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In Memoriam

David McCullough: Accidental Historian

By George “Matt” Patino

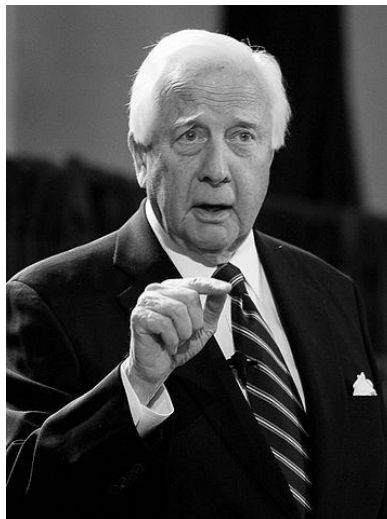


Figure 1. David McCullough (1933-2022), Courtesy of Brett Weinstein, Wikimedia Commons¹

History, I like to think, is a larger way of looking at life. It is a source of strength, of inspiration. It is about who we are and what we stand for and is essential to our understanding of what our own role should be in our times. History, as

¹ Brett Weinstein, *David McCullough Speaking at Emory University*, photograph, accessed April 25, 2023, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:McCullough_1.jpg#file

can't be said too often, is human. It is about people, and they speak to us across the years.²

The preceding paragraph is how David McCullough (1933-2022) opened the introduction of his book, *The American Spirit: Who We Are and What We Stand For* (2017). McCullough venerated the stories of our past throughout his life, and although his profession was writing, his avocation was History.

History can be the tonic to cure our collective ills, the salve to heal our wounds if—and only if—we accept the humanity (good and bad) that shaped our past. “History” comes from the Greek word *historia* (inquiry), and McCullough endeavored to channel his inquisitiveness into his narratives. It was McCullough’s curiosity and his desire to share the stories of our past that drove his career. In an interview with National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Chairperson, Bruce Cole, McCullough said that he writes “the kind of book I would like to read,” and he cited Mary Lee Settle’s quote, “I write to find out.”³

David McCullough’s first book, *The Johnstown Flood: The Incredible Story Behind One of the Most Devastating Disasters America Has Ever Known* (1968), made him a popular historian, a label that brought a certain level of criticism throughout his career from professional academic historians. For example, in a review of McCullough’s book, *John Adams* (2001), Sean Wilentz, a professor of History at Princeton University, criticized McCullough’s writing as “severely lacking in evaluation – too much narrative, not enough historical insight.”⁴ McCullough faced

² David G. McCullough, *The American Spirit: Who We Are and What We Stand For* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2018). xiii.

³ “The Title Always Comes Last,” David McCullough Interview (National Endowment for the Humanities), accessed December 26, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080511114908/http://www.neh.gov/howeare/mccullough/interview.html>

⁴ James R. Allen, “Keeping History Alive: David McCullough and the Debate Between Popular and Academic History,” DigitalCommons@CalPoly (California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, May 2010), <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/histsp/3>

other reproaches from the academy, but none could fault his writing. He fully understood the beauty and weight of language used in creating narratives that captured a reader's attention. For McCullough, the stories were more important than the historiography, and a popular historian could serve the field as much as an academic.⁵

David Gaub McCullough was born to Ruth (née Rankin) and Christian Hax McCullough Sr. on July 7, 1933, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.⁶ Christian ran a successful family electrical supply business (McCullough Electric Company)—founded in 1904—which allowed David and his three brothers “a marvelous childhood” and an opportunity to explore many interests.⁷ David McCullough's interests included sports, drama, journalism, and painting. Growing up, he imagined himself in several vocations: painter, architect, actor, lawyer, politician, actor, or doctor. However, McCullough was sure of two things; he *did not* want to be a businessman, and he *did* want to live in New York City.⁸

In 1951, McCullough enrolled at Yale University, majoring in English literature. While at Yale, he befriended the playwright Thornton Wilder, a friendship that influenced a young McCullough. Wilder taught McCullough that he should be

⁵ Popular history is usually written as a novel, making it easier for a non-historian to consume the material. However, some regard academic history as superior to popular history for its contribution to the scholarship of a specific topic.

