Alumni

Second to None

Inspired by David McCullough's biography, George Baker '69CC, '73LAW revels in impersonating John Adams.

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|
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On a hot afternoon in July, John Adams, the second president of the United States, stepped out of a white Volvo sedan S60 and walked toward a cedar-shingled building

set back on a lush green lawn in Old Lyme, Connecticut. On Lyme Street, a passing car slowed, and the driver waved and called, “Mr. President!”

Adams waved back and continued along a stone path. Dressed in a black velvet jacket with gold trim, a black vest with gold embroidery, an ornamental white bib called a jabot, black knickers, white stockings, and black shoes with gold buckles, Adams — or rather, George Baker ’69CC, ’73LAW, a stout, rosy lawyer from New Canaan — strode into the building with the beaming importance of a patriot fresh off his horse.

Baker had entered not a tavern or meetinghouse, but the Lyme Art Association, a gallery that opened in 1921 in support of American impressionism. The airy rooms bristled with men and women in country club casuals, older Connecticut Yankees (and some younger ones) who chitchatted and jiggled ice cubes amid an exhibition of seascapes of blues and yellows and pinks and greens that reflected the shifting beauty of the Lower Connecticut River Valley. Baker’s appearance was part of a fundraiser for the association, which had been hit with a flood in March, and the enthusiasm that greeted him suggested a thirst in the public gullet for the reassuring Adams virtues: wisdom, courage, faith, honesty, forbearance, insight. Baker, a lively raconteur, Sunday pewster (Episcopal), and long-standing member of the Rotary Club of New Canaan, emitted a hale sociability from which his Adams promised to flow like the Madeira with which the founders toasted independence. Baker’s first rule of being Adams is to be himself.

At 6:30 p.m., President Adams was introduced to the assembly. The applause was fit for a man with a monument in the Capitol and a granite brow on Mount Rushmore, though Adams had neither of these. But in recent years, thanks to David McCullough’s 2001 biography and an HBO miniseries based on it, Adams, a single-term northern president wedged haplessly between the popular Virginians Washington and Jefferson, has finally been getting his due. Many in Baker’s audiences are fans of the McCullough book. Indeed, without McCullough, George Baker might well have spent this evening as George Baker — might, at that golden hour, have been standing outside his weekend house in nearby Essex, on the bank of a quiet cove off the Connecticut River, his trusty field glasses trained on a bald eagle as it dived out of a big, rolling, watercolor sky, fell past the green bands of the wooded hills beyond, splashed into the tea-colored waters, and came up with a flapping shad.

Instead, Baker was being John Adams, a man who, though absent from electoral politics for over 200 years, hadn't forgotten his supporters. "My wife Abigail predicted I would get the warm welcome I have just received," he told the citizens that had gathered round, "because Old Lyme, she said, has always been a stronghold for the Federalist Party. And indeed, Abigail was right, as usual."

He spoke of his humble beginnings in Braintree, Massachusetts, of the pride he took in his English heritage, and of his sorrow over the inexorable rift between the colonies and the crown. Then came a defining moment: On March 5, 1770, British soldiers fired on a mob of stone-throwing colonists, killing five. The soldiers were arrested for murder in what became known as the Boston Massacre.

"The next day," Adams said, "I was asked to represent them as a defense counsel."

It was at this point that the air-conditioning inside the Lyme Art Association began to fail. Tiny droplets bloomed on the speaker's broad forehead.

"I agreed to represent the soldiers, even though I knew that I would be hated by almost everyone in Boston, including my clients. I did this because I did not want these men to receive a kind of mob justice that would remind the world that Massachusetts had not progressed much since the days when we executed Quakers and stoned Salem witches. And more important, I had to prove to myself that we lived by the rule of law."

Adams defended the British soldiers on grounds of self-defense, with a strong belief that "it is of more importance to the community that innocence should be protected than it is that guilt should be punished." All but two of the eight soldiers were found not guilty.

