

Keeping History Alive:

David McCullough and the Debate Between Popular and Academic History

James R. Allen

Department of History
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

May 2010

© James R. Allen

James Allen

Keeping History Alive:

David McCullough and the Debate Between Popular and Academic History

This project uses popular historian David McCullough to draw attention to the growing divide between academic historians and their ‘popularizing’ counterparts. It will highlight the works of McCullough, his research methods, and his overall goals of writing history aimed at educating the masses. It will show how critics of the author use him to degrade popular histories, and promote academic literature. It will analyze the goals of popular historians and examine what Princeton University professor Sean Wilentz describes as an age old question, “Who should tell the nation’s history, the professors or the popularizers?”¹

Few writers have introduced history to the populous like David McCullough. His books captivate the reader and immerse each and every one within each setting. His topics range from former presidents, to architecture, to natural disasters. McCullough brings these people, objects, and events to life with such eloquence and vigor; one relives the experiences of the past with every turn of the page. David McCullough’s accolades speak for themselves (including two Pulitzer Prizes; in 1993 and 2002²), and while he spends much of his time researching and writing award winning books, his true passion is spreading knowledge to the masses.

¹ Sean Wilentz, “America Made Easy: McCullough, Adams, and the decline of popular history” *The New Republic* (2001), <http://www.tnr.com/article/books/america-made-easy>

² Pulitzer Prize Organization, “Winner of Pulitzer Prize for Biography or Autobiography, 2002,” <http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2002-Biography-or-Autobiography>.
Pulitzer Prize Organization, “List of Biography or Autobiography Pulitzer Prize Winners,” <http://www.pulitzer.org/bycat/Biography-or-Autobiography>

In McCullough's eyes there is a lack of historical knowledge and understanding among the younger generations. McCullough believes, and rightly so, that all too often students are taught by teachers who have no passion for their subject and the indifference trickles down.³ This cycle, according to McCullough, needs to be broken, and a great way to break free is to immerse ourselves in the day to day lives of those who came before us. McCullough's strength is relating the details. Everyone has a favorite color, a favorite song, a favorite meal, and these are the things that enliven these figures. These are the things that separate one life from another – the conscious decisions ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary. This is the world that surrounds each reader and creates an emotional connection between the present and the distant past.

McCullough researches with enthusiasm bordering on obsession. He writes at a breakneck pace. He crafts with precision. What caught my attention, as well as that of many other commentators, was his humble attitude towards his life's work. He cites those who knowingly and unknowingly guided his scholarly development and frequently praises those who have helped him throughout his endeavors.⁴

David McCullough is now one of the most recognized writers of popular American history. He has written eight books in all, with topics ranging from monumental moments to monuments themselves. Each book has been greatly influenced by his collegiate and professional literary training. He graduated from Yale with honors in English Literature, and has been using that background to write some of the most intriguing history books of our time.

³ Leslie Shaver, "The Storyteller: An Interview with David McCullough," *Information Outlook* (2003)
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FWE/is_4_7/ai_100203181/

⁴ Academy of Achievement, "David McCullough" Academy of Achievement,
<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/mcc2int-1>

When McCullough graduated, he moved to New York and worked for a new magazine, *Sports Illustrated*. The job would eventually lead to another, and he took a job writing for the United States Information Agency in Washington D.C. Eventually, he moved back to New York and began writing for *American Heritage* and became an editor there. It was during this time that he worked on his first book, *The Johnstown Flood*, in his spare time. After the success of his first release, he decided to write full time, and has been ever since.⁵

McCullough arrives at each of his book topics through his desire to learn. He equates his vocation to that of the playwright Thornton Wilder; he notes,

Thornton Wilder was asked how he got the ideas for his books, and he said – or his plays – and he said, “I imagine a story that I would like to read, or see done on the stage.” Well, I wanted to be able to read a really first-rate book about the incredible story behind the disaster at Johnstown in 1889, and I found there was no such book. But having read that interview I thought, “Well maybe you could write the book that you would like to read.” And I am convinced that the only way we ever really learn is by doing it.⁶

McCullough’s thirst for knowledge drives him to understand the past in his own way, and, luckily for him, he can support himself and his family by sharing his new-found knowledge with the rest of us. First, McCullough will arrive at a question and then check if there have been any good books written about his subject. If not, he sets out to solve the question himself. “The ideas for these books can come from anywhere,” McCullough says.⁷ The topic of his second book “came by accident... This one came from two friends in New York – one a writer and the other an engineer. They began talking about what the builders of the Brooklyn Bridge didn’t know when they set out to build that structure, and I knew right away that was it.”⁸ He then raced to a local library to check

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dave Weich, “Connecting With David McCullough.” Powells.com, <http://www.powells.com/authors/mccullough.html>.

⁸ Leslie Shaver, “The Storyteller: An Interview with David McCullough,” *Information Outlook* (2003)

whether a book had been written about the bridge's construction. Though there were over one-hundred library cards on the topic, none took the approach that McCullough envisioned.⁹ Another book of his, about the life of President Truman, was conceived during a lunch with his publisher, editor, and agent.¹⁰ It was suggested that he write a book about Franklin D. Roosevelt, to which McCullough replied, "If I were ever going to [write about] a twentieth century President, it wouldn't be FDR; it would be Harry Truman."¹¹ After a quick moment of contemplation, the consensus was reached, and McCullough is still unsure how the idea ever entered his mind.¹² When McCullough settles upon a question or topic, answers are not far behind. His question regarding the Johnstown flood would be the catalyst to his eventual career.

His first book, answering his inquiries regarding the devastating flood that struck Johnstown, Pennsylvania, was published in 1968, followed by his recounting of the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, which was published four years later in 1972. He then wrote and published *The Path Between the Seas*, a book about the creation of the Panama Canal, which was released in 1977. McCullough's next challenge was published in 1981, a book about Theodore Roosevelt and how he grew up to become one of the most influential figures of the early twentieth century. Then, McCullough began work on what would become his first Pulitzer Prize winner – *Truman*, an exhaustive narrative that spans almost one-thousand pages.

It would take McCullough an entire decade to research and write, but he would be well rewarded. During his research, he published a series of essays, entitled *Brave Companions*,

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FWE/is_4_7/ai_100203181/

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dave Weich, "Connecting With David McCullough." Powells.com, <http://www.powells.com/authors/mccullough.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

which was released in 1991. A year later, *Truman* was released to high praise. A decade later, *John Adams* would be released, which earned him another Pulitzer Prize. It also would be adapted into an HBO special of the same name. His most recent book, *1776* was published in 2005, and was received well by the public. McCullough has never had any one of his books out of publication.

David McCullough's success can be attributed to his enthusiasm for learning and sharing his knowledge with others. Above all, his goal seems to be creating a passion for learning and understanding of history in others. Both of McCullough's most recent books recount America's storied beginning, with *1776* researched and published after the attacks of September 11th, 2001. McCullough contrasts both periods of history to paint an optimistic portrait of our future.

