

MEYER REINHOLD

THE INFLUENCE OF CICERO ON JOHN ADAMS

In the United States of America we recently commemorated the 350th anniversary of the birth of the study of Latin and Greek in North America. Despite the distance from the great centers of classical learning in Europe, and the complete absence of relics of the Roman (not to mention the Greek) presence in our landscape, the classical curriculum was imported and speedily naturalized with the founding of the Boston Latin School in 1635 and Harvard College in Cambridge in 1636. The memory of Queen Elizabeth, Shakespeare, King James I and the King James Bible were still fresh to the American pioneers, and they carried with them in their intellectual baggage across the Atlantic Ocean the models of the European educational system. This curriculum had at its core in the colonial grammar schools and colleges the study of the Latin and Greek languages, literatures and antiquities. In this country, from its beginnings until the early 19th Century, besides the Sacred Bible, stood what some called the "Sacred Classics" (1).

The aims of this learning were to expose students to classical authors from whom they could derive "useful knowledge". And among these selected Classics in early America Cicero took pride of place in the admiration of many liberally educated men as model authority for diction and style, as orator, lawyer, political theorist, letter writer, and guide to "private and public virtue". As role model in the political arena Cicero was also idealized as a sort of secular "saint" for his patriotism, devotion to the Roman Republic, and opposition to tyranny (2).

Despite the powerful impact of Cicero on many early Americans, little clarification of this pervasive influence was made until quite recently. In 1950 Bruno Weil in preparation for a book commemorating

(1) M. Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States*, Detroit 1984, 23-49; Idem, *The Latin Tradition in America*, "Helios" 14,2, 1987, 123-139.

(2) M. Reinhold, *The Classic Pages: Classical Reading of Eighteenth-Century Americans*, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1975, 49-63; R.M. Gummere, *John Adams, Togatus*, "Philological Quarterly" 13, 1984, 203-219; D.M. Robathan, *John Adams and the Classics*, "New England Quarterly" 19, 1946, 91-98.

the bimillennium of Cicero's death wrote to the Library of Congress in Washington for assistance, with a view to explicating this reception of Cicero in early America. He received the following reply: "We regret to inform you that it would appear there is no biography that deals with the influence of Romans or of Cicero on the revolutionary period of the United States" (3). That time was not propitious, for research in the classical tradition in the American colonial and early national periods was still in its infancy. It is only in the last twenty-five years that substantial progress in this field has been made, revealing the extent of the reception of Graeco-Roman antiquity in the "Golden Age" of classical learning in America. Now finally we have begun to understand its influence on many of the American Founding Fathers, especially on Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Rush.

It was upon John Adams that Cicero had the greatest influence among early Americans. From his youth to his old age the preeminent role model for Adams's legal career, his oratory, literary style, letter writing, and self-image as statesman and political theorist was consistently Cicero (popularly known as "Tully" among the English and Americans in the 18th Century). It is true that in his youth, as a student at Harvard College he had a strong interest in Mathematics and Science. But, looking back on this from his later eminence he wrote, in a brief autobiography: "I was destined to a Course of Life in which these Sciences have been of little Use, and the Classicks would have been of great importance" (4). At age seventy-five he could reaffirm that "I chose to confine myself to Cicero" (5).

It was not until 1758-1759, while reading law in a Boston law firm that he threw himself into extensive and purposeful reading and study of the Classics, especially Cicero, and the Civil Law. In the intimate diary that he wrote at this time he tells how when his mother and father quarreled over some domestic matter he "quitted the Room, and took up Tully to compose myself" (6). As a young law student he enjoyed reading Cicero's Catilinarian orations aloud for "The Sweetness and Grandeur of his sounds, and the Harmony of his Numbers [that] give pleasure enough

(3) *2000 Jahre Cicero*, Zurich 1962, 265. The English is mine from Weil's German version of the letter.

(4) *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L.H. Butterfield, 4. vols., Cambridge Mass. 1962, III, 262.

(5) *The Spur of Fame. Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813*, ed. J.H. Schutz and D. Adair, San Marino, California 1966, 142. On Adams's lifelong admiration for and identification with Cicero see P. Shaw, *The Character of John Adams*, Chapel Hill 1976, 270-272.

