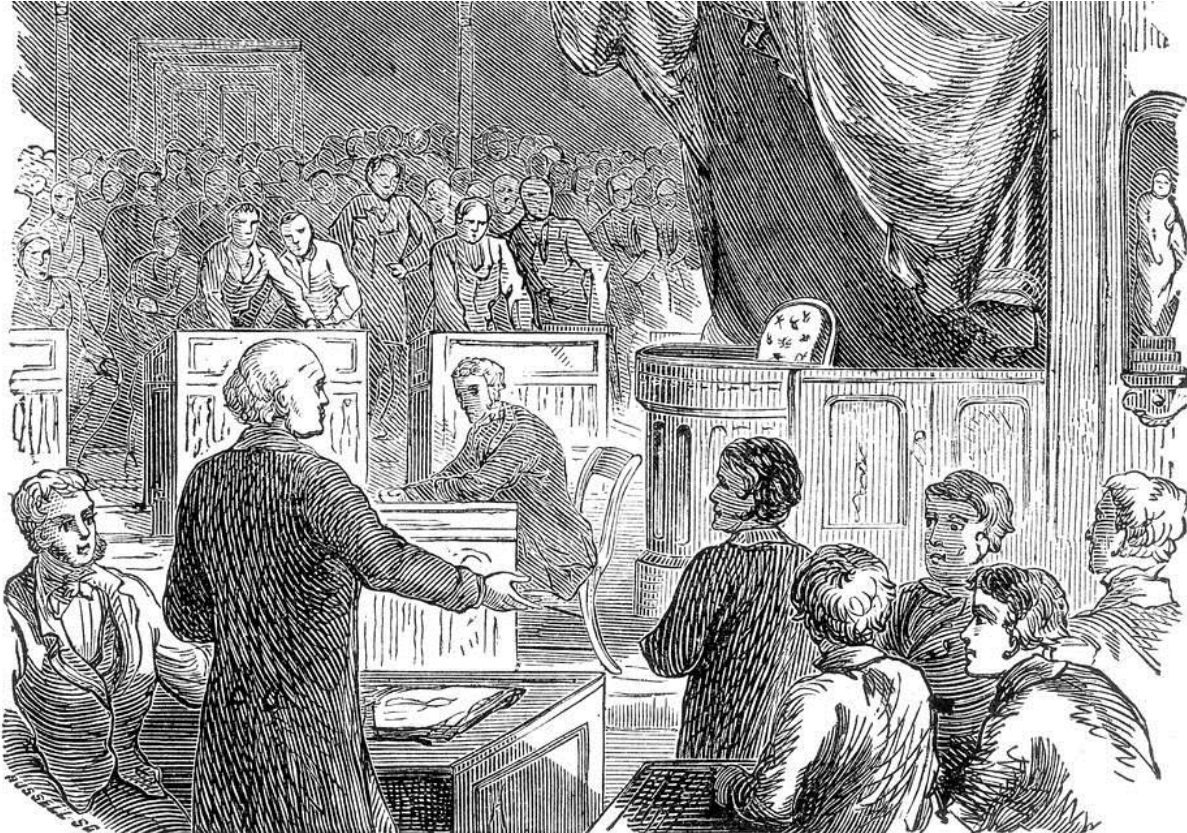


Why History Will Repay Your Love

Knowing the past is 'a wonderful way to enlarge the experience of being alive,' says historian David McCullough.



John Quincy Adams on the House floor. ILLUSTRATION: GRANGER, NYC



By

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For Memorial Day some thoughts on historical memory.

We are losing it. We are less versed in the facts of history, not only of other countries but of our own. It is a crisis, and much has been written on it over the years. “We are raising a generation of young Americans who are by and large historically illiterate,” observes the historian David McCullough in his latest book. He describes a bright Missouri college student who thanked him for coming to the campus, because, she said, “until now I never understood that the original 13 colonies were all on the East Coast.” Another student once asked him: “Aside from Harry Truman and John Adams, how many other presidents have you interviewed?”

What explains the new dumbness? Some blame boring textbooks put together by committee and scrubbed clean of the politically inconvenient and incorrect. Some argue that so many strange, culturally fashionable things are jammed into public school curricula that essentials have been forced out. Many point to a certain negativity, a focus on our national sins that has crowded out our achievements. This is counterproductive: a sophisticated presentation of our triumphs and tragedies makes our sins all the more poignant and powerful. Historical balance leaves young minds not cynical, which is always an excuse to do nothing, but inspired—we can right wrongs, we’ve done it before. In our colleges they teach pale, eccentric variations on history at the expense of history itself: “Modes of Alienation in Pre-Maoist China” as opposed to “A History of Modern China.” They do odd embroideries while ignoring the main fabric.

