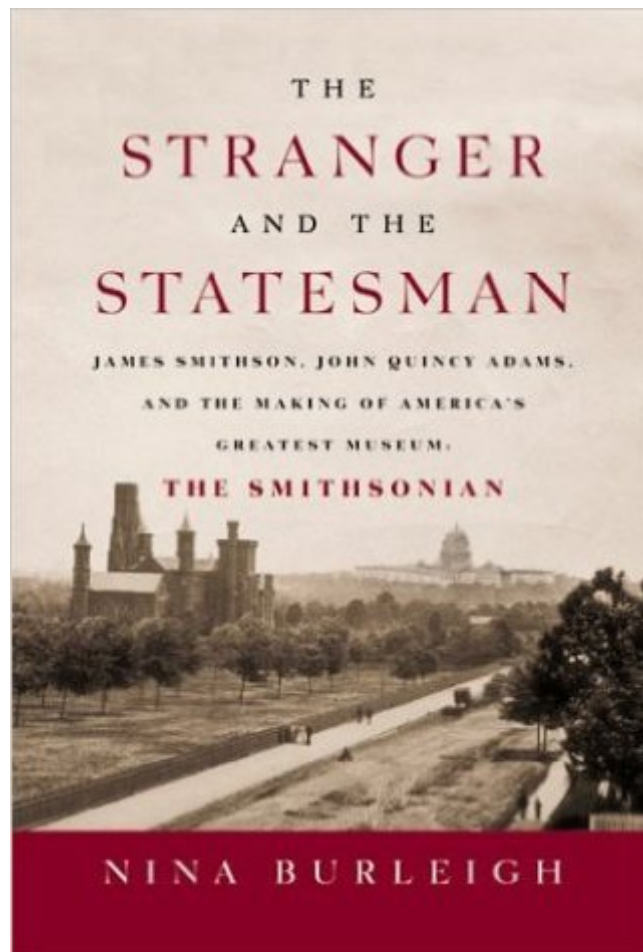


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The Stranger And The Statesman: James Smithson, John Quincy Adams, And The Making Of America's Greatest Museum: The Smithsonian



Synopsis

In her illuminating and dramatic biography *The Stranger and the Statesman*, Nina Burleigh reveals a little-known slice of social and intellectual history in the life and times of the man responsible for the creation of the United States' principal cultural institution, the Smithsonian. It was one of the nineteenth century's greatest philanthropic gifts -- and one of its most puzzling mysteries. In 1829, a wealthy English naturalist named James Smithson left his library, mineral collection, and entire fortune to the "United States of America, to found ... an establishment for the increase & diffusion of Knowledge among men" -- even though he had never visited the United States or known any Americans. In this fascinating book, Burleigh pieces together the reclusive benefactor's life, beginning with his origins in the splendidly dissipated eighteenth-century aristocracy as the Paris-born bastard son of the first Duke of Northumberland and a wild adventuress who preserved for her son a fortune through gall and determination. The book follows Smithson through his university years and his passionate study of minerals across the European continent during the chaos of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Detailed are his imprisonment -- simply for being an Englishman in the wrong place, his experiences in the gambling dens of France, and his lonely and painstaking scientific pursuits. After Smithson's death, nineteenth-century American politicians were given the task of securing his half-million dollars -- the equivalent today of fifty million -- and then trying to determine how to increase and diffuse knowledge from the muddy, brawling new city of Washington. Burleigh discloses how Smithson's bequest was nearly lost due to fierce battles among many clashing Americans -- Southern slavers, state's rights advocates, nation-builders, corrupt frontiersmen, and Anglophobes who argued over whether a gift from an Englishman should even be accepted. She also reveals the efforts of the unsung heroes, mainly former president John Quincy Adams, whose tireless efforts finally saw Smithson's curious notion realized in 1846, with a castle housing the United States' first and greatest cultural and scientific establishment.

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Customer Reviews

People want to like this book. I definitely had it on a "to do" list for quite a while. Could there be anything more interesting than John Quincy Adams, James Smithson and the founding of America's greatest scientific institution, the Smithsonian? James Smithson was a reclusive figure and to be fair little was known about him so the author did not have much to go on. But why fill this work with innocuous filler? The author should have concentrated this work on the embarrassing shenanigans surrounding Smithson's bequest once the money reached America and go on from there. There is plenty to fill a 267 page book once his money reached these shores. Instead the author focuses, as another reviewer has succinctly stated it, on the mating habits of Victorian England. Unfortunately, the story of who begat whom out of wedlock three generations removed from the Smithsonian's founding is simply not relevant. Smithson is not born until page 53, 20% of the way through the book, and sadly this work goes downhill from there. Over 200 pages, 75% of the book, pass before Smithson's bequest reaches American shores and the Smithsonian's story can begin. When the reader finally meets John Quincy Adams the author pursues yet another series of events completely unrelated to the museum's founding. As the author explains in considerable detail, John Quincy Adams spent 15 or so years defeating the Congressional Gag Rule. This law forbid even the discussion of slavery and suspended a fundamental American liberty, the right to petition Congress. But it had nothing to do with John Quincy Adam's fight to protect James Smithson's bequest and the ultimate establishment of the Smithsonian. So why, one wonders, is time devoted to it?

I found this book to be a bit of a slow-starter. Smithson is pretty well absent for the first 50 pages, as the author goes into quite a bit of detail concerning the mating habits and inheritance rights of the British aristocracy. The information on inheritance is relevant, as it ties into the tale of Smithson's bequest. The amorous adventures, though certainly fun to read about, don't seem essential to the story. But have no fear - eventually Ms. Burleigh settles down to business and we learn about James Smithson, assorted oddball scientists, John Quincy Adams, 19th century Washington D.C.,

etc. We also learn the unsurprising fact that they had some sleazy politicians back then (Smithson's gift of \$500,000, equal today, perhaps, to \$50 million, "disappeared" and was only replaced by the Treasury after John Quincy Adams screamed bloody-murder), and we also learn the depressing fact that Congressmen were just as provincial, and as ignorant concerning scientific matters, 160 years ago as they are today. The mind boggles that many politicians didn't want to take the money for fear the establishment of the Smithsonian would increase the power of the Federal government. Some Anglophobes, still smarting from two wars with the British, didn't want to taint American tastebuds with the financial crumbs (admittedly, a healthy portion of crumbs) tossed our way by an Englishman. Just as interesting was the fact that even those who were glad to get the money didn't know what to do with it. After all, Smithson wanted the money to be used to "increase and diffuse Knowledge among men." How do you go about doing that....exactly? It was not inevitable that the Smithsonian would become highly involved with research and expeditions...

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