Henry Adams and the Making of America
by Garry Wills

"A contemporary historian pays tribute to a previous one in this personal and rigorous analysis of the works of Henry Adams . . . providing a marvelous character sketch of this enigmatic but delightful man." — Booklist

"Makes a great case that Adams's epic is a 'nonfiction prose masterpiece of the nineteenth century in America,' one that pioneered the use of foreign and domestic archival sources, blended intellectual, military, diplomatic, and economic history, and distilled it all in a richly ironic voice." — Kirkus Reviews

"Wills nimbly dusts off the nine volumes of Henry Adams's little-studied history of the United States from 1800 to 1816 and proclaims it to be both 'a prose masterpiece' and a model for how to research and write history . . . With its revisionist stance, felicitous prose, and compelling argument, Wills's book charts new directions as well." — Publishers Weekly, starred review

About the Book

Henry Adams and the Making of America is a major work of revisionist history from Pulitzer Prize winner Garry Wills, in which he showcases Adams's little-known but seminal study of the early United States — the years 1800 to 1817. Wills draws from his analysis the revelatory views of the origins of paradoxes that roil America to the present day.

In writing History of the United States of America During the Administration of Thomas Jefferson (four volumes) and History of the United States of America During the Administration of James Madison (five volumes), Henry Adams drew on his southern roots, his extensive foreign travel, his political service to Lincoln's White House, and more, to invent history as we have come to know it. His nine-volume chronicle of the United States, written when he was in his forties, established new standards for employing archival resources, firsthand reporting, eyewitness accounts, and other techniques that have become the
essence of modern history.

Adams's innovations went beyond the technical as he posited an essentially ironic view of the legacies of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. As is well known, these presidents strove to shield the young nation from "foreign entanglements," a standing army, a central bank, and a federal bureaucracy, among other hallmarks of "big government." Yet, by the end of their tenures, they had permanently entrenched all of these institutions in American society. This is the "American paradox" that defines our polity today: the idealized desire for isolation and political simplicity battling against the inexorable growth and intermingling of political, economic, and military forces.

*Henry Adams and the Making of America* is big in scope, nuanced in detail and argument, and redolent of period atmosphere. Here we have a gifted contemporary historian drawing on the work of another gifted historian. Wills interweaves two themes: how Adams came to write such a revolutionary work of history, and how the *History* has informed Wills's own understanding of our nation's founding. Reading *Henry Adams*, one develops a more inclusive sense of how the United States became the country we know today.

Wills shows us Henry Adams in London, in Spain, in France, at Monticello, in the Louisiana bayous and the foothills of the Alleghenies — drawing from these places evidence of the far-flung influences on early-nineteenth-century America. This syncretic method and mindset were revolutionary in Adams's time and, strangely enough, in ours too, since the study and writing of history has evolved into a primarily specialized field. Adams was the first to do what the best historians still do today: blend political and cultural history with people's history.

In its time, the *History* was enormously influential and led to Adams's founding of the first graduate history program at Harvard. Although the epic *History* was superseded in popularity by *The Education of Henry Adams*, which Adams wrote in his sixties, its conclusions are still apparent today in the irony of the "American paradox." This venerable irony is made fresh by Wills's insights, his splendid prose, and the fact that he resurrected its source from undeserved obscurity.

**About the Author**

*Garry Wills*, one of our most distinguished historians and critics, is the author of numerous books, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Why I Am a Catholic*, *"Negro President": Jefferson and the Slave Power*, *Saint Augustine*, *Papal Sin*, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. He has received many awards, among them two National Book Awards and the 1998 National Medal for the Humanities. A regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, he is an adjunct professor of history at Northwestern University.

Wills has served as the first Washington Irving Professor of Modern American History at Union College, a fellow of the Institute of Humanities at the University of Edinburgh, and a Regents Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has also been a Silliman Seminarist at Yale, the Christian Gauss Lecturer at Princeton, the Welch Professor of American Studies at Notre Dame, the W. W. Cook Lecturer at the University of Michigan Law School, the Storrs Lecturer at Yale Law School, and the Rosenthal Lecturer at Northwestern Law School.

A Conversation with Garry Wills

Why do you consider Henry Adams to be the greatest American historian?

In his major work, the nine-volume History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, with its attendant biographies and edited papers, Adams pioneered many forms of history then in their infancy or only about to be born — archival history, economic history, social history, intellectual history, and military history. He created innovative research techniques (statistical, among others) while writing the nonfiction prose masterpiece of nineteenth-century America.

Why is his achievement not recognized for what it is?

Students of Henry Adams have concentrated exclusively on his work in the twentieth century, when he was in his sixties. The only book that is still taught at the college level is The Education of Henry Adams, a favorite of English departments. The History, written in his forties, has been neglected by history departments. The Education has fixed an impression of Adams — pessimistic, opposed to American democracy, arch, and ironic — that does not fit the History, so it is treated as not a product of his "real" self.

Why does the History not fit the image of Adams?

There is an unexamined dogma about Adams — that he was a disappointed politician who felt that he had to vindicate his famous president-ancestors against the "upstart" Republican-Democratic presidents (Jefferson and Madison).

Was that not true?

It is the reverse of the truth. Adams was a fierce critic of the Federalists in general and of his great-grandfather John Adams ("a demagogue") and his grandfather John Quincy Adams ("demonic") in particular.

How could an Adams oppose the Adamses?

Henry felt closest to his "non-Adamsey" grandmother Louisa, his only immediate relative without any Quincy, Boylston, Brooks, or Adams blood in her. He exaggerated his own "quarter taint" (actually one-eighth) of her "southern blood" as the real secret of his character.

Why did he want a southern ancestor?

He loved the South, despite its slave institutions. The most congenial hero of his first novel was a southerner. His close friend was Robert E. Lee's son. Adams consistently said that the only great presidents were southerners, Washington and Jefferson.
Why is none of this generally recognized?

Because the *History* is not generally read. It is a treat too many people deprive themselves of.

**Why was Adams fascinated by his grandmother Louisa?**

She was not accepted by Abigail Adams and other members of the family as worthy to be married to John Quincy Adams. Louisa deeply resented her mistreatment by the family and poured out her grievances in private papers, which Henry began to edit for publication (in three volumes!) to vindicate his favorite in the family.

**Why is this important to a reading of the *History*?**

If one clears away the myth that the *History* was written to vindicate the Federalists, one can appreciate the wonder of what the Republican presidents achieved.

**Which was what?**

They alone, Adams shows, could have taken a sluggish, divided, backward-looking, intellectually stunted nation in 1800 and brought it, by 1817, to a state of union, energy, exploration, and progress. The paradox is that they came to office opposed to national union and energy. But their idealism, their ambition to build a national party, their thrust to the West, and the War of 1812, which they took up reluctantly, did nothing less than make a nation.