Review

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In 1992 the National Portrait Gallery in Washington mounted an exhibition titled The Five of Hearts. Its guest curator was Patricia O’Toole, the author of a scintillating book of the same title, which recounted the lives and friendship of Henry Adams and his wife, Marian (“Clover”); John Hay and his wife, Clara; and the quirky, peripatetic Clarence King. Both the book and the pictures at the exhibition, including portraits by John Singer Sargent, depicted the wide and varied connections of this quintet in the worlds of politics, diplomacy, art, and literature. Visitors to the exhibition entered into the middle of three rooms, where the subjects were the Five themselves, with a panoramic photograph on the wall just below the ceiling that showed Lafayette Square at the time when the Hays and the Adamses lived opposite the White House in adjoining houses (the site of the present Hay-Adams Hotel). The subject of the room to the left was their literary friends, who included Henry James, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and William Dean Howells. The subject of the room to the right was their political and artistic friends, who included Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, John La Farge, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens. The overall effect of the exhibition was to convey the sense that these Five knew everybody of their time who was worth knowing.

The person chiefly responsible for drawing their circle together and extending it outward in such fascinating directions was unquestionably John Hay. He possessed a winsome, winning personality that gave him a genius for friendship. Added to that gift was his uncanny knack for being in the right place at the right time throughout most of the six and a half decades of his life. Born in 1838 in Indiana and raised in Warsaw, Illinois, a town on the Mississippi River not far from Mark Twain’s Hannibal, Missouri, he had a childhood like Tom Sawyer’s and Huck Finn’s. Still, he was glad at the age of sixteen to leave that “barbaric frontier” for college at Brown University. Though an aspiring poet, he came back to read law in Springfield, not liking
either study or the town much. Hay's first big break came through his friendship there with someone only slightly older than himself, John G. Nicolay, who became Abraham Lincoln's secretary during the 1860 campaign and followed him to the White House, bringing Hay along as his assistant. The two young men spent the entire Civil War at Lincoln's side, right up to his deathbed, and they became surrogate sons to the president. This was the formative experience of Hay's life, and as John Taliaferro and other biographers argue, no matter what else he did or how high he rose, the shadow of Lincoln never left him.

In the four decades that remained to him, John Hay went many places, did many things, and rose high in the eyes of the world. His White House years had brought a friendship with Secretary of State William Seward, who appointed Hay to diplomatic posts in Paris and Madrid. Then he joined the staff of Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune and published his popular volume of verse, Pike County Ballads. In 1872 he married Clara Stone, the daughter of a Cleveland tycoon, whose enterprises Hay managed through the Great Strike of 1877. That experience later led him to write the anonymously published, widely read, and fiercely antiradical novel The Breadwinners. Hay's by now longstanding Republican ties and newfound Ohio connection secured his return to the State Department in 1879 as assistant secretary in the administration of Rutherford B. Hayes. All the while, he kept up both his literary and Lincolnian pursuits, working again for the Tribune, becoming friends with Henry James and Henry Adams, and laboring off and on for fifteen years with Nicolay to produce their ten-volume Abraham Lincoln: A History. It was in the early 1880s that the Five of Hearts came together, although none of them lived permanently on Lafayette Square. Clover Adams’s suicide and Clarence King’s wanderings and secret life as husband of a black woman pulled them apart further.

The last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed Hay’s final ascent to great places. His Washington residency brought friendships with other Republican notables and with two bright young men of the party, Roosevelt and Lodge, both of whom would loom large in Hay’s last decade. But his most important connection and deepest friendship with a politician since Lincoln came through Ohio, with Representative and later Governor William McKinley. Hay joined a group of wealthy backers who bailed McKinley out of financial distress and contributed heavily to his presidential campaign in 1896. Hay’s reward came with the brightest jewels in the nation’s diplomatic crown, first in London as ambassador to the Court of St. James, and then less than two years later as secretary of state. After McKinley’s
assassination in 1901, which hit Hay almost as hard as Lincoln’s had, Roosevelt refused to let him resign and kept him on, despite Hay’s failing health, until his death in 1905. Here, indeed, seems to have been one of fortune’s favorite sons.

Yet a recital of this steady rise in the world and enjoyment of wealth and acclaim misses the essential melancholy of John Hay. The year 1901 was his *annus horribilis*. In June his elder son, who was about to take the post his father had held three decades before as the president’s private secretary, died in a freak accident at a college reunion. “I have been extraordinarily happy all my life,” Hay wrote to Adams. “Good luck has pursued me like a shadow. Now it is gone—it seems to me forever. I expect tomorrow to hear bad news, something insufferable.” The bad news came, first, three months later, with the assassination of McKinley, the president to whom he felt by far the closest after Lincoln. Next, just two weeks afterward, came the death of his old friend and collaborator John Nicolay. Finally, at the end of the year, Clarence King died alone in Arizona, having hidden much of his life from his friends but having accepted financial assistance from Hay and Adams. Soldiering on for four more years, Hay enjoyed Roosevelt’s affectionate regard but not his respect, and he suffered the slings and arrows of Lodge’s carping and intrigues against his work. Curiously, Hay did not welcome death as surcease from his sufferings. In one of his last diary entries he wrote, “I cling instinctively to life and the things of life, as eagerly as I had not had any chance at happiness & gained nearly all the great prizes” (543).