⁶ “David McCullough: Recording the Drama of History,” Academy of Achievement, August 8, 2022, <https://achievement.org/achiever/david-mccullough/#biography>, Jonathan Newcomb, “David McCullough: Winner of the 1995 Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Award,” National Book Foundation, Presenter of National Book Awards (National Book Foundation, February 9, 1996), https://web.archive.org/web/20080415045419/http://www.nationalbook.org/nba/acceptspeech_dmccullough.html

⁷ “Christian Hax McCullough Sr. (1899-1989),” Find a Grave, accessed December 26, 2022, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/122473340/christian-hax-mccullough>, “David McCullough: Recording the Drama of History.”

⁸ “David McCullough: Recording the Drama of History.”

passionate about his subjects and write with “an air of freedom in the storyline,” whether fictional or not.⁹ In 1954, McCullough began his writing (and editing) career with several publications, including *Time*, *Life*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *American Heritage Magazines*, before moving on to the United States Information Agency.¹⁰ In the same year, McCullough married Rosalee Barnes and graduated with honors in 1955.

McCullough discovered his affinity for writing and research in equal measure while working for the magazines and the U.S. Information Agency. After that breakthrough, he said, “I knew I had found what I wanted to do in my life.”¹¹ Having been raised in Western Pennsylvania, McCullough was interested in the deadly 1889 flood in Johnstown. His fascination with the incident led to his first book, *The Johnstown Flood: The Incredible Story Behind One of the Most Devastating Disasters America Has Ever Known* (1968), which took three years of nights and weekends to complete. The book’s success allowed McCullough to quit his “day job” at the U.S. Information Agency and concentrate on writing histories and biographies full-time.

The topic of McCullough’s sophomore effort came to him “accidentally.”¹² As a Brooklyn resident, he frequently strode the borough’s namesake bridge without giving the structure much thought. However, a conversation with another writer and an engineer about the bridge’s origin sparked McCullough’s interest, and he began work on *The Great Bridge: The Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge* (1972).¹³ McCullough opens his

⁹ Neda Ulaby and Elizabeth Blair, “Pulitzer Prize Winning Historian David McCullough Has Died,” NPR (National Public Radio, August 10, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/08/1116337415/historian-david-mccullough-died>, Daniel Lewis, “David McCullough, Best-Selling Explorer of America’s Past, Dies at 89,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, August 8, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/08/books/david-mccullough-dead.html>

¹⁰ “The Title Always Comes Last,” Lewis, “David McCullough, Best-Selling Explorer of America’s Past, Dies at 89.”

¹¹ “The Title Always Comes Last.”

¹² Allen, “Keeping History Alive.”

¹³ Allen, “Keeping History Alive.”

book by introducing John Augustus Roebling and his “consultants” as they planned to build the Brooklyn Bridge,

They met at his request on at least six different occasions, beginning in February 1869. With everyone present, there were just nine in all—the seven distinguished consultants he had selected; his oldest son, Colonel Washington Roebling, who kept the minutes; and himself, the intense, enigmatic John Augustus Roebling, wealthy wire rope manufacturer of Trenton, New Jersey, and builder of unprecedented suspension bridges.¹⁴

In his review, Gerald Carson of *The New York Times* hailed the “sound intuitive sense” of McCullough’s narrative style. In addition, Carson noted that McCullough conveyed “a vivid sense of what the Brooklyn Bridge has meant to the passing generations.”¹⁵ Such praise helped establish McCullough’s reputation as a storyteller and popular social historian.