We're often told, and we know, that we're living in a very difficult, dangerous and uncertain time. But that's not a new experience in American life. Some have said, in the aftermath of 9/11, that this is the darkest, most perilous hour of our history. But we've been through worse and we've come through it. Further, we need to be reminded always of the ideas and ideals that this country was founded on, and never take our blessings for granted.¹³

Many times, McCullough's themes have enlightened readers of prototypical American ideals – hard work, perseverance, teamwork, integrity, morality, among others. These traits, while not lost on many Americans today, aren't studied as they were in the past, according to McCullough. "The more I understand these eighteenth-century people," he says, "that it was that grounding in Greek and Latin that gave them their sense of the classic virtues: the classic ideals of honor, virtue, the good society, and their historic examples of what they could try to live up to. These traits are the focus of many of McCullough's books, merging the parables of the distant past with a more modern history that can relate to contemporary readers.

¹³ Book Reporter, "Author Talk: David McCullough" BookReporter.com, <http://www.bookreporter.com/authors/au-mccullough-david.asp>

While he has reached many with his words, not everyone has enjoyed them. Many scholars have criticized McCullough, even challenging his understanding of the history he recounts. Over the course of his career, many have reviewed his works, and in our digital age, it seems as though everyone has an opinion.

One web site, GoodReads.com has, as of April 10th, 2010, over fourteen-hundred individual reviews on *The Johnstown Flood* alone. It has another four-thousand reviews of *Truman*. Of course, not all of them are scholars. In fact, I would be surprised to see much more than fifteen or twenty scholars who reviewed the book for this website, but it shows the great reach of an author of McCullough's caliber. On this web site alone, 46,771 individuals have taken time out of their day to create an account on that website, and submit a review for at least one of his books. That's almost six-thousand per book. At the very least, McCullough has gotten what he wants – people to read about history and converse about it.

These conversations have not always treated McCullough kindly, however. [One instance of this occurred](#) in the September 2001 issue of *Harper's Magazine*. Book reviewer and author Richard Rosenfeld wrote a piece detailing a misquote in McCullough's most recent book, *John Adams*, [as well as, in Rosenfeld's eyes, the unjust glorification of a controversial-at-best president and founding father](#).¹⁴ As Rosenfeld writes,

From the first sentence of McCullough's beautifully written biography ("In the cold, nearly colorless light of New England winter, two men on horseback traveled the coast road below Boston, heading North"), we are off on a dramatic and heroic ride with the founding father he aims to glorify, most effectively through the worshipful phrase "the colossus of independence," which he employs as a chapter title and then falsely attributes to Thomas Jefferson (This nonexistent quotation has been perpetuated in reviews and even appeared as the cover line on an issue of The New York Times Book Review.)¹⁵

¹⁴ Rosenfeld, Richard. "The Adams Tyranny." *Harper's Magazine* 303, no 1816 (September 2001): 82. *Academic Search Elite*, EBSCOhost (Accessed April 21, 2010)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Throughout his review, Rosenfeld upholds the popular idea among many historians that John Adams is not a founding father worthy of the praise McCullough gives. Adams was, in the eyes of Rosenfeld, a tyrannical leader who “opposed popular democracy, subverted the Bill of Rights, and brought his nation to the brink of civil war.”¹⁶ This assessment is supported by many of Adams’ peers, most glaringly quotes made by Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, among others, that questioned his motives, his ability, and his mental state. These men, of course, were political enemies of Adams, and would not be expected to support any move he made. And this is exactly Rosenfeld’s point, as he explains to reporter David D. Kirkpatrick of the New York Times – “‘You don’t want to make this man a hero’... the only thing that would make historians reconsider Adams’ legacy... ‘is someone with Jefferson’s credentials saying he is the colossus of independence.’”¹⁷

Later in his news article, Kirkpatrick highlights the schism between those who support Jefferson, whom they deem as “the good guy” and those who support Adams, who becomes histories’ “bad guy”, a continuation of the Federalist versus Anti-federalist battle which was seemingly won over two hundred years ago.¹⁸ In more recent American history, a new battle has emerged, this one between popular historians, McCullough included, and academic historians.

McCullough’s academic foe would be played by Sean Wilentz, history professor at Princeton University. In his review of McCullough’s *John Adams*, Wilentz writes that “David McCullough is the most accomplished current practitioner of [popular history], and one of the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ David D. Kirkpatrick, “MediaTalk; Error in Quote Stirs Arguments Over Adams Legacy.” *New York Times*, July 23, 2001. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/23/business/mediatalk-error-in-quote-stirs-arguments-over-adams-legacy.html?scp=1&sq=media%20talk;%20error%20in%20quote%20stirs%20arguments%20over%20adams%20legacy&st=cse>

¹⁸ Ibid.

major forces behind its resurgence.”¹⁹ To Wilentz, this style of writing, though interesting and somewhat exciting, is severely lacking in evaluation – too much narrative, not enough historical insight. Along the fine line of academic historical literature and popular historical literature, it veers too far too often towards the latter.

This hasn’t been the only problem David McCullough has encountered during his writing career. In an article published shortly after news of McCullough’s misquote in *John Adams* came to light, author and editor Philip Nobile recounts his experiences dealing with McCullough after he found an error in Pulitzer Prize winning *Truman*.²⁰ According to Nobile, he had “exposed McCullough’s unfootnoted [sic] War Department memo as historical counterfeit.”²¹ In this case, Nobile cites *Truman* page 400, which reads,

“But a memorandum of June 4, 1945, written by General Thomas Handy of Marshall’s staff, in listing the advantages of making peace with Japan, said America would save no less than 500,000 to 1 million lives by avoiding the invasion altogether – which shows that figures of such magnitude were then in use at the highest levels.”²²

This passage was used by McCullough to demonstrate the difficult decision Truman faced about the use of the atomic bomb. Preceding it, McCullough shows other estimates, ranging from 31,000 to 220,000 lives that could potentially be lost with an invasion of Japan, the larger of which was deemed entirely too high for General MacArthur, who was in favor of attack.²³ According to Nobile, these estimates more closely resemble the popular thought of generals and other high ranking officials. This would, in turn, make using the atomic bomb much harder to justify. However, elsewhere in *Truman*, McCullough notes that the decision to

¹⁹ Sean Wilentz, “America Made Easy: McCullough, Adams, and the decline of popular history” *The New Republic* (2001), <http://www.tnr.com/article/books/america-made-easy>

²⁰ Nobile, Philip. “The David McCullough Nobody Knows” *History New Network*, (2001) <http://hnn.us/articles/157.html#>

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 400.

²³ *Ibid.*, 400.

drop the bomb was never really a difficult one in the sense that Truman and his allies viewed it as another weapon that could bring the war to an end. As McCullough points out,

Churchill was to write of the decision that it was no decision, and that in retrospect this seems to have been the case. 'The historic fact remains, and must be judged in the after-time,' Churchill wrote, 'that the decision whether or not to use the atomic bomb to compel the surrender of Japan was never an issue. There was unanimous, automatic, unquestioned agreement around our table; nor did I ever hear the slightest suggestion that we should do otherwise.'²⁴

Though it was never an easy decision to make, it seemed to be the only plausible decision to make at the time. Let us not forget that these men were witnessing the death of their constituents at the hands of the enemy every day, and that a speedy end to the war, by any means necessary, would be their goal. McCullough uses this passage to bolster his thesis, that Truman's actions were forced by the situations he found himself in. Truman could "end the war a year sooner now," speaking of the advantages of using the bomb, "and think of all the kids who won't be killed! That's the most important thing."²⁵ With the advantage of hindsight, the bombing of the Japanese can be seen as deplorable, or admirable, depending on the viewpoint. This, however, is not what troubles his critics.

