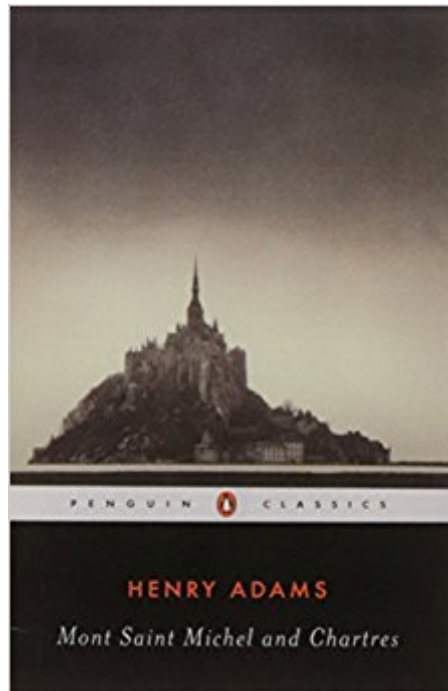




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Mont-Saint-Michel And Chartres (Penguin Classics)



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

Born in 1838 into one of the oldest and most distinguished families in Boston, a family which had produced two American presidents, Henry Adams had the opportunity to pursue a wide-ranging variety of intellectual interests during the course of his life. Functioning both in the world of practical men and affairs (as a journalist and an assistant to his father, who was an American diplomat in

Washington and London), and in the world of ideas (as a prolific writer, the editor of the prestigious North American Review, and a professor of medieval, European, and American history at Harvard), Adams was one of the few men of his era who attempted to understand art, thought, culture, and history as one complex force field of interacting energies. His two masterworks in this dazzling effort are *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* and *The Education of Henry Adams*, published one after the other in 1904 and 1907. Taken together they may be read as Adams' spiritual autobiography—two monumental volumes in which he attempts to bring together into a vast synthesis all of his knowledge of politics, economics, psychology, science, philosophy, art, and literature in order to attempt to understand the individual's place in history and society. They constitute one of the greatest historical and philosophical meditations on the human condition in all of literature. Raymond Carney is well known for his writing on the relationships between American art, thought, and culture. He has been a Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities, served as an artistic consultant to the Whitney Museum of American Art, and written extensively on American and British poetry, fiction, drama, dance, painting, and film. His two most recent books are *American Dreaming* (University of California Press) and *Figures of Desire* (Cambridge University Press). He teaches at Middlebury College in Vermont.

Henry Adams toured French medieval gothic architecture, and apparently took a lot of notes, focusing on the Grande Cathedrals of Mont-Saint-Michel (built in the 1100s) and Chartres (built in the late 1100s to 1200s). The notes became the book. If that were the extent of the book, however, it could be summed with a few nice photos and captions. But there's also 360 pages of mystery and fascination surrounding the architecture. Most of the book is Adams' observations on the culture surrounding the buildings, more so than on the buildings themselves. Adams takes us on a gothic travelogue through the intrigues of medieval royal families of France, clashes in the cloisters of church hierarchy, power struggles in church and court, dark-age philosophers and poets telling stories captured in sparkling gothic stained-glass perfection. Reminiscent of Melville's long chapters on the anatomy of the whale, there are long detailed descriptions of the elements of the cathedral. Wading through that pays off. The stories told literally and figuratively in the massive stained glass paintings, in themselves and in their relation to other architectural features, represent the heart and soul of people's faith, fears, allegiances, loves, hates, and pivotal events of the time. So many fascinating stories and events converge in the 1100s and 1200s: the Golden Legend; the founding of Orders; the Chanson de Roland as metaphor for Mont-Saint-Michel, or vice versa; the intellectual romance of Abelard and

Henry Adams, Christian of Troyes retelling the age-old story of Tristan and Iseult (originating from a pre-Islamic Persian story); the famous invention and flowering of Courtly Love and how it is epitomized in the chanted Aucassin et Nicolette; the real-life romances of Thibaut and Blanche of Castille; the backdrop of the Crusades; the touching familial closeness of Richard and Mary of Champagne; the Magna Carta and the Zodiac Window; the scholastic vs. mystic battles of theology between Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux; inquiries into universals of geometry and syllogisms, and unity versus multiplicity; the controversy of the two Popes and its effects on people's careers. The book closes out the 1200s with Thomas Aquinas' rise from dumb ox to Summa Theologica building his Church Intellectual to complement the Church Architectural—a Gothic Cathedral to the Trinity (329). As Adams puts it, "His sense of scale and proportion was that of the great architects of his age" (354, 355). For culture, science, and art, the equilibrium of the universe rested on the delicate balance of the flying buttresses. To most people, the above references have little meaning, if any. But if you read this book, they will have a lot of meaning and enrich your experience. The broad brushstrokes across history, occasionally filled in with colorful detail, renewed my interest in the period. So after finishing the book, I searched on key people and events and found additional fascinating bits of historical intrigue. The book covers so much of the culture, arts, science, philosophy, politics, and social aspects of the period, it's a great reference point for further investigation. Robert Rose-Coutre Author of *Call of the Active Mind*

To fully appreciate Adams's book the reader is required to know the general parameters of the author's life. While Adams's autobiography, "The Education of Henry Adams", was written after this volume it is nevertheless necessary to read it first and to also acquaint oneself with the details of Adams's marriage to Clover Hooper and her suicide which are not mentioned at all in the book. "Mont Saint Michel and Chartres" is personalized history. If you want a more objective history look elsewhere. Some people are put off by its subjectivity. But in my view that subjectivity is exactly what makes the book so great. It's about the tremulous, perilous striving of an age, of religion, of faith, and finally of one's personal life. It's about the stress between unity and multiplicity. The book is profound in its exploration of these themes. It's learned, it's funny, it's ironic, and, in the end, profoundly moving. Reading these two books will provide any reader willing to put in the effort with some of the wisest and most trenchant observations in all literature all put forth in some of the most elegant prose ever written.

I have always loved the tone and personality of Adams' autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*. But I'd never read *Mont Saint Michele and Chartres*. Got the book for my Kindle as travel reading. Having been to both places made the book very easy to get into. Adams brings his wonderful mind, wit, learning, and insight to bear on these two sacred spots as expressions of the Romanesque and Gothic sensibilities, the male and female, justice and mercy. He thinks in terms of the dualisms inherent in Christianity and the psychological archetypes prevalent in his time. In the course of the book he takes the reader from the earlier Norman-era shrine to the flat fields southwest of Paris where Chartres cathedral dominates the skyline. Along the way he engages every major medieval personality, from Abelard to Aquinas. Adams evokes a vision of the tensions, ideals, and travails of the Middle Ages. And he presents the only cogent rationale I have ever read for the veneration / worship of the Virgin. Read this book. It will stimulate your intellect and please your imagination.

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