
FREDERICK B. ADAMS JR.

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ARCHIVES OF THE PIERPONT MORGAN LIBRARY, NEW YORK

“**T**O RUSSIA WITH FROST,” an unlikely name for a real adventure, came in 1962, at a high point in Fred Adams’s life. He had reached the climax of his long and successful career as director of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. James Bond’s similarly named exploit had been published in 1957. The Bay of Pigs and President Kennedy’s hair-raising game of bluff were in the womb of time. Russia was *terra incognita*, frozen in the depths of the cold war. Only Frost was warm, Robert Frost: invited to visit Russia and see Khrushchev by the engaging Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, he was coming round to the idea of what was to be a real adventure for an octogenarian poet. He would only go if Adams came too, and Adams had agreed, privately believing it would never happen. But it did, and afterwards Adams gave a talk about it that he later expanded into a book; Frost did not live to see it, but it has become a classic, a perfect vignette of life on both sides of the Iron Curtain forty years ago.

Adams was born in 1910, the son of Frederick B. Adams and Ellen Walters Delano, and great-nephew of Henry Walters, founder of the Walters Art Museum at Baltimore. Through his mother, he was first cousin once removed of President Roosevelt, whom he got to know well from his childhood. He was educated at St. Paul’s School and Yale University, from which he graduated Phi Beta Kappa and *summa cum laude* in 1932, moving to England to spend a year at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. He was already an inveterate book-collector, beginning with the works of Thomas Hardy in his first year at Yale; he now expanded his collection, adding Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Willa Cather, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Robert Frost. Collecting contemporary authors was not as common then as now, and collectors themselves had scarcity value. Or it may have been Adams’s always winning way. At all events, he got to know or at least meet most of his heroes, and with Frost inaugurated a lifelong friendship.

He also wanted to get married, and marriage meant finding a job, a harder task than collecting books by modern authors. So he returned to America to take a job with his father’s firm, the Air Reduction Company, a menacingly named business that in fact manufactured gases for welding plants. His first task was to examine how his cousin’s New Deal might affect the company, which led him to read extensively on labour relations and socialism in and beyond the U.S.A. From this he embarked on an even more avant-garde collection of the works of Karl Marx and radical and socialist writing, especially in America. None of this was easy to find, but he got the first edition of *Das Kapital* (1867) in its original wrappers and two copies of the rarer *Manifest* (1848), as well as the first American printing of Marx and other forgotten and still rarer documents of the labour movement. He made an excellent

book out of this, *Radical Literature in America* (1939), and was delighted when his Marx collection finally came to rest in the Karl Marx House at Trier.

He made another collection, too, of President Roosevelt's speeches and ephemera: "It was a sort of joke between us that I was his bibliographer," he said. As it happened, he was in the White House on the night of Pearl Harbor, and retained first-hand and unforgettable memories of the president in action then. He had a gift for being in the right place at the right time, as he was in 1948 when the formidable Belle da Costa Greene, first director of the Pierpont Morgan Library, retired. She had seen, indeed made, it grow from the private library of John Pierpont Morgan to a great collection of the finest books and manuscripts, unique as such in the world. Although the public were admitted, it retained something of the ivory tower quality of a millionaire's library.

Without abating its quality, Adams made it more accessible. He expanded its collections, notably of fine bookbindings on which he was himself an authority, but also literary and historical manuscripts and equally significant printed texts. It was a period of rapid growth in libraries all over the U.S.A., and the competition to keep up, particularly for a library of the Morgan's quality, was considerable. But Adams achieved it. Still more important, he made the Morgan a friendly place, welcoming its public, whether they were scholars come to use its collections or ordinary people looking at the exhibitions that became an important part of its work.

He retired after twenty enjoyable but exacting years in 1969, the same year that he married Marie-Louise Croy and began a transatlantic second career, gradually spending more time in France than America. He had always had other commitments besides the Morgan, as president of the New-York Historical Society and the Board of Governors of Yale University Press, and as a trustee of Yale University. He gradually retreated from these responsibilities, but in 1974 he became president of the Association Internationale de Bibliophilie, based in Paris. As such he took an important part in organising its annual congresses, at which he presided with polyglot distinction. He retired in 1983, becoming honorary president, a well-deserved distinction, but until recently continued to attend meetings of the Association and of the Roxburghe Club (to which he was elected in 1966), as well as bibliophilic occasions on both sides of the Atlantic, always enlivened by his presence.

Back in 1962, he was back from Russia. There had been ups and downs, meetings with Yevtushenko and Akhmatova, missed planes and boredom, readings to enthusiastic audiences, then, on the eve of

the meeting with Khrushchev, illness—would the copy of Frost’s poems, inscribed “To Premier Khrushchev from his rival in friendship, Robert Frost,” go undelivered? But Khrushchev came to him, and they had a suitably rumbustious conversation, which ended with Khrushchev telling Frost he had “the soul of a poet.” “Did you have a good time, Mr. Frost?” asked the reporter at the airport. “I had a great time,” he answered, “the time of my life.” So it was for Adams, too, but any time with him was a great time.

Elected 1965

NICOLAS BARKER

Editor

The Book Collector

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