"THE ADAMS CHRONICLES" AND THE AMERICAN HISTORY SURVEY

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When Professor Frank Freidel, in his April, 1976, Presidential Address before the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, stated that "the historical profession is in a state of crisis," no one in the audience was surprised. And no one attempted to argue that it was not. Surely all professional historians have heard more than they would like about unemployed Ph.D.'s, declining enrollments, layoffs and budget crunches. Yet Freidel added this thought to his gloomy assessment: "It is one of our most salutary American traditions in time of crisis to seek new opportunities." And if one looks hard enough it is possible to find a silver, or at least chrome-plated, lining around the dark cloud of Clio's tribulations.

In response to this situation teachers of American history in all types and sizes of institutions across the country have turned their attention to developing and improving new classroom techniques. New subject matters, lifelong-learning formats and interdisciplinary approaches combining history with literature, psychology, and a wide variety of other topics are all being experimented with. Specialized journals, including the American Historical Association's Newsletter and The History Teacher devote space in every issue to new and innovative methods designed to improve classroom effectiveness. Several new periodicals, including the Society for History Education's Network News Exchange; Teaching History: A Journal of Methods; and Film and History have appeared in the last five years. Even the national print-media, oriented toward the larger public, including Change, Time, Commentary, Saturday Review, and newspapers, have carried essays by serious scholars on new ideas about teaching. Both the A.H.A. and the O.A.H. have committees specifically charged with channeling information to those interested. Several sessions on teaching are usually integrated into the national conventions each year.

One of the most interesting developments in recent years has been the classroom use of film, and especially dramatized documentaries. In the past two years, stimulated no doubt by the Bicentennial, programs dealing with a wide range of subjects have been televised. Examinations of the history of certain groups, including women, blacks, immigrants, Indians, and others, have appeared. Another approach concentrates on individuals: for example, Thoreau, Whitman, Jonathan Edwards, the Rosenbergs, Lincoln, and Washington have been analyzed.

Unique among these, yet clearly related to them, was "The Adams Chronicles." As originally broadcast in the early winter of 1976, this series of thirteen hour-long episodes was not intended for use in the classroom. The producers sought to appeal to a national audience from diverse backgrounds, not a strictly academic one. Their main objective was to present a basic social history of the United States between 1750 and 1900, yet focus on the lives of four generations of the Adams family, showing their role in the major events of the period. It became the most popular series ever shown on public television.

An attempt was made, however, to use the series as a means of instruction in American history. Most of the stations affiliated with the Public Broadcasting System aired the programs and offered a course for viewers on a life-

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long-learning basis, for credit or non-credit. The basic design of this approach consisted of home-viewing of all thirteen segments supplemented with a package of three books. All readings were designed and written by persons working with the producers and published by Little, Brown. Enrollees were asked to watch an episode, read a chapter in the main textbook, read several short primary documents from the appropriate period, and then complete a section of a workbook that attempted to stitch all the information together through essay questions, identification problems, and programmed-learning techniques. Three or four meetings were scheduled with a "contact person," hopefully a local history teacher.

The most important positive aspect of this approach was that it attracted people who were not taking regular American history courses. Students enrolled in a course of this description at Michigan State University ranged in age from 24 to 55. Among them were secretaries, teachers, factory workers, housewives, and executives. These courses were given to over 45,000 Americans from all walks of life at 305 institutions from the State University of New York at Stony Brook to Bakersfield College. Most of the enrollees had full-time jobs that prohibited them from taking regularly-scheduled classes. The video portions of "The Adams Chronicles" did succeed in expanding interest in American history.

Yet the lifelong-learning structure has several limitations, as does the series itself. The televised programs are inadequate as an introduction to either the Adams family or American history between 1750 and 1900. They fail to come to grips in any meaningful way with the intricate intrafamily relationships of a group of highly intelligent, sensitive and complex individuals. Indications of the influence of one generation and their values upon another are shown, but no analysis is attempted. One wonders what Erik Erikson or Bruce Mazlish would do with the Adams family. The "Chronicles" presented a chance to invest some real resources (the series took five years to develop at a cost of over $5 million), to experiment with a wealth of accessible materials concerning the interrelationships of generations, ideas, personal values, and public actions. Instead, a trivialized, soap-opera approach is often evident.

More serious problems abound. The series as it stands is superficial at best. Broad developments of profound importance for all Americans are glossed over or ignored. Slavery, industrialization, the development of political systems, and the transportation revolution are just a few of the basic historical problems inadequately considered. The programs often seem to lack an historical perspective. We see John Adams grow old and die, and we see his descendants do the same. Yet the viewer is rarely given a feeling that historical change is taking place, that immense developments are proceeding. And of course the pace of the dialogue is too fast to allow accurate transcriptions of the essential factual information by students. Chronological jumps and a lack of identification of important characters, including even Thomas Jefferson, occasionally make clear comprehension difficult.

Written materials mirror the programs. While pleasing to the eye, they remain superficial in content. The producers organized a package of three books: a textbook divided into thirteen chapters and clearly intended as a history of both the Adams family and the nation; an anthology of primary documents concentrating on social history; and a programmed-learning integrated workbook. The lavish illustrations of the main text are accompanied by a journalistic narrative that fails to come to grips with either the family or the nation. Anecdotal in tone and even sensationalistic at times, it is in the tradition of a printed "As The World Turns." It is totally inadequate as an introduction to American history; no professional history teacher could be satisfied with it.

