

Review

Louisa, *The Extraordinary Life of Mrs. Adams*, pp. 455
by Márcia Balisciano

Louisa Thomas takes the story of an earlier Louisa (February 12, 1775-May 15, 1852), Louisa Adams, wife of John Quincy, from historical footnote to compelling drama. Thanks to Thomas' fine prose and compassion for her subject, it is a story beautifully told and worth remembering.

Thomas sets the scene for a first meeting in 1795 with a 28 year old John Quincy Adams, a smart and attractive, if unfashionably attired, young diplomat who came to call on Louisa's American father. Joshua Johnson's graceful home, precariously financed through his merchant trading business, was a drawing point for visiting Americans and independent thinkers.

One of seven daughters of an English mother Catherine, Thomas recounts what John Quincy found when looking at Louisa, based on a portrait painted about the time they met: a young woman with skin the hue of the "milk-pink roses that she holds in her fingertips" and a face wreathed by curls. Her direct gaze is "not at all the expression of a vain and vapid girl," it is "intelligent, her smile small and assured. She is beautiful."

Throughout her life Louisa was an other. She was born in Nantes, where her father was working as a buyer for a Maryland company, and at age six moved to England when he set up his business. Following a fainting spell apparently in religious fervour – she was much influenced by the Catholic school she had attended in France – she was sent to live with family friends, Elizabeth Hewlett, another American transplanted to Britain, and her Anglican biblical scholar husband, John. As Thomas notes, they "listened to her, talked with her, recommended books for her to read, and treated the child with unusual respect." In short, the couple fostered the strong intellect which defined her life. With money from her father, she did not buy new dresses but books, among them Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

But thus a tension which suffused her life. Born in our own time, given her interests, she might have become an author like Thomas, a scholar, a judge, a therapist. But these were not avenues for a woman in the late 18th century nor the 19th for that matter, born as she was in the former, and reaching her maturity in the latter. Thomas quotes a contemporary arbiter of female morality: "Girls should be taught to give up their opinions betimes, and not pertinaciously to carry on a dispute, even if they would know themselves to be in the right." Throughout her life, she discounted herself after expressing an opinion, when likely she knew herself to be right.

She thought John Quincy might be more interested in one of her lovely sisters. This most serious of young men upbraided himself for being distracted from his diplomatic endeavours, but love for Louisa prevailed. During his London visits they took walks and conspired about a future out of earshot of chaperones. But he returned to his post in Holland and then moved on to Portugal and would not be drawn on when a betrothal might become marriage. He gave Louisa leave to find another if she could not wait in response to her letters of understated anticipation, but she waited.

It was a pattern that marked her life: she had little say in her own destiny. Her husband and frequently his famous parents, John and Abigail Adams – who became President and First Lady in 1797, the year John Quincy and Louisa did marry in All Hallows-by-the-Tower Church in London – made the decisions, not least about the precious children she went on to bear.

The newlyweds travelled to Berlin, where John Quincy joined the American legation. Despite lacking funding for the finery required of courtly life, Louisa was a resourceful success. Like his father before him – John Adams had criticised Benjamin Franklin’s enthusiastic participation in the *joie de vivre* of French royal circles when serving as the first American statesman – he did not yet understand that as much could be achieved at elegant balls, as through crafting treatises. John Quincy was not pleased when Louisa became “the only foreign lady” to be given a role in a royal quadrille which required weeks of rehearsals, ornate costumes, “and liberal use of crown jewels.” Nor did he delight in Louisa’s hosting lively dinners for the sons of erstwhile adversary King George III at their Berlin home. Thomas states John Quincy’s dilemma: “He needed her to be admired but not adored. She had to fit in but could never belong.”

In 1801, Louisa and John Quincy left their contented life in Berlin with a babe in arms, the patriotically named George Washington Adams. They landed in Philadelphia and travelled first to Washington to see Louisa’s family now living in greatly reduced circumstance after the collapse of Joshua’s business – which took with it, to Louisa’s lasting shame, the £5000 dowry he had promised to John Quincy. (Dispirited by misfortune, what limited work Joshua had was made possible through the largesse of John Quincy’s father; he died not long after seeing Louisa again.)

She was an American but one who had never lived in America. Used to a cosmopolitan life in London and Berlin, she had to learn a new cultural tradition, not least in arriving to meet John Quincy’s family in Massachusetts (including John Adams, second US President between 1797-1801) at their estate Peacefield, which was adorned more by trees than decoration as befitted the Adams’ puritan roots. Louisa recounted, “Had I stepped into Noah’s Ark, I don’t think I could have been more utterly astonished.” It was grey skies, fallen leaves and winter in New England. She recalled being “so much depressed, and so ill.” Throughout her life she suffered from ‘illness,’ much of which was physical but frequently, in the wake of loss and partings, emotional. She wrote: John Adams took “a fancy to me” though “he was the only one.” She felt a withering eye for her more fashionable traits from Abigail, who had corresponded with John Quincy from his first mention of Louisa about wifely attributes. She had met Louisa’s parents during their heyday in London and feared her daughter-in-law would not be a woman of substance. After her first encounters with Louisa, observing her thin physique and persistent cough, Abigail predicted she would be of “short duration.” But in time Louisa won her over. The excellence of her correspondence Abigail wrote her, “makes me a sharer with you in your various occupations, brings me acquainted with characters, and places me at your fireside.” For “one single letter conveys more information...than I could obtain in a whole session of Congress.” Greetings of “Mrs. Adams” in their letters, Thomas says, gave way to expressions of “my dear daughter” and “my dear mother” as the years proved Louisa’s fortitude despite separation, change and tragedy.