McCullough began earning recognition from the literary community with his next book, *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914* (1977), which earned the 1978 National Book Award for History.¹⁶ Next, McCullough took the 1982 National Book Award for Autobiography/Biography

¹⁴ David McCullough, “The Great Bridge: The Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge,” Google Books (Google), 21, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://books.google.com/books?id=bOM93rb22YEC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

¹⁵ Gerald Carson, “The Great Bridge,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, October 15, 1972), <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/10/15/archives/the-great-bridge-by-david-mccullough-illustrated-404-pp-new-york.html>

¹⁶ “National Book Awards 1978,” National Book Foundation, March 6, 2018, <https://www.nationalbook.org/awards-prizes/national-book-awards-1978/?cat=history>

for his fourth volume, *Mornings on Horseback* (1981), chronicling the life of a young Theodore Roosevelt and his family.¹⁷

With his sixth book, *Truman* (1992), McCullough reached the pinnacle of literary achievement, winning his first Pulitzer Prize (1993) in the Biography, Autobiography, or Memoir by an American author category.¹⁸ However, along with the honors came reproach. A review of *Truman* by Alan Brinkley of *The New York Times* praised McCullough's "sound, thorough narrative of the major events of the Truman Presidency." But Brinkley chastised the popular historian for failing to engage "in the debates over...the decision to use atomic bombs in Japan...the cold war...the North Korean invasion of South Korea [or]...Truman's policy in Vietnam."¹⁹ In 1953, when President Harry S. Truman left office, he was—according to Frank Gannon of *The Wall Street Journal*—“reviled by many of the country’s leading historians.” Gannon credits McCullough’s portrayal of the 33rd President as the “catalyst” that changed public opinion about Truman.²⁰ Gannon’s assessment is a testament to David McCullough’s popularity, not only as a writer but also as a historian.

McCullough’s follow-up work, *John Adams* (2001), earned the author a second Pulitzer Prize (2002) in the Biography, Autobiography, or Memoir by an American author category and a growing chorus of critics.²¹ In his review of *John Adams*, Richard

¹⁷ “National Book Awards 1982,” National Book Foundation, July 30, 2018, <https://www.nationalbook.org/awards-prizes/national-book-awards-1982/>

¹⁸ “The Pulitzer Prizes: Biography,” The Pulitzer Prizes, accessed March 16, 2023, <https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/222>

¹⁹ Alan Brinkley, “Work Hard, Trust in God, Have No Fear,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, June 21, 1992), <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/21/books/work-hard-trust-in-god-have-no-fear.html>

²⁰ Frank Gannon, “‘The Trials of Harry S. Truman’ Review: Giving Them Hell, Getting It Too,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, March 22, 2022), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-trials-of-harry-s-truman-review-giving-them-hell-getting-it-too-11647987509>

²¹ “The Pulitzer Prizes: Biography,” The Pulitzer Prizes, accessed March 16, 2023, <https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/222>

N. Rosenfeld denounced McCullough's reverence for his subject, "[the] biography of Adams partakes of the aura of autobiography, and, in doing so, it raises important questions of identity and verity."²² C. Bradley Thompson's review of the title casts McCullough as Adams' long-missing publicist, more interested in popularizing the founder than examining his political ideology.²³

McCullough's most ardent literary critic, Sean Wilentz, remarked that *John Adams* served as an example of the popular historian yielding to public demand for the heroic tales of the past.²⁴ Further, Wilentz suggested that McCullough's curious fascination with Adams led the author to misattribute a quote in the biography.²⁵ McCullough's error was minor compared to the plagiarism charges leveled against other popular historians—Stephen E. Ambrose and Joseph Ellis—but it was enough for academics to further the divide between genres. Eric Foner, a history professor at Columbia University—who has enjoyed his own commercial success—said, "I think there are a lot of popular writers—Garry Wills, Taylor Branch—you don't hear these complaints about."²⁶ Foner articulated his expectation that popular historians take responsibility whenever "they realize they've made mistakes," but he also wanted "Ellis...and the others to continue writing books."²⁷ Interestingly Wills and Branch's credentials as "trained" historians could be questioned; Wills holds a Ph.D. in classics from Yale University (1961), and Branch a Master's degree in Public Administration from Princeton University (1970). Meanwhile, Ambrose received a Ph.D. in history from the

²² Richard N. Rosenfeld, "The Adams Tyranny," *Harper's Magazine*, September 2001, pp. 82-86, <https://search-ebshost-com.libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=5043467&site=ehost-live>

²³ C. Bradley Thompson, "John Adams," *Claremont Review of Books* II, no. 2 (2002), <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/john-adams/>

²⁴ Allen, "Keeping History Alive."

