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Ira Stoll, *Samuel Adams: A Life*. New York: Free Press, 2008. Pp. 338. ISBN 978-0-7432-9912-1.

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Ira Stoll portrays Samuel Adams, the great agitator of the revolutionary era, as something akin to “The Flying Dutchman.” According to nautical lore, a sailing ship, “The Flying Dutchman,” crisscrosses the oceans in an apparent effort by captain and crew to rejoin long-dead families and friends. The ship appears periodically to sailors, often in times of crisis, but then vanishes. The wanderers can never get home. Stoll’s Adams is just such a figure: an eighteenth-century Bostonian who longed for the seventeenth century. As the Reverend William Bentley wrote on Adams’ death, “Our New England Fathers was his theme, & he had their deportment, habits & customs. Often as I conversed with him, I saw always this part of his character.... He was a Puritan in his manners always” (258).

Implacable in defense of American liberties, Sam Adams saw himself as doing God’s work; he hoped that the revolutionary struggle would return Boston and New England to their Puritan glory. Boston welcomed his efforts, but stubbornly refused to revert to the age of John Winthrop. The other America, the America of Franklin and Jefferson, also made use of him, but was more guarded in its affections and even less interested in returning to the past. It imagined a future that reflected a very different historical experience, a future where mobility, diversity, capitalism, and secular virtue would be the norms. Not for them the closed corporate communities of the Massachusetts past; not for them the jeremiads and the days of fasting. Later writers have reacted to Adams and his vision in the same way. And while Stoll hopes that Samuel Adams will speak to us, his book highlights why he remains a somewhat spectral figure among the Founders. It will not bring him home to full membership in that august community.

Stoll takes us through the many roles Adams played in the Revolution (journalist, activist, delegate to Congress, and finally state politician); he does not, however, attempt anything like a full life and times. Instead, he focuses on the spiritual assumptions and aspirations that motivated Adams’ life and political career. “Faith helped him cope with the separation and isolation” that were the consequences of his career. Faith also shaped his ideology. Some of the Founders saw America’s founding through the lens of the Enlightenment; Adams viewed it from a religious perspective. “The religious references kept coming, in nearly every document touched by Adams’ quill” (86, 103). God was an advocate for the “common rights of mankind” (46) demanding freedom for his people. Thus, to Adams “the cause of liberty was inextricably joined with the question of salvation” (96). For him “the moral argument ... [was] the central point, more important than either the economic or the legal aspects of the struggle” (38). His views always connected him with the early history of New England, with Winthrop and the “virtues of our Ancestors” (61, 123). This prompted the fierce righteousness of his agitation and his conviction that “the end was in God’s hands”; national unity was the result of “the agency of the supreme Being” and Yorktown was a “divine blessing” (150, 221).

Adams shared an exclusive, even provincial, worldview with his judgmental Puritan ancestors. As Benjamin Labaree notes in his history of colonial Massachusetts, the “Puritans did not undergo the hazards of an ocean crossing to share their new Zion with those they considered heretics.” As one Puritan clergyman put it: non-Puritans “shall have free liberty to keep away from us, and such as will come to be gone as fast as they can, the sooner the better.”¹ This creed was in Adams’ bones. “Despite efforts to be tolerant, Adams had ‘contempt’ for the Catholic church and was deeply suspicious of the Church of England, Quakers, and non-believers” (134, 264, 92, 63-64). On his way to Congress, he was “shocked” by the lack of churches and schools in New York City (131). Like the preachers of old, he hurled jeremiads at sinners. The Revolution

1. Benjamin Labaree, *Colonial Massachusetts: A History* (Millwood NY: KTO Pr, 1979) 74.

brought changes he could not abide. He railed against the “torrent of vice,” the “levity, vanity, luxury and dissipation” that seemed to swamp Boston and America (184, 202). He insisted that governments foster piety, virtue, and education, and that they enforce “laws against blasphemy and cursing” (226–27). He demanded that theaters be closed. His ancestors loomed behind him. “Our Bradfords, Winslows, and Winthrops would have revolted at ... such scenes of dissipation and folly.” And then a gloomy reflection: “I once thought that ... [Boston] would be the Christian Sparta. But alas” (219). Predictably, Adams felt ambivalence toward colleagues like the wealthy merchant John Hancock and toward the nation’s crucial ally France. And it comes as no surprise that “Adams’ political opponents wearied of all the praying” (248) or that his national political career did not flower.