Nobile contends that McCullough's use of the 'million man' reference helps to justify the use of the bomb, and McCullough had "whitewashed [Truman's] decision."²⁶ To Nobile, and those who agree with him, McCullough's use of this particular quote adjusts history to fit his thesis – that Truman never really had a choice in the matter.

This seems to be another battle in the war between academic and popular historians. Sean Wilentz notes in his review of *John Adams* that America has turned away from history books rampant with critical analysis and have turned more toward "a vision of American history

²⁴ Ibid, 442.

²⁵ Ibid, 440.

²⁶ Nobile, Philip. "The David McCullough Nobody Knows" *History New Network*, (2001) <http://hnn.us/articles/157.html#>

as simply a rewarding spectacle.”²⁷ In other words, the majority of Americans who buy history books are more inclined to read a book that glosses over the hard decisions and embellishes the ‘good times.’ This is the exact thing that critics of McCullough have accused him of doing.

Not everyone has attacked McCullough for his errors in what may be his most famous books. Professor Michael Nelson of Rhodes College defends McCullough as an author who has “thoroughly researched, deeply insightful, and wonderfully well-written works of American history.”²⁸ Nelson admits that McCullough mistakenly attributed a non-existent quote regarding John Adams, but also notes that “no other factual errors have been pointed out in his 736-page book.”²⁹ Much of Sean Wilentz’s complain, Nelson writes, was “that McCullough had focused on Adam’s character, liked what he saw, and written ‘merely another valentine,’” a reference to a previous reviewer’s take on McCullough’s *Truman*.³⁰ To Nelson, it seems as though McCullough’s book should be reviewed based on its content and ability to relate a story to the public, not what other historians believe should have been between the covers.

Nelson also notes that the release of *John Adams* and its subsequent public trial may have simply come at a bad time. Of course, this in no way excuses McCullough for any errors of citation when writing history books. It is interesting, however, that more than a few popular historians fell under public scrutiny around the same time. At the turn of the century, many historians were caught committing various undesirable acts. Stephen E. Ambrose, author of *The Wild Blue: The Men and Boys Who Flew the B-24s over Germany*, and Doris Kearns Goodwin, author of *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, were caught plagiarizing in their most recent books;

²⁷ Sean Wilentz, “America Made Easy: McCullough, Adams, and the decline of popular history” *The New Republic* (2001), <http://www.tnr.com/article/books/america-made-easy>

²⁸ Michael Nelson, “What’s happened to history” *History News Network* (2002) <http://hnn.us/articles/969.html#>

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Joseph J. Ellis was caught lying about his past to his students and the public alike (Ellis had told his students that he served in the Vietnam War, scored the winning touchdown in his high school's final football game, among others, none of which was true, in order to connect better with his audience).³¹

McCullough's misquote came out around the same time. In an article entitled "Historians Under Fire", Hillel Italie, writer for the Associated Press, mentions McCullough's side of the story. McCullough acknowledges that writing about history is "hard work; you're trying to get the truth about distant times...When you make mistakes, it's very painful, but you will make mistakes. We're imperfect, in an imperfect world."³² In a separate interview, McCullough added, "It does not change my thesis at all. I'm perfectly within my rights to say he was the colossus of independence, as others have said... It does not change Adam's role in the Declaration of Independence."³³

This begs the question, how *does* it affect his thesis? If he is simply writing about the triumphs and failings of a historical figure that had varying degrees of influence, depending on which point of view the reader agrees with, then it would not change his thesis. McCullough is perfectly within his rights to hold his own opinion and disseminate it in his books.

McCullough may be correct; he is able to advance his thesis in a clear and purposeful way. It is the route which he takes that raises questions. The style that McCullough employs is a narrative history which enables him to present his theses in the manner he employed (and subsequently caught criticism for) when writing *John Adams*. This method has "a beginning, a

³¹ Ibid.

³² Hillel Italie, "Historians Under Fire" *The Associated Press*, January 24, 2002.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/01/24/print/main325434.shtml?tag=mncol;lst:1>

³³ Justin Pope, "Adams Book Stirs Up Controversy". *The Associated Press*, July 19, 2001, Entertainment Section.

middle and an end, plus an element of suspense to keep the reader turning pages.”³⁴ McCullough is excited to tell a story, and people are apparently excited to read his accounts of America’s past. For McCullough, storytelling is the best way to get people interested in history again and to rectify what he believes is a growing generation of historically illiterate Americans.³⁵ McCullough adds, “[Children] want to learn, and there’s no problem getting young people interested in history. Barbara Tuchman said it perfectly in two words, ‘Tell Stories.’”³⁶

The narrative style McCullough employs keeps the reader in the past’s present. Readers learn about new information when the characters do. We share the experience as if we were in the room. Though this is exciting, and more importantly riveting, it abandons the informative lens of hindsight. This is all well and good for many in the general public, but it does have many downfalls. To begin, the scrutiny that history lends itself to is removed in favor of the richness in detail. For academic purists, this is not the path future generations of historians should follow. Secondly, there is a definite lack of debate when writing in the narrative style. The actions are laid in a matter-of-fact manner, and consideration of other, sometimes conflicting, points of view are all but lost.

As Professor Gordon S. Wood shows in his article, “In Defense of Academic History Writing,” many academic historians prefer to write analytic history rather than a narrative history.³⁷ They focus on “specialized and often narrowly focused monographs usually based on

³⁴ Alvin P Sanoff, “Dispatches From the Past” *U.S. News & World Report*, June 22, 1992, Science and Society Section, Vol. 112, No. 24; Pg.76.

³⁵ Leslie Shaver, “The Storyteller: An Interview with David McCullough,” *Information Outlook* (2003) http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FWE/is_4_7/ai_100203181/

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Gordon S. Wood, “In Defense of Academic History Writing.” *Perspectives on History* (2010), <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1004/1004art1.cfm>

their PhD dissertations.”³⁸ Such topics may be focused on particular political movements during a very finite period of time in a distant land. These stories are hardly aimed towards the general public, and purposefully so. Instead, they are written by historians for historians, similarly how complicated physics discoveries would be published for physics professors and physical engineers.

William C. Rice, author of the article “Who Killed History? An Academic Autopsy,” argues that the fault lies in the institution of education itself, more specifically the lack of incentives for academics to write for the general public.³⁹ According to Rice, academic research and writing needs to justify the amount of funding granted from the universities who commissioned the projects, especially in cases of public, government sponsored universities.