(6) *Diary and Autobiography*, I, 65.

to reward the Reading even if one understands none of his meaning" (7). From this time on Adams, following in the path of a *novus homo* like himself, consciously patterned himself on the Roman lawyer-statesman as model for his own career. In a letter to John Winthrop in 1758 he wrote: "I find myself entering an unlimited Field. A Field in which Demosthenes, Cicero, and others of immortal Fame have exulted before me" (8). By 1760 he was envying Cicero's successes at a time in his career when Adams himself was still struggling for recognition. In these formative years, to sharpen his knowledge and skills, not only in politics, public speaking and literary style, but also in moral philosophy, Adams immersed himself in the Classics. Once he counseled himself: "Study Seneca, Cicero, and all the other good moral writers" (9).

In modeling himself on his Roman idol Adams sought guidance and inspiration both from extensive reading in Cicero's works and from the popular idealized biography of Cicero by the British clergyman Conyers Middleton. In 1805, when he was ex-president, he wrote from his home in Quincy, near Boston, to his friend Benjamin Rush: "Almost fifty years ago I read Middleton's *Life* of this man, with great pleasure and some advantage. . . Within a month past I have read Middleton's *Life* of him again, and with more pleasure because with more understanding than before. I seem to read the history of all ages and nations in every page, and especially the history of our own country for forty years past. Change the names and every anecdote will be applicable to us" (10). And, he might have added, "and to my own career".

As a young lawyer in Boston, Adams served as defense attorney for British soldiers charged with crimes in the Boston Massacre. At the trial Adams delivered a famous speech that was patterned on Ciceronian models. In his address he borrowed tactics and rhetorical style from Cicero's *Pro Milone*, *Pro Sexto Roscio*, and the *De Inventione* (11). Moreover, as his political thought began to evolve at that time he counseled "Let every sluice of knowledge be opened and set a-flowing" (12). To support the

(7) *Ibid.*, I, 63.

(8) *The Earliest Diary of John Adams*, ed. L.H. Butterfield, Cambridge Mass. 1966, 65.

(9) *Diary and Autobiography*, I, 73.

(10) *The Spur of Fame*, 44; Conyers Middleton, *The History of the Life of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, London 1741.

(11) *Earliest Diary*, 74-75. Cp. S. Botein, *Cicero as Role Model for Early American Lawyers: A Case Study in Classical 'Influence'*, "Classical Journal" 73, 1977-8, 316-318; J.M. Farrell, *John Adams and the Classical Paradigm*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison 1988, 50-93.

(12) *Dissertation on the Canon Law and Feudal Law* (1765), in *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols., Boston 1850-1856, III, 462.

principle of natural law as one of the foundations of American revolutionary rights in the face of enactments of the British government, Adams turned to the classical sources, especially Cicero. In the *De Legibus* he found passages in which Cicero expounded in ringing terms the doctrine that Adams now espoused, that "Law . . . is something eternal which rules the whole universe . . . in agreement with the primal and most ancient of all things, Nature" (13). It was also in Cicero's works that Adams found support for the theory of mixed government, which some Greeks (notably Polybius) and many Romans regarded as the secret of the power and strength of the long-lasting Roman Republic. In his political thinking Adams was devoted to the indispensability of such an interdependent balance among three divisions of government representing monarchical, aristocratic and democratic elements, with checks and balances to ensure such balance and long-range stability.

It was largely from Cicero's works that Adams formulated these views as applicable to America. In his sprawling work, *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, hastily cobbled together in 1787/8 while he was abroad as ambassador to England, Adams wrote of his Roman model: "As all the ages of the world have not produced a greater statesman and philosopher united than Cicero, his authority should have greater weight". And he applauded Cicero's advocacy of mixed government of the three elements as "founded on a reason that is unchangeable". In this connection he deplored the loss of Cicero's *De Republica*, which, he averred, "were worth all the rest of his works" (14). It is then, in light of this, curious that after considerable parts of Cicero's *De Republica* were recovered and published by Cardinal Angelo Mai in 1822, when Adams was eighty-five, he did not comment again on the importance of Cicero's work. It is also curious that Adams paid so little attention to Plutarch's life of Cicero. The *Lives* of Plutarch was, after all, the most popular work of classical literature in America, during that veritable *aetas Plutarchana*, when Plutarch was cherished as one of the foremost mediators of the *humanitas* ideal, which Cicero extolled and associated with classical antiquity and Adams associated with Cicero.

