

David McCullough, 1933-2022—The promise, and the perils, of popular history

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David McCullough, probably the most widely known American historian of the past half-century, died at the age of 89 on August 7, at his home near Boston, Massachusetts.

McCullough won two Pulitzer Prizes for biographies of Harry Truman (1992) and John Adams (2001), and two National Book Awards for books on the creation of the Panama Canal (1978) and the young Theodore Roosevelt (1982). His plain-spoken, grandfatherly persona is familiar to millions owing to his narration of Ken Burns' immensely popular *The Civil War* documentary series (1990), and for his presentation of *The American Experience* programs on public television, a tenure which lasted from 1988 until 1999.

McCullough never completed a doctoral dissertation, never held an academic post—as a matter of fact, was not even an undergraduate history major. Born in 1933 and raised in an upper-middle class family in the leafy Point Breeze neighborhood of that most working class of cities, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, McCullough attended college at Yale University. There he majored in English, learning from noted authors such as John Hersey, Thornton Wilder, Brendan Gill, John O'Hara, and Robert Penn Warren.

That his lack of academic training in history may have been his greatest strength is as much an indictment of the professoriate as it is a compliment to McCullough. It is a sad fact that very few academic history books are readable, let alone achieve narrative coherence. Academic trends since the 1980s, the period of McCullough's great popularity, have been dominated by the anti-historical claptrap associated with postmodernism and the moralistic finger-wagging at the past typical of identity politics. Prior to their public promulgation by the *New York Times* in its 1619 Project, and by corporate America in its post-George Floyd embrace of Critical Race Theory, such "schools of thought" attracted little interest outside very narrow academic audiences comprised of a few true believers, and many more careerists trying to get on the right side of things.

In the 1950s American history writing had its problems, too, and McCullough probably did well to avoid Yale's deeply "traditionalist" Department of History. According to one account, a few of its leading members still believed that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a leftist and "the devil incarnate," and the department as a whole was awash in antisemitism and dedicated to a historical narrative "relevant to the lives of the young gentlemen of wealth and privilege seated in Yale's classrooms."^[1] Colonial era historian Edmund S. Morgan was hired at Yale only in 1955, the year McCullough graduated. The first Jewish scholar, political historian John Blum, was not hired until 1957. The great historian of the South, C. Vann Woodward, arrived in 1961.

After Yale, McCullough worked for *Sports Illustrated*, the patriotic historical magazine *American Heritage*, and the state propaganda bureau, the United States Information Agency. That very conservative career trajectory would seem unlikely preparation for his first book, *The Johnstown Flood* (1968), which dealt with one of the most horrific disasters in American history.

On May 31, 1889, catastrophe struck the steel milling and coal mining town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, when a private recreational lake created for the pleasure of Pittsburgh's rich, including the Carnegies, Mellons, and Fricks, burst through a shoddily constructed dam and washed away the city in the valley below, killing 2,209 men, women, and children. McCullough describes the final moments:

Most of the people in Johnstown never saw the water coming; they only heard it; those who lived to tell about it would for years after try to describe the sound of the thing as it rushed on them. It began as a deep, steady rumble, they would say; then it grew louder and louder until it had become an avalanche of sound...Everyone heard shouting and screaming, the earsplitting crash of buildings going down, glass shattering, and the sides of houses ripping apart.

No one was ever punished for this act of social murder, as McCullough recounts. But the author drew few conclusions. Approaching his topic in straight journalistic fashion, though with obvious sympathy for the victims, he allowed the selected facts to speak for themselves—an approach that would characterize all his subsequent writing. There was little analysis of the great steel industry that emerged after the Civil War and created the likes of Carnegie, on one side, and, on the other, the industrial working class that lost so many to the flood. McCullough could only allude to the class anger—"bitterness," he called it—that connected Johnstown in 1889 to the bloody Homestead strike of 1892.

The book was a success. Encouraged by his publisher to write on other disasters, McCullough instead turned to major feats of engineering in his next two efforts, *The Great Bridge: The Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge* (1972), and *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914* (1977). These were wide-ranging efforts, dealing heavily with politics, business, and, to some extent, labor—and, as always with McCullough, featuring intricate, lifelike descriptions of the personalities and places involved. The book on the Panama Canal led him to his interest in Theodore Roosevelt and his youth, which became his first biography, *Mornings on Horseback* (1981). Then followed the best-sellers—*Truman* (1992) and *John Adams* (2001).

McCullough's achievement in *John Adams* was to bring this remote, forbidding founding father back to public consciousness. He relied on Adams' remarkable personal diary and correspondence—much of it carried on with his brilliant wife and co-thinker, Abigail Adams. Contrary to the second president's popular reputation as dour and austere, his letters revealed a man of considerable warmth, and one capable of intimate, elegant prose. Tellingly, however, McCullough paid little attention to Adams' numerous political tracts. These were dry and lawyerly, though they were of far greater historical importance than his personal letters. It is

not a small omission. Some historians argue that Adams was an even more substantial political theorist than James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, or Thomas Jefferson.

McCullough's book, which became the basis of an acclaimed HBO miniseries staring Paul Giamatti, captures the great drama of the Continental Congress and Adams' central role in it, as well as the efforts of Adams, Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin to develop American diplomacy in Europe. But McCullough's attachment to Adams, one of the more conservative of the founding fathers, prevented him from fathoming the powerful egalitarian dynamic that led to Jefferson's and Madison's ultimate triumph, and the destruction of Adams' and Hamilton's Federalist Party.