What this really boils down to is what Rice calls the academic historian’s ‘social contract.’ He writes, “In exchange for the special license, internal control, and other privileges, professions provide recognizable goods which benefit others.”⁴⁰ Academic historians owe the public, in Rice’s eyes, an education. This is the same public, after all, that “supports scholarly careers through tuition, government funding, grants, loan guarantees, and endowments.”⁴¹ The highly specialized research and subsequent material created by the academics is too hard to understand, or just plain uninteresting for ‘outsiders’ all too often. Rice cites some articles that were produced by academic historians, including “Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver during World War II and Reconversion” and “Rebels with Causes: A Study of Revolutionary Syndicalist Culture among the French Primary School

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Teachers between 1880 and 1919.”⁴² These articles could be fascinating to some, but are rarely sought after by the general consumer.

Rice acknowledges that these histories should be studied, but he believes that they “shouldn’t be conducted to the near exclusion of writing general history and history aimed at nonexpert readers.”⁴³

Historians should consider their ‘social contract’ when gathering information and synthesizing data and recognize the difference between the knowledge being created for the public and the knowledge created for fellow historians. The ‘knowledge’ created for the specific audience of other academics can hardly be called knowledge at all. Rice explains,

“If knowledge is being produced as never before and yet there are so few knowers, we have to ask this: is it really knowledge? By routine definition, of course, it is. But can it rightly take on the dignity of the word, its aggrandizing rhetorical powers, if this ‘knowledge’ is all but unshared? The question brings to mind Bishop Berkeley’s famous challenge: if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?”⁴⁴

This is an interesting question. The Britannica World Language Dictionary defines knowledge as, among other things, “Information; learning; specifically, the cumulative culture of the human race.”⁴⁵ Information that is produced for such an insignificant amount of people relative to the population can be considered knowledge in the ordinary sense, as Rice notes, but how much of it actually attributes to the greater understanding of the cumulative culture of the human race? Conversely, the narrative style put forth by popularizers such as David McCullough reach an astounding amount of people. Rice continues to explore this question,

“If you say that a sound must be heard to be a sound, that it requires a perceiver, then the answer is No. Similarly, if knowledge is ‘created’ and no one – well, almost no one- knows it, is

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Charles Earle Funk, ed., *Britannica World Language Dictionary* (USA: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1956), 741.

it knowledge? If you say that knowledge requires knowers in a meaningful plural sense, the answer must again be No.⁴⁶

Rice argues that there must be a substantial, though ambiguous, amount of people who receive said knowledge in order for it to be of any use. The work of academics must be directed towards a large audience in order for it to become relevant. David McCullough tries to rectify this problem by bringing knowledge to the masses. He may not be troubled by the lack of deep analysis, because any truths that can be shared are more important than all the truths that are not shared. Rice expands upon this idea,

“Now the sound of the tree is a one-time thing, whereas the knowledge in question can reside in a book awaiting knowers. But unless knowers appear, which they won’t for all but a few books among many thousands, that knowledge is consigned forever to the realm of potentiality and never exists in a consequential, concrete sense.”⁴⁷

This idea, that worthwhile knowledge necessitates a large audience, is expanded upon. Rice contends that the knowledge produced in books published for a minute audience (relative to the general population) are inconsequential and worthless. Wood, for one, would argue this point, and McCullough would argue as well. These aren’t worthless pieces of knowledge being created. Instead, they just need to be synthesized and shared.

Wood and McCullough would argue that these ‘inconsequential’ facts are actually the skeleton of every history book, and it falls to the author to form the meat around it. After all, the flavor is what is desired by much of the mainstream consumer base, and the knowledge is the byproduct of that indulgence. These writers entice the reader via their literary artistry and teach them while their guard is down. To finish Rice’s thought on the matter, he continues,

⁴⁶ Rice, William Craig, “Who Killed History? An Academic Autopsy,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Autumn95, Vol 71 Issue4, p601.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

_____ To adapt John Dewey's argument about the triadic nature of language, knowledge 'exists only when it is listened to as well as spoken. The hearer is an indispensable partner. The work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it.'⁴⁸

Rice uses this argument to facilitate his overall thesis, namely, that universities need to hold academic historians accountable to the needs of the general public. History, Rice reasons, should be written in an accessible fashion. Academic histories should be written in an engaging narrative rather than the monographic style that is routinely used, laden with "flattened verbs, incessant abstractions, disregard for rhythm and sentence balance, expert-oriented asides, and occasional political tendentiousness."⁴⁹

While it is possible for any writer to add an artistic flare to their work, it would do little to remedy the situation. No matter how elegant or well written a book is, if the topic fails to entice the reader, it will remain on the shelf. The blame does not necessarily fall on the author regarding the lack of readership, as Rice would argue; rather it most often falls on the topic itself. Additionally, these topics are esoteric, intending to expand the general knowledge of specific actions and consequences that fit into the larger themes.

For example, the fast-paced lifestyle of the 'Roaring Twenties' together with the illegal underground speakeasies, the subsequent proliferation of bootleggers, and their fiscal impact in the Depression era economy can be chronicled in a narrative style book that many would find interesting. Much of the reading population may be interested in this book, and a percentage of them would actually buy it. Twenty years before this fictitious book was written, a fictitious post-graduate history student conducted research based on the impact of a mass-produced, low-quality liquor produced in the Appalachian Mountains from 1922 to 1923 and its monetary impact on the surrounding counties. Few would encounter this essay directly, but if it was

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

consulted by the author of the book, then the academic research would reach the reading public. The essay could have been written with all the literary flare of Shakespeare condensed into a single essay, but since the topic doesn't draw in the majority of the reading public on its own, it wasn't read. If the history student didn't care to write it in the first place, instead wary of the lack of public reception, the popular historian would have no source to cite, and thus the connection between the academic and the reader is not created. It isn't the lack of artistry in the writing keeping people away from academic literature, it is the topic itself. This point is exemplified by Wood.

Rice's viewpoint isn't shared by all who worry about the decline of American historical knowledge. As we have seen through Wood's writings, many academics believe that the detailed analysis constructed by the focused lens of an academic historian is the most important piece of historical knowledge. After all, who would an author consult if not for those who compiled the many acts of history into a single document?

Wood concludes that limited readership is not the problem concerning academic history; instead it is the extreme specialization of academic research that keeps the general population out of their books. "The problem at the present," writes Wood, "is that the monographs have become so numerous and so refined and so specialized that most academic historians have tended to throw up their hands at the possibility of synthesizing all these studies, of bringing them together in comprehensive narratives."⁵⁰ The fact that these monographs are typically written for a small audience isn't troubling to Wood as it is for Rice. Wood argues that these monographs are the backbone to any well researched and well written popular history book.