In concentrating on Adams’ spiritual aspirations, Stoll puts aside many other dimensions of his life and career; his protagonist becomes a man without a context. Just how did Sam Adams “fit” into his era? Stoll tells us little about the workings of Congress in wartime or the political culture of Massachusetts in the early years of the First Party system, when Adams was Governor, or, more strikingly, about revolutionary Boston, Adams’ home and political base. The economic and demographic situation is also largely ignored. Was Boston stagnant or flourishing? Were rich and poor antagonistic, as elsewhere in the colonies? How important was church-going? What about the structure of revolutionary politics in Boston? Stoll’s narrative leaves the impression that Sam Adams led that movement. However, ages ago, my mentor, Charles W. Akers, repeatedly told me that the revolution in Boston was more than Sam Adams and wrote in his biography of a key Boston minister of the revolutionary era that

The revolution ... [in] Boston was not a radical plot hatched and nursed to maturity by a master revolutionary. Rather it emerged as the unexpected and at first unwelcome climax of a course of action initiated by the socio-economic elite in response to British measures and supported by a large cross section of all citizens. In many respects, John Hancock had a more decisive leadership role than Samuel Adams, but group rather than individual action characterized the resistance of Boston’s Whigs Boston’s wealth was pitted against Britain.²

Adams was the agent—not the instigator. Akers answers one of the intriguing questions that Stoll overlooks: how did the impoverished and ascetic Samuel Adams support his family during his years in politics? Stoll adduces periodic “gifts” from Bostonians (110, 245), but Akers is more explicit: “Adams clearly could not have survived ... without the steady support of his elitist patrons” (118).

The book is much longer than it needs to be. The primary sources for Adams are limited; he appears to have destroyed many of his own letters. Thus, some things just cannot be known: how, for example, did Adams feel about women voting (210)? In a number of cases, circumstantial evidence must suffice: Stoll suggests that Adams was the “older and graver” person who took over from John Adams the task of spelling out church/state relations in the Massachusetts constitution of 1780 (208). Given the paucity of sources and Stoll’s limited interest in context, a much shorter work would have sufficed. Instead, we get the lyrics of a patriotic song we can “imagine” Adams sang (70–71, 143–45), lengthy excerpts from an election sermon given by Charles Turner in 1773 (106–8), an extended discussion of the Virginia Baptist Isaac Backus (141–42), a summary of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 (211–14), and page after page of excerpts from proclamations Adams issued as Governor. I, for one, would rather know more about his “mundane” duties as governor (1793–97), than about the texts of proclamations that were probably ignored by most citizens.

There is irony in this tale. Sam Adams’ project of restoring Puritanism was doomed to failure. The great patriot lived in the wrong century and one can never go back in time—except in the movies. His efforts contributed significantly to the success of our revolution. In Jefferson’s eyes he was a “zealous ... laborer” for the liberty and happiness of posterity;³ for his cousin John, he was the author of “a Mass of Principle, &

2. Charles W. Akers, *The Divine Politician: Samuel Cooper and the American Revolution in Boston* (Boston: Northeastern U Pr, 1982) 357.

3. Letter to Samuel Adams Wells (12 May 1819), in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (NY: Library of America, 1984) 1422.

Reasonings suitable ... for all good men.”⁴ However, the American Revolution was only partly his revolution. Instead of Winthrop’s vision of a religious “city upon a hill,” Americans produced a world-shaking revolution that coupled freedom to diversity with capitalism. Sam Adams would certainly have disliked the outcome—especially as seen in our own age. Perhaps some readers will share Stoll’s hope that Americans of faith will admire Adams’ fierce, single-minded religious devotion or embrace his vision of a return to a simpler, purer past. On the other hand, many will sense the futility of searching for perfection in any previous age, particularly the pre-modern age, and see in Samuel Adams a righteous man regrettably prone to isolate, marginalize, and exclude. In any case, Stoll’s book is a very unreliable guide to one of the great events in modern history, one lacking a sufficiently nuanced view of historical events. Better to read Akers for revolutionary Boston, Bailyn⁵ and Wood⁶ for revolutionary ideology, and Middlekauff⁷ for a grand narrative of the future-shaping events that unfolded in America after 1763. In these accounts, Adams, like The Flying Dutchman, appears for a time, then vanishes from the larger story.

4. Letter to Abigail Adams (28 Mar 1783), in L.H. Butterfield et al., ed., *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762–1784* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 1975) 344.

5. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 1992).

6. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (NY: Knopf, 1992).

7. Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789*, rev. ed. (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2005).