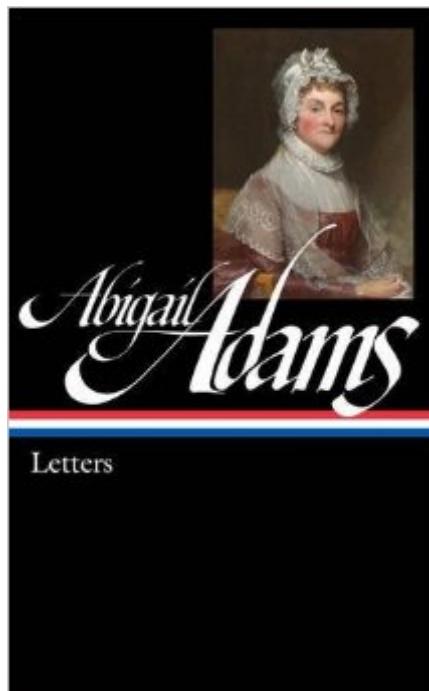


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Abigail Adams: Letters: Library Of America #275 (The Library Of America)



Synopsis

Abigail Adams was an unusually accomplished letter writer. Spirited and insightful, her correspondence offers a unique vantage on historical events in which her family played so prominent a role, while bringing vividly to life the everyday experience of American women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Here are 430 letters—more than a hundred published for the first time—to John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Mercy Otis Warren, James and Dolley Madison, and Martha Washington, among many others. Including her famous call to “Remember the Ladies,” letters from the 1760s and 1770s offer an unrivaled portrait of the American Revolution on the home front. Travel to Europe in the 1780s opens a grand new field for her talents as social commentator and political advisor while her roles as vice presidential and presidential wife place her at the very heart of the nation’s founding. Also included are a chronology of Adams’s life, detailed notes, and extensively researched family trees. This volume is published simultaneously with *John Adams: Writings from the New Nation 1784–1826*, the third and final volume in the Library of America John Adams edition.

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Customer Reviews

This is my first purchase in this series. I was thrilled when the surprisingly small jiffy-pak arrived but very disappointed to discover that the print was so small that reading these most interesting and important letters will be left to other members of my family. I am aware that there are alternatives

available to old fools such as me, but one of the primary reasons of having properly bound books is so that they and their readers can grow old together.

I first became acquainted with Abigail Adams' letters several years ago when I reviewed "My Dearest Friend," a collection of the letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams. I found her to be a perceptive observer of events, very skillful in discussing ideas, and pretty soundly grounded for someone who had not had much formal education. This new Library of American volume differs from the previous volume in several important respects. First, it is more comprehensive, with 430 letters including 100 never before published. Second, it is limited to Abigail's letters, and does not include the letters to which she is responding. And there is a whole range of features which facilitate the reader's understanding of the letters and the key ideas and individuals Abigail is addressing in her correspondence. The editor has not just laid out an array of letters organized by date. For example, while the letters are contained in individual sections such as "Revolution, 1773-1777" and "Vice President's Lady, 1788-1796", each letter in the table of contents has a brief descriptive tag attached so the reader knows generally the subject of a letter before deciding to read it. In addition, the editor has added an extensive chronology covering 1744-1818 so that the reader knows the background when a particular letter is written. Also included is a List of Correspondents, containing brief bios of Abigail's correspondents which adds further context to the letters. The sources of letters used by the editor are identified in "Note on the Texts." Absolutely essential are the 133 pages of annotated notes designated for specific letters. Once again, unfamiliar terms are made clear and other important information is made accessible to the reader. Finishing out these features is a solid index. All these features are the contributions of the volume's editor, Edith Gelles of Stanford, a recognized Abigail scholar with multiple books on Abigail to her credit. Her informed and experienced hand is evident on virtually every page of the volume. As is typical with LOA volumes, the typography is clear and easy to read, and the paper and binding outstanding. Even at 1180 pages, the book is easy to handle and read. Abigail Adams was a perceptive observer at the crossroads of history, and exceedingly skilled and perceptive in sharing her thoughts and reactions with her correspondents--and thankfully, us as well.

The Library of America has done readers a great service by publishing many volumes of source material on early American history. Much of the material had only been accessible to specialists, but it is now available to those willing to make the effort to read. The LOA has published three volumes of the writings of John Adams edited by the renowned scholar Gordon Wood. At about the time it