⁵⁰ Gordon S. Wood, "In Defense of Academic History Writing," *Perspectives on History* (2010), <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1004/1004art1.cfm>

Though many researchers are churning out extremely interesting, if publicly inaccessible, knowledge, the institutions that should be promoting the dissemination of said knowledge are often stymieing that process. Rice attributes this phenomena to the pressures of academic life, writing, “A talent for writing for a broad audience is considered secondary at best, a mark of intellectual deficiency at worst.”⁵¹ He goes on to note that writing for a large audience will label the author as a ‘popularizer’, which is “about the worst thing that can be said about a young scholar,” according to American historian Page Smith.⁵²

Michael Nelson agrees with Smith’s remark, noting that being called “the nation’s leading presidential historian” by *Newsweek* is “the kiss of death among academic historians.”⁵³ Nelson argues that vanity may be a factor, noting that when television shows call upon their ‘resident historian’ it is often a popular historian and “academic historians hear remarks like [those] and gnash their teeth, partly because they equate media celebrity with superficiality and partly because when the phones ring, it’s seldom the *Today* show calling.”⁵⁴

If there is a stigma in the academic profession regarding ‘popularizers’, then who is educating the public? Fortunately, Rice notes, there are many history books being written by journalists and independent writers. He explains,

Yet more empirical evidence of the superior service rendered by ‘nonprofessionals’ can be gleaned from the History Book Club, the preeminent source of history books sold to American readers. Of the 106 titles offered in a recent standard mailing, only 19 were authored by university faculty affiliated with the American Historian Association. Of the 28 biographies, only four. Overall, less than 20 percent of books offered in this common reader’s agora were grown on the

⁵¹ Rice, William Craig, “Who Killed History? An Academic Autopsy,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Autumn95, Vol 71 Issue4, p601.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Michael Nelson, “What’s happened to history” *History News Network* (2002) <http://hnn.us/articles/969.html#>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

state-subsidized farms of the American academy. The remaining 80 percent sprang from the bounteous private plots of journalists, “amateurs,” and outsiders.⁵⁵

One of the reasons for these popularizers’ commanding control of the history book market relates to the very nature of our capitalist system. Nelson observes, “Academic historians sell most of their books to their conscripts, students who must have them to pass a course. Popular historians sell most of theirs to customers who buy out of genuine interest in the subject.”⁵⁶ This is oversimplifying the point, but does highlight the disparity between popular book sales and academic book sales at the least.

Our original question, “Who should tell the nation’s history,” seems quite evasive. As Professor Wilentz notes, it is not a new one either. In order to suitably answer this question according to our current needs, we must understand how history has been disseminated.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historiography was greatly influenced by scientific research, most importantly by the notion of objectivity.⁵⁷ This idea, that history could be studied from a purely empirical standpoint, void of prejudice and based in sound reasoning, remained just that, an idea. Early twentieth century historians continued to practice biased research, but, as historian Peter Novick argues, “it was made possible by the profession’s religious, ethnic, class, and gender homogeneity.”⁵⁸

Modern historiography’s roots began as a scientific endeavor, with the majority of writers and researchers being white, well-educated, Christian men. Novick argues that since these men

⁵⁵ Rice, William Craig, “Who Killed History? An Academic Autopsy,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Autumn95, Vol 71 Issue4, p601.

⁵⁶ Michael Nelson, “What’s happened to history” *History News Network* (2002) <http://hnn.us/articles/969.html#>

⁵⁷ Harold Mah, “That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession,” review of *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* by Peter Novick, *Labour/ Le Travail*, Fall90, Vol. 26, p221-224, 4p.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

were conducting their research under the guise of objectivity, their vastly common backgrounds lead them to produce theories that were greatly one-sided and wholly inconsiderate of differing points of view. McCullough researches and writes with a more modern historiographical method that resulted from the swing away from purely 'academic' research.

Eventually, historians began to question the authority of these early researchers and writers of history. Wilentz notes that it would not be until the 1930s that the study of history began to shift away from scholarship, led by banner man Allan Nevins, a historian from Columbia University.⁵⁹ His greatest contribution to the study of history came in the formation of the Society of American Historians. As a journalist transplanted in the field of history writing, Nevins was uncomfortable.

He never felt completely at home in his monograph-driven profession. 'He was concerned,' as one of his students recalled, 'not only to guide the young historian toward and understanding of historical method but also to make him aware of the opportunities which history, as a form of literature, offered to the writer, the editor, the critic.' Frustrated by what he regarded as the academy's squelching of literary ambition, Nevins became the driving force behind the formation, in 1939, of the Society of American Historians, an elected group of freelance historians and biographers, as well as belletristic academics, in order 'to promote literary distinction in historical writing.' Nevins also called for the publication of a lively and well-written magazine of American history, purged of scholarly awkwardness and aimed at a popular audience – a project that finally got off the ground in 1954, when a group of former Life magazine editors started American Heritage.⁶⁰

Thus, modern popular history was born. No longer were history writers focused on a scientific study of the past, instead they sought to teach history's lessons through entertaining accounts of influential moments. This is the style that McCullough has employed throughout his career. His first book warns the reader of personal and collective hubris, as detailed by the account of the Johnstown flood that could have been prevented had architects taken greater care in their designs

⁵⁹ Sean Wilentz, "America Made Easy: McCullough, Adams, and the decline of popular history" *The New Republic* (2001), <http://www.tnr.com/article/books/america-made-easy>

⁶⁰ Ibid.

or the people of the surrounding area taken any precautions to safeguard themselves from disaster.

His second book does much of the same. In the description of the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, McCullough highlights the intuitiveness of the American worker, and the eventual product that is produced when hard work meets ingenuity. Both these themes were portrayed through well-written, accessible prose aimed directly at the popular audience, just as Nevins had envisioned. Books in this vein, important as they may be for the growth of popular history, were beginning to be condemned by academics.

As Allan Nevins was making history available to the general public, academic historians were reacting to the previous regime in their own way. Just after the Second World War, historian Richard Hofstadter noticed the shift from scholarly works had led to a large amount of histories aimed to raise spirits and lacked any historical scrutiny.⁶¹ In true generational reactionist form, this new group of historians sought to remedy the perceived shortcomings of the preceding administration. As Wilentz notes, “From the 1950s through the 1980s, American historians devoted themselves to a remorseless re-examination of the nation’s past.”⁶² Popular histories were thought to be tilting too far towards accessibility, slipping away from a judicious account of past actions.

American historiography entered an unusual period. There was a conscious effort to relay history to the American public in an easy-to-understand fashion, lead by Nevins and other popular historians. Congruently, a period of reactionary, self-evaluation was being pushed by prominent academic historians. What resulted was a public encounter with both popular and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

academic historiography. Scholarly historiography had moved from a period of scientific analysis done by a group of like minded, similarly-raised men, through a period of 'feel-good' history created to alleviate the stresses of Depression/WWII era life, to a period of critical analysis.⁶³

Wilentz argues that the cycle has again repeated itself. Today, the emphasis has again been put on popular history, a clear reaction to the "dullness, the narrowness, and the atrocious writing that afflicted the analytical history that was practiced in the universities."⁶⁴ He observes that McCullough has been the poster-child for the resurgent of popular history devoid of real analysis.

