

## 57 QUOTATIONS



Henry Adams

(1838-1918)

Henry Adams, grandson of President John Quincy Adams and great grandson of President John Adams, is important in literary history for his influential autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams* (1919), ranked as one of the major books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a philosophical historian at Harvard he summarized western history in a symbolic contrast between the modern Dynamo and the medieval Virgin, affirming the spiritual order of the Middle Ages. Adams became a pessimistic anarchist and a Naturalist. His application of the second law of thermodynamics to history influenced the most prominent Postmodernist novelist Thomas Pynchon, who developed the theme of entropy. His wife committed suicide.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, education, belief, experience, intelligence, objectivity, history, free speech, philosophy, friendship, friends in power, women, Victorianism, love, politics, society, morality, law, human nature, Naturalism, Realism, science, death:

### YOUTH

Young men have a passion for regarding their elders as senile.

### EDUCATION

A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.

The chief wonder of education is that it does not ruin everybody in it, teachers and taught.

Nothing in education is so astonishing as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the form of inert facts.

A professor can never better distinguish himself than by encouraging a clever pupil, for the true discoverers are among them, as comets amongst the stars.

Of all studies, the one he would rather have avoided was that of his own mind. He knew no tragedy so heartrending as introspection.

#### BELIEF

A man must now swallow more belief than he can digest.

I am an anarchist in politics and an impressionist in art as well as a symbolist in literature. Not that I understand what these terms mean, but I take them to be all merely synonyms of pessimist.

He too serves a purpose who only stands and cheers.

#### EXPERIENCE

All experience is an arch to build upon.

#### INTELLIGENCE

They know enough who know how to learn.

There is no such thing as an underestimate of average intelligence.

It is impossible to underrate human intelligence—beginning with one's own.

No man likes to have his intelligence or good faith questioned, especially if he has doubts about himself.

#### OBJECTIVITY

No historian can take part with—or against—the forces he has to study. To him even the extinction of the human race should merely be grouped with other vital statistics.

#### HISTORY

I have written too much history to have faith in it; and if anyone thinks I'm wrong, I am inclined to agree with him.

#### FREE SPEECH

I would rather starve and keep the privilege of speaking the truth as I see it, than hold all the offices that capital has to give from the presidency down.

#### PHILOSOPHY

[Philosophy] consists chiefly in suggesting unintelligible answers to insoluble problems.

Unity is vision; it must have been part of the process of learning to see.

#### FRIENDSHIP

Friends are born, not made.

Intimates are predestined.

One friend in a lifetime is much.

Every man should have a fair sized cemetery in which to bury the faults of his friend.

## FRIENDS IN POWER

In Paris and London he had seen nothing to make a return to life worthwhile; in Washington he saw plenty of reasons for staying dead.

Those who seek education in the paths of duty are always deceived by the illusion that power in the hands of friends is an advantage to them.

A friend in power is a friend lost.

At best, the renewal of broken relations is a nervous matter.

## WOMEN

The proper study of mankind is woman.

The study of history is useful to the historian by teaching him his ignorance of women.

The woman who is known only through a man is known wrong.

## VICTORIANISM

Women have, commonly, a very positive moral sense; that which they will, is right; that which they reject, is wrong; and their will, in most cases, ends by settling the moral.

A boy's will is his life, and he dies when it is broken, as the colt dies in the harness, taking a new nature in becoming tame.

## LOVE

Love is a steady physical pain, an ache about the heart, never leaving one, by night or by day; a long strain on one's nerves like toothache or rheumatism, not intolerable at any one instant, but exhausting by its steady drain on the strength.

## POLITICS

Practical politics consists in ignoring facts.

Modern politics is, at bottom, a struggle not of men but of forces.

Knowledge of human nature is the beginning and end of political education.

Politics, whatever its professions, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds.

No one means all he says, and yet very few say all they mean, for words are slippery and thought is viscous.

He never labored so hard to learn a language as he did to hold his tongue.

What you do speaks so loudly I can't hear what you are saying.

## SOCIETY

The habit of looking at life as a social relation—an affair of society—did no good...so far as it helped to make anything, it helped only to make the college standard permanent through life.

## MORALITY

Morality is a private and costly luxury.

## LAW

Law is merely the expression of the will of the strongest for the time being, and therefore laws have no fixity, but shift from generation to generation.

## HUMAN NATURE

In practice, such trifles as contradiction in principle are easily set aside; the faculty of ignoring them makes the practical man.

The effect of power and publicity on all men is the aggravation of self, a sort of tumor that ends by killing the victim's sympathies.

Everyone carries his own inch-rule of taste, and amuses himself by applying it, triumphantly, wherever he travels.

## NATURALISM

Man is an imperceptible atom always trying to become one with God.

Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man.

Chaos often breeds life when order breeds habit.

Mont Blanc for a moment looked to him what it was—a chaos of anarchic and purposeless forces—and he needed days of repose to see it clothe itself again with the illusions of the senses, the white purity of its snows, the splendor of its light, and the infinity of its heavenly peace.

Nature's gesture—her attitude toward life—took form then as a phantasm, a nightmare, all insanity of force. For the first time, the stage scenery of the senses collapsed; the human mind felt itself stripped naked, vibrating in a void of shapeless energies, with resistant mass, colliding, crushing, wasting, and destroying what these same energies had created and labored from eternity to perfect.

Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.

## REALISM

The imagination must be given not wings but weights.

[General U. S. Grant] seriously remarked to a particularly bright young woman that Venice would be a fine city if it were drained.

I think that Lee should have been hanged.... Good men do the most harm.

## SCIENCE

Man has mounted science, and is now run away with. I firmly believe that before many centuries more, science will be the master of men. The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength to control. Someday science may have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race may commit suicide, by blowing up the world.

## DEATH

Only on the edge of the grave can man conclude anything.

