The candid diary of a great American statesman is a matchless window on the early republic. Richard Brookhiser reviews ‘The Diaries of John Quincy Adams,’ edited by David Waldstreicher.

By Richard Brookhiser
July 28, 2017 2:55 p.m. ET

John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) was the sixth president of the United States, chosen by the House of Representatives after the chaotic contest of 1824, crushed in his re-election bid by Andrew Jackson in 1828. But his public career stretched decades before and after his single term. His diplomat father, John Adams, took him on his first European trip when he was 10; he suffered a fatal stroke on the floor of the House of Representatives when he was 80. In the seven decades in between he served as ambassador to four countries, senator, secretary of state, congressman and advocate before the Supreme Court.

He also kept a diary, with a juvenile start in 1779 called “A Journal by Me, J Q A, Vol: 1st.” It grew, as he entered adulthood, into an almost daily record. An electronic facsimile of this running autobiography, comprising 14,000 digitized pages of JQA’s original handwriting, can be found at the website of the Massachusetts Historical Society. David Waldstreicher, professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, has distilled 1,200 pages of it, plus chronology and notes, into two volumes in the Library of America’s handsome format. It will be the standard reader’s edition of this masterpiece, which gives an account of both a fascinating life and a thrilling, disastrous period of American history.

JQA is a masterly diarist. He could write in sentences and paragraphs, unlike modern politicians. (Sad!) His style is always clear, often elegant, informed by his reading in Latin, French and German (not Austrian). He has a sharp eye for people, things and places. While he was representing the United States in St. Petersburg he described a Russian Orthodox baptism: “Another singularity was that at one part of the ceremony they were all required to spit on the floor.” Throughout his life, he noted sunrises (he himself typically rose at 4 a.m.), sunsets and eclipses.
Although public affairs consumed him, he had a variety of quirky interests and habits. He had a garden at home in Quincy, Mass., where he tried to start the seedlings of trees, usually with no luck. When he was in Washington he swam (he called it “bathing”) in the Potomac; he once nearly drowned, and on another occasion saw a drowned body pulled from the river. He was forever writing verse, and scolding himself for its poor quality. “It is with poetry as with Chess and Billiards—There is a certain degree of attainment, which labour and practice will reach, and beyond which no vigils and no vows will go.”

His signal deficiency as a chronicler is that he had almost no sense of humor. Whatever seriousness was not drilled into him by his Puritan heritage, history and Adams family history supplied. When he was 7 he saw the smoke and heard the cannon of the Battle of Bunker Hill across Boston Harbor; his childhood friends were heroes—Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Lafayette; his father, the second president, was the hero at home. The private history of the Adams family was somber: JQA’s two brothers, and two of his three sons, were alcoholics.

The gusto that sunnier temperaments draw from humor, JQA got instead from bile. He knew everybody, and hated almost everybody. The diary is a cavalcade of vituperation: Stephen Douglas “cast away his cravat, unbuttoned his waistcoat and had the awkward aspect of a half naked pugilist.” Daniel Webster had “gigantic intellect,” “envious temper,” “ravenous ambition” and a “rotten heart.” Ralph Waldo Emerson was “a crack-brained young man.” Alexander Hamilton’s death in a duel was “divine retributive justice” for his opposing JQA’s father. He acknowledged Martin Van Buren’s “calmness,” “gentleness of manners” and “conciliatory temper” but flayed his “obsequiousness,” “sycophancy” and “fawning servility.” The sternest rebuke was reserved for Jefferson, who “combined a rare mixture of infidel philosophy, and Epicurean Morals—Of burning Ambition, and of Stoical self-control—of deep duplicity and of generous sensibility, between which two qualities and a treacherous and inventive Memory, his conduct towards his rivals and opponents appears one tissue of inconsistency.” JQA ticked off some instances, then struck off this epigram: Jefferson had “a memory so pandering to the will that in deceiving others he seems to have begun by deceiving himself.”

