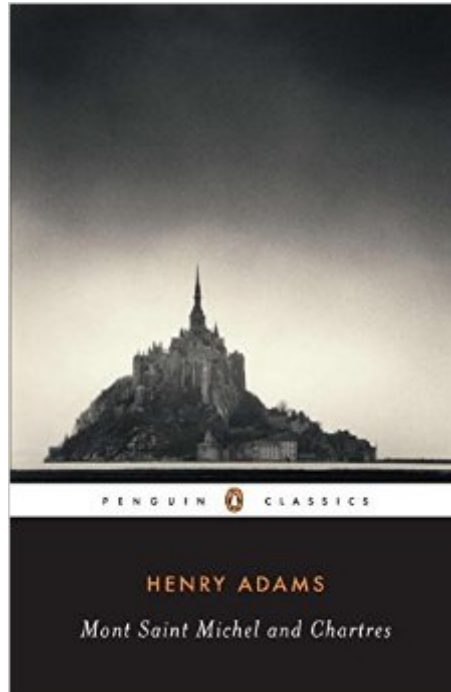


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Mont-Saint-Michel And Chartres (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Mont Saint Michel and Chartres is a record not of a literal journey but of a meditative journey across time and space into the medieval imagination. Using the architecture, sculpture, and stained glass of the two locales as a starting point, Adams breathes life into what others might see merely as monuments of a past civilization. With daring and inventive conceits, Adams looks at the ordinary people, places, and events in the context of the social conventions and systems of thought and belief of the thirteenth century turning the study of history into a kind of theater. As Raymond Carney discusses in his introduction, Adams' freedom from the European traditions of study lends an exuberance "and puckish wit" to his writings. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

A reading of Richard Brookhiser's recent (and highly recommended) *America's First Dynasty* sent me back to *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, a book I hadn't read in thirty years. I'm glad I returned to it, because a few years have, I trust, put me in a better position to appreciate what's going on in the book. On one level, the most obvious one, Adam's book is a sometimes idiosyncratic history of

Medieval art, literature, and religion that takes as its center of gravity the great Gothic cathedrals of the period--structures that Adams thinks sum up what the middle ages are all about. To read the book on this level alone is fine. It provides intriguing insights into, for example, courtly love and the cult of Mary. But I now believe that, at a deeper level, the book is disguised autobiography on the one hand and a backhanded history of Adams's own time on the other. An at times overwhelming sense of nostalgia permeates the book. In reading Adams on the 11th century mystics, the debates of the schoolmen, the chansons of the troubadours, and the unified worldview of the middle ages, one can almost hear him sigh with longing to return to a world which, he thinks, was whole, unfractured, and pure--a world, as the medievals themselves would've said, which reflects "integritas." This reveals a great deal about the restless, unquiet nature of Henry Adams the man. But it also reveals the restless, unquiet nature of the modern era which spawned and molded him: the gilded age, the fast-paced first wave of capitalism, secularism, and consumerism, which has no center of gravity, no art, no tradition.

Henry Adams' MONT SAINT MICHEL AND CHARTRES (MSMC) is simply a great book. Adams' lucid writing style and his insights are impressive, and this book should be read by every supposedly "educated" individual. Adams deals with complex topics such as Gothic Architecture, Medieval poetry and mysticism, and Scholastic Philosophy with clarity and ease. The early sections of MSMC compare the church of Mont Saint Michel with the Catholic view of St. Michel who was militant and was the perfect example of the Medieval hero defending the Catholic Church against all enemies. The comparison with this church with that of Chartres which was the exemplar of God's mercy via St. Mary is insightful and fascinating reading. Such embellishment of St. Mary or Notre Dame (Our Lady) is further investigated in Adams book by Adams' careful treatment of Medieval Poetry. Adams's translations of Medieval French and Latin are good and give those who are not familiar with these languages a better understanding of both the poetry and the Medieval devotion to St. Mary. Much of this poetry was mystical, and Adams demonstrates the attempt of St. Francis and the Franciscans to use such mystical thought in their missionary efforts to help the very poor. St. Francis' mysticism is revealed in Adams' translation of St. Francis' poem titled BROTHER SUN AND SISTER MOON. Henry Adams then compares and contrasts Medieval mysticism, which bordered on Pantheism, with Scholastic Philosophy. Adams gives the reader an insight to scholastic debate when he summarizes the debate between William of Champeaux and Peter Abelard (1079-1142). Here Adams demonstrates his understanding of how students and masters argued and learned.

Privately printed in 1904 (and revised seven years later), "Mont Saint Michel and Chartres" was never meant for the general public. It's the intellectual's ultimate "what I did on my summer vacation" essay, written for friends as a gift to accompany their excursions through France. The first half is a highly personal travel book and an idiosyncratic guide to art and architecture of medieval French cathedrals (particularly of Chartres); the last six chapters offer a succinct excursion through the spiritual mindset of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. If you've never been to Mont Saint Michel or to Chartres, the first ten chapters can be hard going; it's like reading a 250-page description of a painting you've never seen. Even if you have been to both locations, it's unlikely you'll remember the details Adams expected his readers to have in front of them. Fortunately, his prose is not dry (and is at times characteristically witty). Adams is able to render vividly the fleches, the portals, the arches, the statues, and the stained glass panels, and he provides the tourist with a thorough understanding of the achievement represented by medieval religious art. He also supplies as background a wealth of related literary and historical references. The tenth chapter (and the last of Adams's official "tour") focuses less on the cathedral of Chartres itself and more on the cult of the Virgin that it represents. It serves as a segue to the second half of the book, which will be far more accessible to general readers.

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