Each of these transitions has affected the writings of McCullough and their general impact on popular history. His first three books, published in 1968, 1972, and 1977, each contain engineering stories that focus on a human aspect. Given his roots, it is not surprising his writings lean towards popular history. His background in English literature and his work writing magazines directed him towards these topics, and he wrote the only way he knew how. As McCullough progressed through his career, he began focusing on great actors in history, recounting their personal backgrounds, and explaining how their situations controlled their actions. His next two books, about Teddy Roosevelt and Harry Truman, did just that, and were more concerned (compared to his previous books) about the legacy these men left. His two most recent books, both regarding the Revolutionary War period, offer more insight still, with *John Adams* taking the lead role. In *John Adams*, McCullough offers an insightful, if controversial, opinion of the late president. While it is still in the narrative style, McCullough leans more

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

towards the academic by offering more than just plot. Interestingly enough, in 1776, he seems to revert back to his tale-telling ways, completing his personal shift through the history writing lifecycle.

Of course, throughout each of these periods that McCullough wrote, popular and academic historians have researched and written many volumes. But, according to Wilentz, only one of these styles has been dominant during any point of that twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Rice takes a more sobering approach, arguing that the popular resurgence led by Nevins was merely a “mid-century rebellion” and that academics never really considered educating the public a top priority.⁶⁵ Instead, the rise of popular history may be completely reliant upon the wants of the public, and not affected by the goals of academics.

It has become clear that popular historians, McCullough included, are currently educating the public in matters of history. Wilentz argues that this is because of the public reaction to the harshly introspective writings of the 1950s through the 1980s. Rice argues it is because academics write all too often for a small group of fellow scholars. Wood argues that it is due to the fact that historiography has become too specialized and requires previous understanding of the topics presented. Nelson reasons that it is because of the growing resentment of popularizers by the academics, and their lack of willingness to write for the public for fear of losing their scholarly status.

In reality, a blending of each of these theories more closely resembles the truth. Though it may be true that academics spurn the historical nature of the popularizers’ literature, the public seemingly can’t get enough of it. For whatever reason, popularizers like McCullough are selling

⁶⁵ Rice, William Craig, “Who Killed History? An Academic Autopsy,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Autumn95, Vol 71 Issue4, p601.

history one book at a time. Richard Overy, author and history professor at the University of Exeter recounts a more alarming facet to this debate – that academic history is slowly fading into obscurity, and that popular history is taking its place.

Overy argues two factors are contributing to the waning of academic historical research and the subsequent literature produced. First, he contends that popular history, what he terms a ‘democratization’ of the past, is effectively destroying the public’s perception of academic history.⁶⁶ Secondly, he argues that “there is governmental pressure to make history socially useful, contributing in visible ways to the gross national product while providing the taxpayer with some public display of its utility.”⁶⁷ Overy is concerned about the future of history as an academic field, and places the blame on the growth of popular historical literature and popular historical authors, McCullough included.

He claims there is a “public confusion over what history is as an academic subject” and that the confusion “derives from the misconception that popular history and popular history writers are doing in some sense real history, while the arcane, theoretically driven and undramatic scholarship in university departments is bad history.”⁶⁸ In this assessment, his faith in the reading public is woefully lacking. To further exemplify this point, he writes,

The public’s capacity to distinguish clearly between fact and fiction in this process is not very sophisticated, but in a sense it doesn’t matter if the story is told in novel or a nonfiction narrative. There is no higher intellectual purpose to be served by popular narration other than to describe and entertain. It is popular history, not academic history, that is really disengaged from the real world.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Richard Overy, “The Historical Present,” *Times Higher Education*, April 29, 2010, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=411360>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

This point would obviously be argued against by McCullough. His books are written to entertain, yes, but even considering his lack of deep analysis, there is still much to learn from his writing. After all, his main goal in writing is to bring about historical awareness, to bring history to people who wouldn't otherwise encounter it. It doesn't stand to reason that Overy would be disapproving of bringing people and history together, but he does believe that popular history is causing more problems than it is solving.

He sees history in its present form devolving into nothing more than a cultural and heritage study.⁷⁰ One can see his point of concern; if popular history is focusing more and more on entertaining people with grand stories about important people or watershed moments, and popular history is becoming the sole educator for many Americans after their secondary school education (save for one or two world history classes taken during the first two years at a university or at a community college), then it isn't too far of a stretch to assume academic research will fall by the wayside.

This is especially true if the draw to a history profession begins to fade in light of Overy's other concern – that “history must find ways of engaging more with those who produce policy to justify itself.”⁷¹ If policy makers can't justify the “large sums of money to allow people to study the past” public funding will be reduced, and eventually, in the eyes of Overy, the study of history as a scholarly activity will disappear.⁷²

Overy's apocalyptic view is intriguing, but unlikely. Academic and popular history are two parts to the same whole – the former the root and stalk, the later the beautiful flower that catches the eye of the passing bee, or in some cases the burr that embeds itself under an animal's

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

skin. The popular historians rely upon the work of the academics in order to write their books, and the academics need the popular historians to raise the country's historical awareness, hopefully leading to an increased desire to learn more. For many, the process is cyclical, and good writers of either leniency can direct the consumer to the other.

The main difference between these two is the insight they offer. These analytic articles and studies, usually put forth a thesis and defend it with the knowledge of other analytic articles and studies conducted by fellow historians. These historians research and arrive at a conclusion that either supports popular thought among the knowledgeable or contradicts it. They then attempt to prove their own findings while disproving the ideas of their competition.

This is one of the qualms raised by academic historians regarding popular historians such as David McCullough, or to highlight another recent 'popularizer' that was grilled under analytic focus, Gavin Menzies, author of *1421* and other books. Many academics are angered by the ease of publication afforded to authors who write a biased, sometimes poorly researched history book. As Robert Finlay notes in his review of Menzies' *1421*, the books' greatest quality is that it "might serve as an outstanding example of how not to (re)write world history."⁷³ The book is full of cyclical arguments, and factual errors, and yet, is available across the United States and the UK for purchase under the heading of a 'history' book.

In fact, according to book reviewer Gady A. Epstein, Menzies' *1421* "has sold at least 74,000 copies in the US, according to Nielsen BookScan, and hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide."⁷⁴ This is one of the most recent and definitely one of the most glaring examples of the failures of popularizers when it comes to writing history books. Epstein also cites a historian

⁷³ Robert Finlay, "How Not to (Re)Write World History: Gavin Menzies and the Chinese Discovery of America," *Journal of World History*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Jun., 2004), pp. 229-242.

⁷⁴ Gady A. Epstein, "Flat Earth Society," *Forbes*, Vol. 182 Issue 5, pg. 38.

from Peking University, He Shunguo, who also attacks Menzies' book by stating, "His books are assumptions. Even that is a high evaluation of his work... It's not history."⁷⁵—In response, Menzies holds steadfast in his findings, as Epstein shows.