"Though I assumed that my career as a lawyer was over in Boston, I soon realized that I had earned the respect of people for taking on this unpopular case. And it didn't hurt to have my cousin Sam Adams, the leader of the Sons of Liberty, to make sure I wasn't tarred and feathered."

For years, as far back as his Columbia days, when he took U.S. History with James Shenton ("Each class was like a great performance"), George Baker had dreamed of doing a one-man show. Throughout his career as a probate attorney he'd acted in community theater productions, especially musical theater (he sings and plays

piano), a pursuit that harmonized nicely with his day job (“I’m never as good in court as when I’m in a play”). But when a show reached the end of its run, Baker would feel a major letdown. It was *over*.

He wondered how he might free himself from such arbitrary constraints.

In 2007, Baker, nearing 60, read McCullough’s *John Adams*. The book enlivened Adams for him as an “attractive, independent person. He’s not larger than life. You can really understand what he’s doing.” Baker then saw Hal Holbrook’s one-man show, *Mark Twain Tonight!*, which knocked his socks off. “Then my wife said, ‘You know, you kind of resemble John Adams.’” Baker’s wife, Susan, hails from Braintree, and so would seem exceptionally qualified to make this statement. Baker concurred. For the next nine months, he read everything on Adams he could find — biographies, essays, letters. He visited the nativity site in Quincy. Then he got to work on a monologue, which, on Susan’s advice, he leavened with dashes of comedy, such as one might hear at the Gridiron Club. Humor, for Baker, is the yeast that gives rise to persuasion, as he later explained. “If you’re a trial lawyer, you try to lift the mood, lighten things up. If you can get people laughing,” he said, laughing, “they believe they agree with you!” His one cavil with the HBO series was that Paul Giamatti’s Adams was too downcast. “During the Boston Massacre trial scene, there was not one joke,” Baker lamented. “A good trial lawyer would know how to use humor, and Adams was an excellent trial lawyer.”

As the audience in Old Lyme fanned itself with paper plates, John Adams, sustained by a staunch New England constitution, turned the discussion to presidential campaigns. He noted that slash-and-burn tactics, seen today as a sign of a debased politics, were no less common during the election season of 1800, when, as an incumbent, he faced his adversary Thomas Jefferson.

“One of my critics in that campaign stated that John Adams was mentally deranged, subject to uncontrollable emotional fits, and at times absolutely mad. This critic was Alexander Hamilton. You’ve heard of him? The first treasury secretary and a member of my own Federalist Party. Four years after he wrote this about me, Hamilton was killed in a duel with Vice President Aaron Burr, who I understand was not the last vice president to shoot someone.”

The crowd whooped with laughter, almost guiltily. Presidential cheek, especially from a man in a jabot, can feel pleasingly indecent.

“And there was a huge funeral for him in New York City,” Adams went on. “When asked if I attended Hamilton’s funeral, I said, ‘No, but I approved of it.’” He paused for more laughs. Then he said, with some acerbity, “And there’s a university in New York City that regards Hamilton as one of its most distinguished alumni.” This caused some tut-tutting among the ladies, but not everyone got the reference.

When the performance ended, Baker, glistening, jacket and jabot still firmly in place, shook hands with his smiling compatriots. Outside, the evening sun was melting over the Lieutenant River, forging such apricots and corals in the sky as must have inspired the landscapes of the local American impressionist Childe Hassam a century ago.

Baker slung his jacket over his arm and walked to his Volvo, with no pain in his heart for any final curtain. He had portrayed Adams at libraries, historical societies, schools, Rotary clubs, and senior centers all over New England, and as far away as Rancho Mirage, California. In a few weeks he’d do it at a reunion in Boston for the 95th Infantry Division. It’s a show that never ends, and doesn’t have to, anytime soon. Adams lived to be 90 years old, and that affords Baker, who is 62, some luxuries.

“The fatter and balder I get, the more in character,” he said merrily as he got into the car. “I can’t lose in this role.”

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