thomas Jefferson are the last surviving people depicted, before chiding the artist for his depiction of the signing of the Declaration. "It is bad history!" he says at the end of a cruel diatribe, reminding him that the figures in the painting never met as a whole because of war. His final warning "not to let our posterity be deluded with fictions under the guise of poetical or graphical license" is a well-crafted slogan for the show itself. But it seems that, in reality, Adams didn't say much of what he is shown

³² On Abigail's life when alone, read Nancy Isenberg, "Abigail Economicus", *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 39, 2011, p. 42 [p. 39-46].

³³ In this letter to her husband, Abigail Adams exposed the glaring contradiction between men's natural rights arguments and the legal and political status of women. An insightful reading of it is provided in Elaine Forman Crane, "Political Dialogue and the Spring of Abigail's Discontent", *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 56, October 1999, p. 745-774.

saying. According to David McCullough, “what Adams thought as he looked at the painting will never be known³⁴.” Other sources have him point to a door in the background of the painting and state, “When I nominated George Washington of Virginia for Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, he took his hat and rushed out that door³⁵.” What’s more, Adams couldn’t have mentioned himself and Jefferson as the only survivors since Charles Carroll of Carrollton, who is also depicted in the painting, survived until 1832. Wittingly or not, writer Kirk Ellis is therefore calling attention to his own defects as a historian, to the very pitfalls of historical recreation he has fallen into. And yet, as any viewer can observe, the scene works perfectly as a revelator of John Adams’ character and a meditation on 19th-century attitudes to history – I would even paraphrase Galileo by saying that “it moves”... As such, it therefore perfectly embodies the conflicting and symbiotic relationship between the “historian’s truth” and the “dramatist’s truth” in historical film in general.



Plate 5. John Adams chides painter John Trumbull for exercising poetic licence (Part 7).

Conclusion

Historical films have particularly troubled and disturbed

³⁴ David McCullough, p. 627.

³⁵ Mark Antony De Wolfe Howe (ed.), *Articulate Sisters: Passages from Journals and Letters of the Daughters of President Josiah Quincy of Harvard University*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1946, P. 32.

historians since the early days of filmmaking. One could cite a letter by Louis Gottschalk from the University of Chicago to the president of Metro Goldwyn Mayer dated 1935, where Gottschalk warned him:

If the cinema art is going to draw its subjects so generously from history, it owes it to its patrons and its higher ideals to achieve greater accuracy. No picture of a historical nature ought to be offered to the public until a reputable historian has had a chance to criticize and revise it³⁶.

Despite such reservations, film has become a crucial medium in the shaping of collective memory. Filmmakers' historical interpretations have played an influential and formative public role, and continue to do so today. Although literature also influences our memory of history through, for instance, the genre of the historical novel, the impact of the cinema or of TV series is more significant due to the all-inclusive, panoptic character of its experience and to its weight in contemporary patterns of culture consumption. The visual reconstruction of a historical period tends to enter consciousness as the collective memory of that period. Furthermore, technological developments often cause the representation of staged effects on the screen to appear more realistic than "authentic" photographs.

Apart from its being an enormously influential cultural artifact (with its 5.5 million viewers per episode in 2008, it certainly made an impact on the American people), however, what should we retain of HBO's *John Adams*?

Though far from a perfectly accurate picture of the American Revolution and the first years of the U.S. Republic, I think it is one of the most convincing historical renditions ever offered on American TV. Probably because, despite some temporary lapses and a fairly conventional historical approach (biography), it has found the proper balance between "poetic licence" and "historical accuracy." One can only hope Tom Hanks's next HBO movie on the 2008 McCain/Palin campaign (currently filmed in Baltimore) will be as successful...

³⁶ Quoted in Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 45.