²⁵ Allen, "Keeping History Alive."

²⁶ Hillel Italie, "Historians Under Fire," CBS News (CBS Interactive, January 24, 2002), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/historians-under-fire/>

²⁷ Italie, "Historians Under Fire."

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University of Wisconsin-Madison (1963), and Ellis a Ph.D. in history from Yale University (1969).

McCullough shrugged off the criticisms regarding his lack of historiographic “training” or academic position because neither was as vital to him as the subject of history. In a 1998 commencement speech at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, McCullough said,

The lessons of history are manifold. Nothing happens in isolation. Everything that happens has consequences. We are all part of a larger stream of events, past, present, and future. We are all the beneficiaries of those who went before us—who built the cathedrals, who braved the unknown, who gave of their time and service, and who kept faith in the possibilities of the mind and the human spirit.²⁸

In a 2002 interview with Bruce Cole, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), McCullough defined his work in terms that might confound his academic critics—and possibly his publishers,

I feel I’m working in a tradition that goes all the way back to Thucydides or Gibbon, if you want. They weren’t academic historians either. I can fairly be called an amateur because I do what I do, in the original sense of the word—for love, because I love it. On the other hand, I think that those of us who make a living writing history can also be called true professionals.²⁹

²⁸ McCullough, *The American Spirit*. 57.

²⁹ “David McCullough,” The National Endowment for the Humanities, 2003, <https://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/david-mccullough-biography>

To that end, McCullough saw no difference between academic and popular historians. What separated McCullough from his contemporaries is that he considered himself a writer who enjoyed telling stories about the past.³⁰ As he saw it, a significant part of McCullough's job was to "make [history] as interesting and human" as possible.³¹ An accomplishment that Arnita Jones, former Executive Director of the American Historical Association (AHA), championed, "I've always been an advocate of historians trying to reach a public audience."³² Regarding the criticisms McCullough and other writers faced, Jones added, "I would hope the next generation of historians will not be dissuaded."³³

David McCullough passed away at his home in Massachusetts on August 7, 2022.³⁴ Unfortunately, it is not likely that the literary void he left will soon be filled. But perhaps one day, a fledgling writer, curious about history, poring over monographs and wandering through the archives will discover a good story to share and find themselves "accidentally" becoming a historian.

³⁰ Gerardo Orlando, "David McCullough: Painting with Words," *The History Pages* (The History Pages, January 1, 2021), <https://www.thehistorypages.com/2018/12/01/david-mccullough-painting-with-words/>

³¹ "David McCullough," The National Endowment for the Humanities.

³² Italic, "Historians Under Fire."

³³ Italic, "Historians Under Fire."

³⁴ Hillel Italic, "David McCullough, Pulitzer-Winning Historian, Dies at 89," AP NEWS (Associated Press, August 8, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/david-mccullough-historian-dies-7abe5997da74f30b1eab11e36b308fe3>

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Author Bio

Matt Patino is graduating from California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) with a Master of Arts in history. After transferring from Crafton Hills College, Matt earned a Bachelor of Arts in History from the University of Redlands. His area of research is twentieth-century U.S. history, focusing on race in public policy.

He plans to teach at the Community College level while writing and publishing in the popular history genre. Matt has worked as a writing tutor at Crafton Hills College and the University of Redlands, as a Supplemental Instruction (SI) Leader at CSUSB, and in the Heritage Room of the A.K. Smiley Public Library in Redlands. Matt would like to thank Evy Zermeno and Dr. Tiffany Jones for their support, guidance, and encouragement during the writing and editing process.



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