"By and large I've come to accept the abuse," Menzies tells FORBES, arguing the true history is obviously "not welcome" to his critics. "I will be proved absolutely right. The longer that time goes by the more right that people will see that I am." Did we hear him laughing on the way to his bank?⁷⁶

Formatted: Font: 10 pt

Formatted: Indent: Left: 36 pt, Right: 36 pt,
Line spacing: single

Obviously this is hardly a contrite closing remark, but it does bring up a good point. How can authors of history, ranging from McCullough to Wilentz to Menzies, be held accountable to write factual, well-researched, historical literature when a publishing company will disseminate anything that will generate profit? Of course, the academic faces occupational hazards when writing poor history, but is Menzies, a popular historian (by title at the least), not allowed the same leeway when arriving at conclusions regardless of the popular thought that is afforded to David McCullough? As we have seen, McCullough prefers not to entangle himself with deep analysis when writing his books, and is able to circulate his theories on his own accord.

For this same reason, Menzies can, and does, publish his theories regardless of the prevailing enlightened thought. The problem becomes separating theory from fact, especially when reading books taken from the history section of a local bookstore. There are many contradicting viewpoints regarding many crucial moments in history, and it falls to the reader to explore these options and settle on the 'truth' themselves.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Without actually doing the research themselves, the only way one can understand the past is to read about it in history books. This is where the historian truly shines, and where Overy's argument begins to fall apart. While much of the American public would find analytical history boring, Wood contends that they are priceless, and the research conducted by these academics will continue. The volumes of research created by academics are the pieces that nail down the facts about any number of things. "In their multiplicity they are the reason we know much more about the histories of slavery, women, and hosts of other subjects than we ever knew before."⁷⁷ Wood admits though, "Of course, all these gains have often come at the expense of traditional political or narrative history."⁷⁸

When academics write, they sacrifice readership. When popular historians write, they sacrifice the narrow lens of study. The blending of the two is rare and phenomenal, one case being the historian Samuel Eliot Morison whom Wood cites as one academic that reached the masses with his writings. Historians need to be relied upon to enlighten the reader. The lack of a narrow lens of study may not trouble many academics. Instead, it is the lack of analysis and ease of distributing what many academics would deem a less than comprehensive view of the past. Wood believes that if a narrative can be written that uses the detailed research of academics, they would have to write it themselves.⁷⁹

This is something that McCullough aims to do. Though he is not learned in the study of history like Wood, Wilentz, or Nelson, he does take great care in the researching and the writing each of his books, though, as we have seen, some oversights occur. In order to be confident in

⁷⁷ Gordon S. Wood, "In Defense of Academic History Writing," *Perspectives on History* (2010), <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1004/1004art1.cfm>

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

his own writings McCullough puts much time in his journey to understand the places he writes about. He travels to the places he writes about to get a greater sense of the scenery, he reads an enormous amount of material regarding each subject, and he does his best to write with only the knowledge his subjects could have possibly possessed at the moment of their actions. Interviewer Alvin P. Sanoff details McCullough's process,

Writing history for mass consumption requires at least as much research as history written primarily for scholars. McCullough, whose new book [Truman] runs to almost 1,000 pages, compiles 10 times the material he actually uses. In addition to visiting scenes of events, McCullough does an enormous amount of interviewing – he spoke to more than 130 people for the Truman book – as well as archival research. 'I see the past as my territory,' McCullough explains. 'I'm a foreign correspondent who goes there instead of to India or South America.'⁸⁰

McCullough's process has taken him through some of the most pivotal moments in America's history. In his most recent book, *1776*, McCullough was able to sift through material that was being held in more than twenty-five libraries, some in America and others in the United Kingdom.⁸¹ He "drew on letters, diaries, memoirs, maps, orderly books, newspaper accounts – all the usual primary sources historians work with."⁸² McCullough also relies on academic historians for information as well. In the case of *1776*, McCullough used three that were published in the late 1700's, shortly after the events occurred.

As the author notes in the bibliography, he had "drawn a great deal also from three of the earliest histories of the Revolutionary War, all published in the last decade of the eighteenth century, when memories were still relatively fresh and many of the principles were still alive."⁸³ These were *The History of the American Revolution* by David Ramsay, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America* by William

⁸⁰ Alvin P Sanoff, "Dispatches From the Past" *U.S. News & World Report*, June 22, 1992, Science and Society Section, Vol. 112, No. 24; Pg.76.

⁸¹ Book Reporter, "Author Talk: David McCullough" BookReporter.com, <http://www.bookreporter.com/authors/au-mccullough-david.asp>

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 347.

Gordon, and *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War* by Charles Stedman. The first two were written by American authors, the third by an Englishman. Though it may seem odd to put much weight on an account published shortly after altercations occur, losing the benefit of hindsight, it is important to understand the thought processes of those who fought and survived the ordeal. In addition to their personal account, biased as it may be, historians can ascertain what was important enough to include in a history book – the reasons they picked up their weapons, left their families, endured harsh winters for little monetary compensation, as well as many other aspects that led the participants to make the decisions they made.

As cavalier as it sounds, history is written (originally at least) by the victors, and that history is half the true story. It is the prerogative of any history writer to use any resources available to understand the time period in question. This has been a criticism of McCullough, that he does not delve into his topics enough. By reading into these first-hand accounts, he attempts to uncover the truths he is searching for. It is by combining these accounts with other researcher's studies that one can piece together fuller pictures.

This is why, in addition to the numerous primary sources and the histories written shortly after the Revolutionary War, McCullough consulted many anthologies, biographies, and essays written more recently. While Professor Gordon Wood suggests that “nonacademic historians... unfortunately write without much concern for or much knowledge of the extensive monographic literature that exists” McCullough seems to pass that test.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Gordon S. Wood, “In Defense of Academic History Writing.” *Perspectives on History* (2010), <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1004/1004art1.cfm>

McCullough not only researches his topics himself, he uses the “extensive monographic literature” created by academic historians to write his books. When writing *1776*, he used just under three hundred separate books to gather information, not including the twenty-one reference works or the thirty-nine articles with dates ranging from 1834 (an article published in *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*), to 2003 (an article published in the *New York Times*). McCullough uses the vast amount of literature available to him. He synthesizes material already created by many academic historians into a readable format so that McCullough’s final product is a well-researched and concise book that considers voices from participants to researchers, and many places in between.

For McCullough, the many hours of textual research is coupled with visual and sensory research as well. For each book he has written, McCullough has visited the areas of which he describes on the page. “I love to go to the places where things happen,” McCullough says, “I like to walk the walk and see how the light falls and what winter feels like.”⁸⁵ This physical research leads to the sensory-driven writing that McCullough is known for. Reading how long a trip would take, along what path, and enduring what weather not only enlivens the story, it begs the reader to visit areas that they have imagined and to connect themselves with characters from the past.

McCullough converts this experience and research at a speed of four pages a day. He attributes this mark to Western writer Harry Sinclair Drago, whom he had met at a party before he began work on his first title.⁸⁶ McCullough recalls the experience of walking over to Drago

⁸⁵ Bruce Cole, “The Title Always Comes Last,” National Endowment for the Humanities, <http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/mccullough/interview.html>

⁸⁶ Academy of Achievement, “David McCullough” Academy of Achievement, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/mcc2int-1>

and said “Mr. Drago, I – someone told me that you’re written over 100 books... How do you do that?”⁸⁷ His response has been the pace set by McCullough ever since.