published the third volume, the LOA published this large volume devoted to the letters of Adams' wife, Abigail Adams. Edith Gelles, Senior Scholar at Stanford's Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research and the author of two biographies of Abigail Adams, edited the volume. It is an outstanding accomplishment and a welcome addition to the LOA. Abigail Adams (1744 -- 1818) was the daughter of a New England minister, William Smith and his wife Elizabeth Quincy Smith. She received no formal education but was what people today might call home schooled. In 1764, she married John Adams (1735 -- 1826), and the union lasted until her death 54 years later. John and Abigail Adams were active participants in and observers of the events of the Revolutionary Era and beyond with John Adams serving as the second president of the United States. Abigail Adams became an inveterate letter writer. Gelles writes that over 2,300 of Abigail's letters have been preserved, with 430 selected for inclusion in this LOA volume, with about 100 of these published for the first time. The volume also includes Abigail Adams' will and selections from her diary on returning to America from Europe in 1788. For much of their married life, Abigail and John were separated as John left home to perform official duties for the new nation. Many of the letters in this book are written to John during the course of the long, difficult separations. There are many letters to other family members, siblings, children, uncles, aunts, and others; and it is sometimes difficult to sort them out. Various family trees are offered at the outset of the book to help the reader. Adams also wrote to many other friends and famous people, such as Thomas Jefferson, Dolley Madison, and Mercy Otis Warren. This LOA volume includes a detailed List of Correspondents with short biographies that is useful in giving context to the letters. The letters cover a breadth and depth of subjects. They cover family matters in great detail and they also cover political events of the day. They cover the break with Britain, the Revolutionary War, John Adams long period of diplomatic service in Europe, his eight-year vice-presidency, single term presidency, and more. Abigail Adams is both an astute observer and a participant. She was also a highly enterprising woman. During the years of John Adams' absences, she received difficult to find merchandise from Europe which she sold to maintain the family and the family property. She was a savvy woman of business. The letters offer a great deal of information about daily life in the period, as Abigail wrote and observed in detail. In particular, the letters offer a picture of the epidemics, including smallpox and yellow fever, which ravaged America and of the primitive state of medicine. (Abigail's daughter, Abigail 2, underwent a mastectomy without anesthetic and latter succumbed to cancer in her remaining breast.) Abigail Adams also was a great reader, and this volume is replete with allusions to literature from the Bible, the Greeks and Romans, Shakespeare, and contemporary authors. The letters also include discussions of deeply held religious faith and patriotism. The letters often are lengthy and difficult to

read. Apparently, Abigail Adams gave little thought to the eventual publication of the letters until near the end of her life. The book is divided into seven sections, beginning with a small section on her courtship and marriage to John (1763 -- 1773). The following much longer sections cover the Revolutionary Era (1773 -- 1777); the years John spent abroad, with Abigail joining him in the latter years (1778 -- 1788); the eight years of Adams' vice-presidency (1788 -- 1796); the four years as First Lady (1797 -- 1801); and the years of retirement in Quincy, Massachusetts ((1801 -- 1818). In addition to the biographies of correspondents, this volume includes an extended chronology of the years 1744 -- 1818, covering both personal and political events during this formative era. The volume also includes unusually thorough notes on the letters. These three carefully prepared sections (notes, biographies, chronology) are indispensable aids to understanding what is still a formidably difficult volume of writing. There are over 950 pages of letters and nearly 200 pages of supporting material. Abigail Adams' best-known letter appears early in this volume. In March-April, 1776, Abigail wrote to John to "remember the ladies" and to improve their lot during the Continental Congress (p. 90) The themes of women's education and women's rights appear frequently in this volume. Her views are advanced for a woman of the time and are also carefully nuanced. It would be unduly narrowing to read these letters with an emphasis on Abigail Adams' views on women's issues because of the breadth of her personal, political, religious, and intellectual interests as shown in the letters. I want to suggest some of Adams' key concerns by quoting from two letters written during her retirement years reflecting on her long, active life. In 1811, Abigail wrote to her granddaughter, Abigail Louisa Adams, in a letter that stresses women's independence and patriotism. She wrote: "I was amused with your politiks, you must tell the young Ladies that I have heard it observed that a Ladies politicks Should be always those of their Husbands now if they fix theirs, they must be Sure they are Right, and chuse accordingly or they may chance to Spar, and that would be very unpleasant. I fix it as a principle that every Lady Should Love her own Country in preference to any other, and that whatever tends to promote its prosperity its happiness and welfare Should be regarded by her, next to her near Relatives -- for in the Fredom and Independence of her country, is contained her own happiness, and that of her connections. I ask them to Name a Country equally Blest with our own, notwithstanding all the Clamours against our Rulers, and all the injuries we have Sustaind from forign powers? neither war, Pestilence, or Safety, our Country produces us every necessary, and many of the Luxuries of Life, no hard task Master gripes them from us, no Children of want Starve for Bread. there is one thing we want, we want gratefull Hearts and deserve not the abundant mercies we receive". (p.828) In a letter to Richard Rush dated February 26, 1816, who had succeeded John Quincy Adams as minister to Russia, Abigail Adams

reflected on her personal life and her long separations from her husband. She wrote: "In a time of war, or in any great calamity which may threaten a country, I consider it the Duty of a good citizen, to Sacrifice property and even Life, to save it upon this principle I have always acted. When called upon for a Separation from those most Dear to me, which wrung my heart with anguish and placed me, a Solitary Being in the world -- for Sixteen years of my Life, and that at a period, when it may be supposed, Life is best enjoyed -- I was deprived of the Support, the Comfort, and Society of Him whom I most Loved, and esteemed, in the World." (p. 920) This book is long and difficult to read. It will be rewarding to readers with a strong interest in the United States and its history and sense of itself -- particularly involving Revolutionary America -- and in Abigail Adams. The Library of America and Edith Gelles are to be commended for adding this book to a series that documents American thought, history, and writing. The LOA kindly sent me a review copy of this volume. Robin Friedman

Adams was a strong, exceptionally intelligent woman who was a great correspondent, but it does become rather a slog to digest the entire collection. I much more enjoyed the books written by Edith Gelles previously -- "Abigail and John: Portrait of a Marriage," "Portia: The World of Abigail Adams," and "Abigail Adams: A Writing Life." That said, the book is definitely a good read. The letters reveal Abigail's influence and involvement with her children, as well as her expectations for their excellence. She was a force to be reckoned with!

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