Many Americans in the middle of the eighteenth century read Plutarch's *Lives* for political enlightenment, historical models and moral instruction. And in Plutarch's "Hall of Fame" of ancient lawgivers and republican statesmen, Cicero ranked high in the admiration of Americans,

(13) Especially *De Legibus* 2, 4, 8 and 10; cp. Reinhold, *Classica Americana*, 96-97.

(14) *Works of John Adams*, IV, 284-285, 294-295, X, 50; *Spur of Fame*, II, 351.

together with Demosthenes and Cato Uticensis as "classical saints and martyrs" who gave their lives in defense of liberty. In Plutarch was to be found Cicero as self-made man, brilliant orator and lawyer, dedicated patriot battling to the death against tyranny in defense of the Roman Republic. It was especially for these aspects of Cicero's life that Adams was drawn to him. It was especially Cicero's patriotism and political wisdom that Adams extolled, writing: "Cicero had the most capacity and the most constant as well as the wisest and most persevering attachment to the republic" (15). In 1791 at a meeting of Washington's cabinet Alexander Hamilton declared that "the greatest man . . . that ever lived was Julius Caesar". Had Adams been present, he would surely have nominated Cicero.

Adams also found in Cicero the exemplar *par excellence* of civic virtue, the communal value construct that many since the Renaissance held to be indispensable for the foundation and stability of a republic, that is, systematic subordination of personal interests to the welfare and strength of the civic community. "No Virtue, no Commonwealth", wrote an early American (16). Adams expressed over and over his conviction of the indispensability of civic virtue, especially in the leaders. In 1781, when John Quincy Adams was a young student, Adams wrote his son: "In Company with Sallust, Cicero, Tacitus, and Livy you will learn Wisdom and Virtue. You will see them represented with all the Charms which Language and Imagination can exhibit, and Vice and Folly painted in all their deformity and Horror. You will ever remember that all the End of Study is to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen" (17). And in 1788, when his son was reading law, Adams urged on him the study of works on ethics, advising him thus: "Morals, my boy, Morals should be, as they are eternal in Nature, the everlasting object of your pursuit. Socrates and Plato, Cicero and Seneca . . . should be your continual Teachers". And again to his son, this time about oratory: "Let me advise you in another art, I mean oratory, not to content yourself with Blair and Sheridan . . . , but read Cicero and Quintilian. . . . Preserve your Latin and Greek like the apple of your eye" (18). Even in the area of letter writing Adams consistently modeled himself on the Ciceronian tradition. "Cicero's", he wrote, "are the

(15) *Spur of Fame*, I, 44-45.

(16) Reinhold, *Classica Americana*, 144-145; Shaw, 25-58.

(17) *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L.H. Butterfield and M. Friedlaender, 4 vols., Cambridge Mass. 1963-1973, IV, 117.

(18) John Quincy Adams, *Life in a New England Town, 1787, 1788. Diary of John Quincy Adam*, Boston 1903, 125-126, Note 3.

only ones of perfect simplicity, confidence, and familiarity" (19). Pliny's letters he considered too studied and artificial.

All his life, then, John Adams, in quest for fame, consistently modeled his persona on the paradigm of Cicero. About his classical model he wrote late in life: "I have read him almost seventy years, and seem to have him almost by heart" (20). He conceded faults in his hero: vanity, even pusillanimity. But he never failed to defend him. Once he wrote to John Quincy Adams: "What other People call Vanity in Cicero, I denominate Naivete". Cicero, he argued, was faced with Jealousy and Envy, and "In this distressing Situation he poured out the feelings of his tortured Heart with the utmost Naivete. . . . He blazoned forth his own Virtues, Talents and the great Services in the Face of the Senate and the whole Roman People. . . . It was Self Defense, Independence, Intrepidity" (21). He argued that Cicero and Demosthenes before him were exemplary patriots, who, though devoted to the freedom of their republics, met with unpopularity and violent death. Defending his own image after his flawed presidency, Adams wrote his friend Benjamin Rush: "I will not die wholly unlamented. Cicero was libeled, slandered, insulted by all parties. . . . He was persecuted and tormented by turns by all parties and all factions, and that for his most virtuous and glorious actions. . . . Pushed and injured and provoked as I am, I blush not to imitate the Roman". Like Cicero, Adams was conscious of his own persevering attachment to the republic. And it is in the works of Cicero, Adams wrote, that "We see the true character or the times and the passions of all the actors on the stage" (22), in the last decades of the Roman Republic.