Perhaps the most serious problem with "The Adams Chronicles" is a product of the nature of the series itself. The perspective it presents on American life is that of a well-to-do, old-stock New England family. While the story of the Adams is certainly an important one, interesting and thought-provoking, it is simply too narrow for a room full of Americans who have grown up with the assumption that American history includes the contributions of immigrants, workers, blacks, Indians, and the other minorities that the series gives only limited acknowledgement to. Moreover, the major events, and in fact the development of American society as a whole between 1750 and 1900, are filtered through the eyes of specific people with clear-cut opinions and interpretations. Since everything is shown as the Adams family saw it, the viewer must be constantly reminded that one perspective is represented.

Despite all these limitations, "The Adams Chronicles" can and should be used in the classroom. Indeed, dramatized documentaries of all kinds, and especially this series, can add a fresh, stimulating viewpoint, one that opens new opportunities for learning. The "Chronicles" are a particularly rich visual experience; the sets, clothing, and acting are extremely well-done. They present American history in ways that no book or lecture can possibly equal. Historical imagination, an element vitally important in the process of understanding in the past, receives much encouragement. Students can identify with specific individuals and thus develop much sensitivity to the human side of history. Indeed, the material dovetails nicely with recent research by educational psychologists on the stages of cognitive development of students similar to those here at Ohio State. Beginning students respond well to humanistic material that is concrete and humanly personal. "The Adams Chronicles" function as a basis for more abstract ideas. The series attempts to reveal the connections between private lives and public events: the microcosm and macrocosm of the past. This is especially important, and the visual impact of the programs makes it easier for the instructor to highlight these connections.

"The Adams Chronicles" are most useful and effective in the classroom when used to emphasize, develop, and strengthen critical and analytical thought processes. Like most dramatized documentaries, they are poor teachers of facts and dates. They are not efficient substitutes for lectures or readings, and should not be used as such. Instead, they should be used in introductory courses as stimulants to discussion and analysis. They contain an enormous number of possibilities. For instance, after a lecture or reading on the historiography of a topic, students dissect an episode along the different lines of interpretation drawn by historians. Is contradictory evidence presented? After absorbing material on events leading up to the Revolution, the role of mobs in colonial society, imperial relations, and other topics, students see the Boston Massacre recreated from John Adams' point of view. Discussion or writing assignments are oriented toward approaching the same incident from different angles. Would the students defend the soldiers, as Adams did? What were his reasons for doing so? How did the event fit into the overall pattern of historical development? Similar questions could be asked about the Treaty of Paris, the creation of the Presidency, early party politics, the Quasi War, the War of 1812, the Treaty of Ghent, slavery, abolitionism, the protestant ethic, and a variety of additional topics. The series is flexible, and the instructor can develop new and innovative approaches to virtually any event, historical figure, or social movement between 1750 and 1900.

In a course taught during the Fall, 1976, quarter for the Department of History at Ohio State University, the televised programs were integrated into a standard American history survey oriented toward first-year students. Lectures, programs, readings, and discussions were all coordinated to form coherent topical units. All assigned readings were chosen by the instructor, and were similar to those used in standard courses. Perspectives far different from those of the Adams family were stressed through material on black Americans, immigrants, and other groups. Literature and the arts, industrialization, and

additional basic points were also incorporated. The few historical inaccuracies were easily set straight in class. The course met two evenings each week for two and one-half hours. A summary of the appropriate episode handed out before each session identified the important characters and filled in any necessary background information. The program was shown in class and discussed immediately after its conclusion. It was also available for reviewing by students in the Learning Resources Center.

While no survey was available to examine student reactions, some measure of the effectiveness of the course can be estimated. A standard departmental evaluation was given to each student who attended one of the last class meetings. Gauging by their evaluations of the course as a whole, the response to the integration of the various kinds of materials was strongly positive. While student response on evaluation forms was not specifically designed to analyze "The Adams Chronicles," insight into their reactions may be gained. Among the forty-seven enrolled, were twenty freshmen, seven sophomores, six juniors, six seniors, and eight special students. Thirty-six students filled out questionnaires. Three specific questions can be related directly to our interests. Twenty students regarded "the clarity and organization of the course as a whole" as "excellent," while sixteen viewed it as "satisfactory." No one selected the option of "unsatisfactory." Thirty-three respondents noted that the course encouraged them "to want to learn more about the subject." Only two voted in the negative, and one had "no opinion." And most happily, all thirty-six students were willing to "recommend this course to others.

Students were also asked to write additional comments. The largest group merely stated that they appreciated a new approach to American history. A representative comment was that "The Adams Chronicles" "helped to keep our attention." To another, they were "interesting and informative . . . different from the usual class."

The rich visual immediacy of the films also stimulated a strong response. "[They] made the period much more real to me, much like history being made today," read one comment. Said another student: "They made me closer to what it was really like. . . ." One student thought the series allowed him to "see history instead of read it or hear it in a lecture."

Students also liked the infusion of biographical material. It "provided a more personal contact with history." This often challenged their previously-held stereotypes. The programs "gave more information about the people, and not about just historical facts and dates," wrote one student. "One tends to forget there were people with lives and problems then too."

Most importantly, and certainly the most satisfying response was a strong indication that the students had learned something and even been stimulated to think about American history as a whole. One student felt that this course was "the first class in 17 years of going to school that I've enjoyed and have looked forward to each week. More importantly, I feel I've learned things which I'll retain after the final [examination]." A representative response in this category summarized it this way: "I've developed a new interest in American history as well as a new understanding of it and hope to be able to do some outside reading on it."

Dramatized documentaries can be a valuable addition to classes on American history at the first-year level, and "The Adams Chronicles" can certainly make valuable additions to a survey of American history. The flaws of the series can be corrected or at least diminished through careful planning and analysis of the programs and printed matter. More importantly, utilization of the effective settings and portrayals of the human side of history is definitely a positive experience for both students and instructors. Finally, my decision to continue use of the series is testimony to my conviction of its value.