For all his sorrows, Hay remained a charming figure who led a charmed life. The question that hangs over him and this biography is what to make of this paradox? Given where he went, what he did, and whom he knew, Hay could have taken as much satisfaction in his life as if he had set out to write a big novel about himself. Substantive accomplishments were another matter, however. Hay would have been the first to admit that his writings did not hold a candle to the output of the people he knew, not just such literary giants as Mark Twain and Henry James but also his closest friend and fellow member of the Five Henry Adams, who ranks among America’s greatest historians. Of all his literary productions, only his collaboration with Nicolay about Lincoln stands out as a true work of written art. Then there was his lengthy, repeated, but not quite continuous immersion in public life. His nearly seven years as secretary of state made him one of the longest-serving occupants of that office, and great events did transpire on his watch. Those included the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, the “Open Door” notes regarding China, the
circumstances leading to the acquisition of the route for the Panama Canal, and mediation of the Russo-Japanese War.

That stint at the helm of the State Department would appear to make him a notable figure in this nation’s history. But not everyone has endorsed such an estimate. Hay’s earliest and most important detractor was someone who should have known best, the second president under whom he served as secretary of state, Theodore Roosevelt. In a succession of well-known letters written after Hay’s death, Roosevelt disdained the secretary and his accomplishments. For example, in 1909, on the eve of his departure from the White House, he told Lodge that Hay “accomplished little . . . [and] his usefulness to me was almost entirely the usefulness of a fine figurehead.” Taliaferro dismisses this judgment as an expression of Roosevelt’s “characteristic egotism” (416). Further, he denigrates those words and others from Roosevelt as “spoken like a son jealous of his father’s shadow” and prompted by a compulsion to reframe their relationship “in the pages of his own self-inflated record” (546, 548). The poor taste and mean-spiritedness of the president’s remarks do seem to support that judgment, but on reflection it is hard to deny their kernel of truth. Under neither McKinley nor Roosevelt did Hay formulate or originate major policies. He was absent during the Spanish-American War, because he was not yet secretary of state, and during the Russo-Japanese War, when he was in his dying days. Otherwise, with one exception, he functioned mainly as a smooth and capable negotiator, which was to his credit but did not lay the basis for lasting acclaim.

The exception to Hay’s secondary, subordinate role occurred in 1899 and 1900, when he dispatched the Open Door notes, which have constituted his chief claim to fame. Taliaferro spends considerable time going over the diplomatic maneuvering before and after the issuance of those proclamations about keeping China equally open to trade—and, by implication, exploitation—and maintaining that nation’s territorial integrity against incursions and annexations. Those notes garnered a lot of public praise for Hay, together with outpourings of national self-congratulation. But, as George Kennan and others observed long ago, these statements were empty gestures that had little effect on events in East Asia and encouraged delusions about exerting international influence through big talk never meant to be backed up with action. To his credit, Hay himself recognized “the inherent weakness of our position” and said that newspapers crowing “about ‘our preeminent moral position giving us authority to dictate to the world’ is mere flapdoodle” (307). Try as he does to make something more of the impact of the Open Door,
Taliaferro concedes that “while not exactly off its hinges, [it] appeared rather battered and flimsy” (384).

It would be overly harsh to extend that assessment to Hay himself, but much of what he did comes off, for all the glamour and charm, as mostly insubstantial. This biography, on the other hand, is substantial. It is long and detailed, although usually well paced. It contains a lot about Hay’s personality and friendships. It can even be a bit titillating when it recounts Hay’s probably strictly verbal forays at romances with wives of men in his circle, including his brief fling with Lodge’s wife, Anna (“Nannie”), and his long-running pursuit, in competition with Adams, of the wife of another senator, Elizabeth (“Lizzie”) Cameron. The dalliance with Mrs. Cameron included Hay writing to her during cabinet meetings what a later generation would call “mash notes.” This biography suits the man in being pleasant to read, but in telling the tales of Hay and his friends it really does not go beyond earlier books, especially Patricia O’Toole’s The Five of Hearts. For readers of this journal, the first hundred pages, about Hay’s early life in Illinois and his time at Lincoln’s side, will hold the greatest interest.