To the very end of his long life Adams continued to find parallels for himself with Cicero, defending him (and by implication himself) against charges of vanity and self-serving. In retirement at Quincy, he not only frequently recalled his model Cicero, but in that setting of agrarian simplicity, he read Cicero's *De Senectute* every year. His constant companions were the books in his large library of over 2700 volumes, which contained most of Cicero's works as well as many in the fields of ancient history and political institutions (23). Yet in his famous exchange of letters with Thomas Jefferson, also in retirement, at Monticello, Adams rarely recalls Cicero. Jefferson did not share Adams's attachment to Cicero.

When his son John Quincy Adams was appointed Boylston Professor

(19) *Spur of Fame*, 263; Farrell, 128-170.

(20) *Works of John Adams*, X, 388.

(21) Shaw, 272.

(22) *Spur of Fame*, 44, 139.

(23) *Works of John Adams*, X, 388; Shaw, 270-271; *Catalogue of the John Adams Library in the Public Library of the City Of Boston*, Boston 1971.

of Rhetoric at Harvard in 1806, and was preparing to give his series of lectures on oratory (which were devoted mostly to the talents and thought of Demosthenes, Cicero, and Quintilian), John Adams, immured in the superiority of the ancients in this field, was skeptical. He wrote his friend Benjamin Rush: "Oratory in this age? Secrecy! Cunning! Silence! *voilà les grandes silences des temps modernes*. Washington! Franklin! Jefferson! Eternal silence! Impenetrable secrecy! deep cunning! These are the talents and virtues which are triumphant in these days. And in ancient days was it much otherwise? Demosthenes and Cicero, the two consummate masters, died martyrs to their excellence" (24).

While Jefferson could declare with conviction, "I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past", and that the Romans did not have good government, "from the rape of the Sabines to the ravages of the Caesars", John Adams to the very end of his long life held that antiquity in many aspects, not only his model Cicero, was the paradigm for coping with the problems of a modern republic. For, like many others of his time, he believed that human nature is unchangeable, and that human behavior is the same everywhere, that history repeats itself, and that ancient models are patterns worthy of imitation. Like those of his contemporary New Englander Fisher Ames, Adams's views and his adherence to the modalities of classical republicanism were antiquated and outmoded. As a result, Adams, like Fisher Ames, was burdened with a deep pessimism for the future of America as a result of his adherence to parallels in the ancient republics. Fisher Ames disparaged the value of innovative experiments that appeared to deviate from ancient precedents. Like Ames, Adams adhered to many aspects of the legacy of Rome and Greece, wedded to these as political formula. But they were incompatible with the rush into the future of the dynamic, pluralistic American culture (25).

Nevertheless, one of the legacies that John Adams left to his descendants was his admiration of Cicero. This tie to Cicero continued in the interests of both John Quincy Adams and Adams's grandson Charles Francis Adams. In the Adams family house in Quincy there were six bronze busts, their "Household Gods", which John Quincy Adams as president had previously kept in his study in the White House. They were representations of Homer, Socrates, Plato, Demosthenes, Vergil, and Cicero (26).

(24) *Spur of Fame*, 59.

(25) On Fisher Ames political thought in the context of John Adams's ideology see W.E.W. Bernhard, *Fisher Ames, Federalist and Statesman, 1758-1808*, Chapel Hill 1965; J.W. Malsberger, *The Political Thought of Fisher Ames*, "Journal of the Early Republic" 2, 1982, 1-20.

(26) *Diary of Charles Francis Adams*, ed. A.D. Donald and D. Donald, Cambridge Mass. 1964, IV, vii, 124.