Separation included being apart from John Quincy at points throughout their life together, among them, after his first appointment to the US Senate (1803). By now she had a second son, John Adams II, and John Quincy determined she should remain with their children in New England to allow him to inexpensively concentrate on his congressional duties. She called his diktat, “coldness and unkindness.” They tried other arrangements, including leaving both her boys in 1805 with her parents-in-law at their request when George was four and John was two. She was told it was better than raising them in a Washington boarding house. But Louisa lamented that when eventually reunited with her children, they found their mother a stranger. Not long after she journeyed to the “gilded darkness” of St. Petersburg when John Quincy was appointed first United States Minister to Russia in 1809, taking along a third son, two year old Charles Francis Adams, but leaving behind George and John against her wishes. She would not see them again for six years. “Oh this agony of agonies,” she wrote later. “Can ambition repay such sacrifices? Never!”

At the Russian court, she was again challenged with projecting an image of elegance without a budget. She cleverly recut her dresses and accented them with trim, trains, fur, and fans. She met the Tsar Alexander and Tsarina Elizabeth Alexeievna and the Empress mother, Maria Feodorovna and charmed and surprised them with her knowledge of London, Paris and Washington for as she reported the “Savage had been expected!”

There was joy two years into their stay with the birth in 1811 of a namesake, Louisa Catherine Adams. She wrote to son George, “I wish you could see what a good natured mad cap she is.” But happiness was short-lived as the child developed dysentery and died shortly after her first birthday. She was bereft: “My heart is buried in my Louisa’s grave and my greatest longing is to be laid beside her.” Following, there would be miscarriages but no other children.

Sorrow became anger as John Quincy left her behind in St. Petersburg when he set off for European capitals to help negotiate the peace following the war of 1812 between America and Britain. Young Charles wrote to his father, “Mama is a great amateur of cards. She is always laying [them out] to see if you will come back soon.” They would not see him for 11 months. But in his absence, her confidence grew as she assumed responsibility for her household. “I am turned,” she exclaimed, a “woman of business.”

Eventually John Quincy requested that she close out their life in Russia and join him in Paris where he was forging postwar diplomatic ties. This would be her finest hour. She did what few men or woman could imagine today – she packed, sold and shipped belongings and bought a carriage, with runners for the snow, departing in freezing mid-winter for a two thousand mile journey to Paris (to wait until spring would mean melting ice and impassable tracts). She sewed pockets into her skirts for money and valuables, created a space where Charles could sleep on the floor of the carriage, hired servants with marksmanship skills to ward off villains on a road that had not fully recovered from the devastation of retreating French, and chasing, rampaging Cossacks after Napoleon’s failed invasion of Moscow (1812). Thomas describes her bravery passing through “desolate scenes and evidence of brutal destruction, rape and plunder. She would have to deal with suspicious guards and drunken soldiers” overcoming her fears and so she did. She passed through Berlin once again, and as she progressed, she skirted a marching Napoleon, newly escaped from Elba, also heading to Paris. On arrival at her husband’s hotel in the city she found no warm, congratulatory greetings from a waiting John Quincy. He had gone to the theatre.

There would be more travels, as Thomas details. From Paris, a return to London when John Quincy became Minister to the Court of St. James’s (1815-1817) where she was reunited with her two older sons; finally some prized time as a family. But as ever, it was fleeting. Louisa was unable to lay down roots as they were soon off to Washington when John Quincy was rewarded with Secretary of State under President James Monroe (1817-1825), a role he wanted in a career where he accepted rather than sought. It was Louisa to whom others turned to encourage John Quincy to pursue the presidency, for despite illnesses – including reoccurrences of erysipelas, a painful bacterial skin infection she had contracted in Russia, she became the most popular political hostess of her day – a place where elections, John Quincy came to realise, could be won. If her husband “was hesitant, then she could not be. If he would not act,” powerful figures told her “then she should.”

Rather than a crux of Thomas’ narrative, her telling of John Quincy’s assumption of the presidency (1825-1829) is anticlimactic. This is likely because Louisa’s account of this period is restrained – unwell, likely exhausted, she does not seem to have even attended his inauguration. Presidency or no, it was a familiar pattern, when no longer instrumental – as she had been in getting her husband elected – when she was once again meant to be only ornamental, she wilted.

At the heart of Thomas' account of Louisa's life is the story of a marriage. Her partner could be exasperatingly distant – literally and figuratively, but he also wrote her poetry and depended on her support (in one poem he stated, "But thine [beauties] are grappled to my soul...They tune my nerves and inspire my soul.") They knew togetherness and strain, joy and grief (Louisa would outlive all but one of her children – to her first born, George, she had recommended the moral instruction inherent in the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, but it did not counterbalance the crushing weight of familial history and expectation; with sad irony, while en route to his parents in Washington on the ship, Benjamin Franklin, for support in recovering from a period of instability, George fell overboard and drowned in 1829).

Thomas states, it was hard for Louisa and John Quincy "to be together and hard for them to be apart." Writing one winter he joked, "I will not say I can neither live with you or without you," but "in this cold weather I should be very glad to live with you." Yet love and respect underpinned their many experiences.

Louisa died in Washington aged 77 in 1852 surviving her husband by four years. She had indeed lived an extraordinary life: daughter-in-law of a president, wife of a president, and mother of a lawyer, diplomat and presidential aide. She had seen much of the world and in an era where she was expected to disown her intelligence and desires, yet she made an impact. "Oh halcyon days of bliss long past," she penned, "Too good too happy long to last."