But history need not be a drudge, a weary obligation, an irrelevance.

And so Mr. McCullough’s refreshing little book on being in love with history, and why it is one of the most rewarding of all loves, “The American Spirit,” a collection of his speeches, published by Simon & Schuster.

History to him is “a larger way of looking at life.” It is “a wonderful way to enlarge the experience of being alive.” It is as mind-expanding as any drug. The American story is our strength, “our greatest national resource.” To preserve it is to save America.

Once, introducing him to a college class, I called Mr. McCullough the Great Rescuer, a historian whose work has been to save the reputation of individuals who were essential to the American experience and yet have been insufficiently appreciated. Harry Truman’s greatness had been

only narrowly acknowledged until McCullough wrote his monumental “Truman,” published a quarter-century ago. Adams was arguably the least-beloved founder until Mr. McCullough, in “John Adams,” demonstrated his personal and political greatness. It was published in 2001, the year we most needed it.

You see the outlines of two other candidates for rescue in “The American Spirit.” One is Philadelphia’s Dr. Benjamin Rush, a founder who was “among the outstanding Americans of all time.” He signed the Declaration, was a physician with Washington’s Army, established America’s first dispensary, heroically battled epidemics, helped the poor, fought slavery, and wrote the nation’s first chemistry textbook. His collected writings fill 45 volumes. He taught thousands of medical students that insanity was an illness, not a curse; that dreams might be a pathway to the deeper workings of the mind. He has been called the father of American psychiatry. On hearing of Rush’s death in 1813, Adams wrote Jefferson: “I know of no character living or dead who has done more real good in America.”

And there is Adams’s son John Quincy Adams, who in 1831 did what no former president had done and returned to Congress, where, Mr. McCullough says, he had “perhaps his finest hours.” He championed scientific inquiry, worked with a congressman named Abe Lincoln to oppose the Mexican War, and for eight years, “almost alone,” battled the Gag Rule imposed by the South to prevent legislative action against slavery. He won.

He collapsed at his congressional desk at age 80 in 1848. They carried him to the office of the speaker, where he died two days later. “At the end Henry Clay in tears was holding his hand.” Lincoln helped with the funeral arrangements.

Here, gleaned from the book, are some of Mr. McCullough’s observations on history.

- *It is a story.* “Tell stories,” said the historian Barbara Tuchman. And what is a story? Mr. McCullough, paraphrasing E.M. Forster, observes: “If I say to you the king died and then the queen died, that’s a sequence of events. If I say the king died and the queen died of grief, that’s a story.”

- *What's past to us was the present to them.* “Adams, Jefferson, George Washington, they didn't walk about saying, ‘Isn't this fascinating, living in the past?’ It was the present, their present.”

They were acting in real time and didn't know how things would turn out.

- *They were never certain of success.* “Had they taken a poll in Philadelphia in 1776, [the founders] would have scrapped the whole idea of independence. A third of the country was for it, a third of the country was against it, and the remaining third, in the old human way, was waiting to see who came out on top.”

- *Nothing had to happen the way it happened.* “History could have gone off in any number of different directions in any number of different ways at almost any point, just as your own life can.” “One thing leads to another. Nothing happens in a vacuum. Actions have consequences.” These things sound obvious, he says, but are not to those who are just starting out and trying to understand life.

- *We make more of the wicked than the great.* The most-written about senator of the 20th century is Joe McCarthy. “Yet there is no biography of the Senator who had the backbone to stand up to him first— Margaret Chase Smith, ” a Maine Republican who served for 24 years.

- *America came far through trial and error.* Mr. McCullough tells the story of iron workers in 19th-century Johnstown, Pa. For months they'd been devising a new machine to produce steel. Finally it was ready. The engineer in charge said, “All right boys, let's start it up and see why it doesn't work.” Progress has come to us largely through empirical methods.

- *History is an antidote to the hubris of the present.* We think everything we have, do and think is the ultimate, the best. “We should never look down on those of the past and say they should have known better. What do you think they will be saying about us in the future? They're going to be saying *we* should have known better.”

- *Knowing history will make you a better person.* Mr. McCullough endorses Samuel Eliot Morison's observation that reading history improves behavior by giving examples to emulate. He quotes John Adams: “We can't guarantee success [in the Revolutionary War], but we can do something better. We can deserve it.” This contrasts, Mr. McCullough says, with current attitudes, in which success is all.

And happy Memorial Day—our 47th since it was designated a federal holiday, under Richard Nixon, in 1971. It was earlier known as Decoration Day, created just after the Civil War to honor the brave and noble who gave their lives while serving in the U.S. military.

God bless their souls.