McCullough brushed aside the Adams administration's antidemocratic imposition of the Alien and Sedition Acts, designed to crush the most democratic political tendencies in the young republic—including by arrest and deportation—which were attracted to revolutionary France. Those democratic forces found their leader in Jefferson, paradoxically a “natural aristocrat” and slave owner, and not Adams, whose humility and industriousness McCullough found much closer to “the American character” he spent his career trying to find.

McCullough was on far weaker ground in attempting with *Truman* to do for the 33rd president what *John Adams* did for the 2nd. But Adams was a major thinker and a revolutionary who risked his life for a cause. Truman was a dull grey figure even relative to the charismatic Democratic presidents who came before and after, Franklin Roosevelt (in office 1933-1945) and John Kennedy (in office 1961-1963). More than that, Truman was the president at the apex of American imperialist power, with all the crimes abroad and at home that such a position entailed.

McCullough was not much interested in the actual historical significance of Truman's administration (1945-1953). What really separates it from administrations that came before was the massive growth and entrenchment of the repressive and peacetime military apparatus of the American state. Truman oversaw the creation of the CIA and the NSA and set forth the Truman Doctrine, committing the US to limitless military spending and endless wars all over the planet.

All this was done in the name of defending regimes the American president alone dubbed “free peoples,” which, from Korea to Ukraine, have been defined not by democracy but by fealty to Washington and vicious domestic repression.

Simultaneously, Truman waged ferocious attacks on the working class, invoking the strikebreaking Taft-Hartley Act more than any other president, and kicking off the second Red Scare. To this it must be added that Truman is responsible for the deadliest minutes in the history of the human race, with the atomic incineration of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki late during the World War II struggle against imperialist Japan.

McCullough spent a handful of pages on those subjects, a tiny amount compared with the endless detail regarding Truman's many political and personal relationships—though in a chilling passage, McCullough reveals that Truman was giddy with excitement when he learned that the Hiroshima bombing was far deadlier than anticipated. “This is the greatest thing in history!” Truman exclaimed. One imagines Hitler would have reacted similarly.

McCullough does not deny that Truman was a “made politician” by Kansas City's notorious Pendergast machine, and in one brief passage he admits that the man from Missouri joined the Ku Klux Klan in 1920s for electoral reasons—and that for changed electoral calculations he very soon left it! He was much more interested in Truman's foray into small business after WWI, an ill-fated attempt to open a haberdashery that left him in ruins—that is, until Pendergast found him. Then, in spite of Pendergast's benediction, Truman struggled as a politician, until, much to his own surprise, he was picked up as the vice presidential candidate in 1944 at the expense of Henry Wallace, as the Roosevelt administration

moved sharply away from domestic reform and the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union and toward the Cold War.

Entranced by Truman's humble origins as a Missouri farm boy, McCullough did not seem to sense that Truman was, as C. Vann Woodward put it in a book review, “like a character in a Sinclair Lewis novel.” Instead, McCullough, after nearly 1,000 pages of text, concluded that Truman,

as much as any president since Lincoln... brought to the highest office the language and values of the common American people. He held to the old guidelines: work hard, do your best, speak the truth, assume no airs, trust in God, have no fear... He was the kind of president the founding fathers had in mind for the country. He came directly from the people. He was America.

This writing is maudlin, even preposterous. That McCullough could equate Truman with Abraham Lincoln or Adams as avatars of “the American spirit” reveals the weakness of his historical imagination, and the fatal absence of class analysis, as he moved forward in time to historical subjects who were nearly his contemporaries.

Certainly, popular history can do much better than this. But as things stand, McCullough's work is still among the best in a genre filled with worshipful presidential biographies and books on battles, inventions and celebrities. And, as opposed to many such efforts, it cannot be said that McCullough's popular success was owed to lowest-common denominator topics or disregard for the archive. Adams and Truman were not the most obvious subjects for a biographer, and they took a combined 17 years to research and write. McCullough's arduous efforts were compromised, and in the case of *Truman*, fatally weakened by a lack of political and class analysis. But his gift for narration made his subjects interesting. He made many people interested in history.

This is no mean feat. American society's reputation for being the least historically conscious is richly deserved. The dominant, bourgeois culture, in its crass acquisitiveness and here-and-now pragmatism, has either been uninterested in the past—“*History is more or less bunk!*” Henry Ford famously declared—or has plundered history for short-term commercial and political gain, the way a stockbroker looks for niche investment opportunities.

The result is a staggering level of historical ignorance in official society, surely unsurpassed anywhere else—and this, indeed, may be the real “American exceptionalism.” One thinks of Donald Trump's utter illiteracy about the greatest of all American wars: “Why was there the Civil War? Why could that one not have been worked out?,” the real-estate conman-turned-commander-in-chief blurted out in 2017. Or Barack Obama's philistine advice to liberal arts students in 2014: “I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.”

Such examples illustrate in the negative what McCullough's immense popularity shows in the positive: That ignorance of history is alien, a form of oppression, something foisted on the great masses of working class Americans, who desperately need knowledge of the past to find their bearings in the present. That McCullough's work could only stimulate this curiosity, not satisfy it, does not diminish this, the central revelation of his success.

[1] Palmer, Williams. “On or About 1950 or 1955 History Departments Changed: A Step in the Creation of the Modern History Department.” *Journal of the Historical Society* 7, no. 3 (2007): 385-405.



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