JQA had the vices that hobbled his father: wrath and aggression, cast as righteousness. “My cause is the cause of my Country, and of human liberty. It is the cause of Christian improvement—the fulfilment of the prophesies.” His canting rage was stoked by the punishments he administered to himself: for being a mediocre poet; for getting up as late as 6 a.m.; for reading for pleasure when he should have been doing research; for a hundred shortcomings, almost all of them magnified by relentless self-scrutiny. Back of the implacable internal judge lay a profound internal fear: I am not worthy—of my father; of the founding fathers; of the opportunities I have been given. Sometimes sheer loss released him from the prison of himself, if only into grief: The death of his mother, and of his drunkard sons, touched him to the core. And day by day, poems, plants and heavenly bodies momentarily soothed him, even if he called them distractions. Otherwise the vise of his personality stayed tight.

Much of Volume I is taken up with JQA’s career as a diplomat. His crowning achievement was his part in procuring the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812. JQA belonged to a five-man American negotiating commission, which also included the young Henry Clay. The shuffling and bluffing of their British counterparts, and their own internal bickering, shows how the sausage of a treaty gets made. There is unintentional comedy in the clash of JQA’s earnest temperament with that of the smiling, spouting Clay; Clay’s all-night card parties broke up just when JQA was starting his day.

In 1817 James Monroe tapped JQA to be secretary of state. Monroe’s eight years in the White House became the original permanent campaign as Adams, Treasury Secretary William Crawford, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, House Speaker Clay and Gen. Andrew Jackson jockeyed to succeed him. JQA’s account of these years, which straddles Volumes I and II, is the ultimate inside baseball. (JQA learned that, at one point, a frustrated Crawford, seeing his chances slip away, threatened to beat Monroe with his cane.) It is a tribute to JQA’s public-spiritedness that in the midst of these brawls he crafted the principle of mutual European/American non-interference, known as the Monroe Doctrine, that would guide our foreign policy for 90 years.
JQA beat his competitors for the White House and served a damp term as president. The most important subject in the diary—much more important than this sterile victory—is slavery.

Joseph Ellis believes that John Adams, at the end of his life, told JQA that the founders of the North had made a tacit bargain with their brothers of the South: End slavery in your own way. Since the South hadn’t done so, it would be fair, and necessary, for JQA to push hard against it.

I see an earlier turning point in the diary, after Missouri applied for statehood in 1819. The House, dominated by free states, wanted Missouri to be free; the Senate, split between free and slave states, balked.

JQA recorded a conversation he had with Calhoun in March 1820, as the two walked home from a cabinet meeting at which Missouri had been the topic. JQA had argued for freedom, citing the Declaration of Independence. Calhoun, who was from South Carolina, told him “that the principles which I had avowed were just and noble; but that in the Southern Country, whenever they were mentioned, they were always understood as applying only to white men.” Slavery, he went on, had “many excellent consequences. . . . It was the best guarantee to equality among the whites.”

JQA wrote it all down, then ruminated: “When probed to the quick,” slaveholders “show at the bottom of their Souls, pride and vain-glory in their very condition of masterdom. . . . They look down upon the simplicity of a yankey’s manners because he has no habits of overbearing like theirs, and cannot treat negroes like dogs.”

The power of this encounter comes from the fact that, at that moment, Calhoun was one of the few people JQA respected. “Calhoun thinks for himself,” he wrote, “independently of all the rest.” If, even so, he thought as he did, what hope was there for the country? You might as well jump straight to Antietam.

JQA did nothing with this prophetic insight—he still had the greasy pole of ambition to climb. But after winning and losing the presidency, then taking a brief time-out in private life, he returned to politics, winning a House seat in 1830, and the slavery issue returned to him. The climax of Volume II is his double resistance to the annexation of Texas, a future slave state, and to the gag rule, which required anti-slavery petitions to the House to be tabled, unread and unrecorded. His struggle against the latter employed all his qualities, bad and good: he was bitter, resourceful, smart and brave. He gave orations,
and he wrangled over points of order. What rendered his campaign all the more splendid were the rants
and threats of his slave-holding opponents. In that long-ago conversation with Calhoun he had seen their
nature, and he forced them to show it again and again.

The gag rule went down in 1844, but Texas was annexed the following year; the road to disunion and war
ran clear and straight. But JQA left, in his life and his diary, the example of a statesman, distracted by
many projects and woes, who, late but true, grasped the vital question.

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1918.”