Interestingly enough, even with the advances of technology over the years, McCullough continues to write every word on his typewriter. “I like the feeling of working physically with my hands,” notes McCullough, “and I also like the idea that if there is a power failure... that I won’t be unplugged... I am the power source, not that plug in the wall.”⁸⁸ Similar to many of his book’s topics, hard work and personal accountability lends a direct hand in the creation of his works. In explaining his methodology, McCullough says,

I try to do the research, up to maybe the point where I think 60-some percent of it is done, and then I begin writing. And it’s in the writing that you begin to find out what you need to know, and what you don’t know, and it’s perhaps circumstantial, but I don’t think so. I try to write four good pages a day. That’s double space, typewritten pages. I still work on a typewriter, a manual typewriter because I love the feeling of making something with my hands.⁸⁹

He allows the writing to dictate the story, gathering enough information to lay the groundwork, and finishing the holes with more pointed research.

McCullough wasn’t always a great history writer. While researching his first book, *The Johnstown Flood*, McCullough learned how to write history. He was without the background of learning historiography in college, being an English major, but he had “stumbled upon a story that [he] felt was powerful, exciting, and very worth telling.”⁹⁰ He then taught himself how to research and write, and quickly discovered that “contrary to the notion that the past is a dead

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

thing – that in fact, wherever you scratch the surface, you find life. And it was the life – the people and what happened to them – that was the pull for [him].”⁹¹

McCullough was able to relate these stories easily because of his background in journalism, having worked for magazines for many years. Throughout his career, he has maintained a journalistic style, while slowly adding the formatting of a self-trained historian to his repertoire. Each work adds more detail, a bit more analysis, and added awareness of the historical impact regarding his topics. The life he encountered in his research impacted history in significant ways, and as McCullough advanced through his career, he began to understand and was able to relate those impacts to the reader in a concise manner, while simultaneously being more comprehensive in his accounts.

What he had stumbled upon that day, early in his career, was a topic that he had found extremely interesting without any decent literature written about it. That became, and has remained, his charge – writing an interesting history that the people could learn from. This is, at its most basic level, what every historian does. Why then, has McCullough remained so popular and his books remained in circulation when others have not? McCullough cites the advent and proliferation of movies during his generation’s youth as one of the main causes.

The roles being played by one famous actor in particular, Jimmy Stewart, exemplifies his point. “The part Jimmy Stewart is playing,” says McCullough, “is very important. He’s almost always the same part, and this is the seemingly ordinary, decent American who – when put to the test in an extreme situation – rises to the occasion and does the extraordinary. And that’s an old, old story in our American way of life.”⁹² In much the same way movies and characters portrayed

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

by actors similar to Jimmy Stewart reached the America of generations past, McCullough reaches contemporary Americans with his books. He uses uniquely American stories to relate lessons of the past with problems of today.

Americans have witnessed these triumphs on the silver screen, and have been given the unprecedented opportunity to experience, together with everyone else in the theatre, the lives of these characters. McCullough tries to recreate that emotional connection between all three parts – the viewers, their contemporaries, and the characters being viewed. McCullough’s writing allows for an understanding on a personal level, in this case between the reader and the character being read about. In addition, it speaks to the target audience’s common history, creating a discussion larger than the predicaments of his characters. In simpler terms, people can talk about history like they talk about movies. An engaging, open discussion can spontaneously occur between enlightened individuals. McCullough’s accessible and dramatic prose allows for this to happen.

In addition to forging connections, McCullough’s crusade to ~~writes to~~ raise historical awareness keeps him writing. Of 1776, he notes,

I want people to see that all-important time in a different way – in the way it was. For a number of reasons, including the absence of photographs, we tend to see the men and women of the Revolution as not quite real. And we have far too little sense of what they suffered. Unlike the people you see in Mathew Brady’s photographs from the Civil War, the men and women of the Revolution seem more like characters in a costume pageant. And it’s a pageant in which the performers are all handsome as stage actors, with uniforms and dress that are always costume perfect. I want to be inside that other time. I want to convey the atmosphere of the time, what it was like to have been alive then, what the reality was for those people. I often think about how they would feel if they could read what I’m writing. I imagine them asking, ‘Does he get it?’⁹³

McCullough’s trademark style details those lives so that readers can explore the past. He doesn’t treat historical figures as outlines, filling in their name, profession, and key influences,

⁹³ Book Reporter, “Author Talk: David McCullough” BookReporter.com, <http://www.bookreporter.com/authors/au-mccullough-david.asp>

reminiscent of the way most Americans learned in history classes. Instead he enlivens them, gives them their individual character, and opens a window into their lives. Similarly to the way the current 'Facebook' and 'Twitter' generation of school children seem to have unfiltered access to the lives of friends and celebrities alike, McCullough gives long-dead people relevance in the twenty-first century.

David McCullough may fall into the 'popular historian' fold, but he isn't concerned about the distinction. In one interview, McCullough states his position, explaining

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 our living writing history can also be called true professionals... I don't feel that there is a great divide between the work that I and others do and those in the academic world. There are superb writers who are academic historians: Bernard Bailyn, William Leuchtenburg, Kenneth Jackson. And there are people who are trying to write history for the general reader who can be quite tedious.⁹⁴

In an answer to our original question, "Who should tell the nation's history, the professors or the popularizers," the answer must be both. As in any profession, there must be a careful balance of deep analysis and the ability to relate the findings to the average consumer. History is no different. As David McCullough said, "I do feel in my heart of hearts that if history isn't well written, it isn't going to be read, and if it isn't read, it's going to die."⁹⁵ Historians of all ambitions must hold it at their highest prerogative to keep history alive, whether they write for the public or for other academics.

⁹⁴ Bruce Cole, "The Title Always Comes Last," National Endowment for the Humanities, <http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/mccullough/interview.html>

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Bibliography

BOOKS

1. McCullough, David. *1776*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005.
2. McCullough, David. *Truman*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.
3. McCullough, David. *The Path Between the Seas*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977.
4. McCullough, David. *Mornings on Horseback*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981.
5. McCullough, David. *The Great Bridge*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.
6. McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.
7. McCullough, David. *The Johnstown Flood*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.

BOOK REVIEWS

1. Ellis, Joseph J. "His Excellency George Washington and 1776." Reviewed of *1776* by David McCullough. *History Today*, June 2005.
2. Finlay, Robert. "How Not to (Re)Write World History: Gavin Menzies and the Chinese Discovery of America." Review of *1421: The Year China Discovered America* by Gavin Menzies. *Journal of World History*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June 2004)
3. Haywood, John. "1434: The Year a Magnificent Chinese Fleet sailed to Italy and Ignited the Renaissance" Review of *1434: The Year a Magnificent Chinese Fleet sailed to Italy and Ignited the Renaissance* by Gavin Menzies. *History Today*, August 2008.
4. Kem, Col. Jack D. "1776." Review of *1776* by David McCullough. *Air & Space Power Journal*, summer 2009.
5. Kingseed, Col. Cole C. "1776." Review of *1776* by David McCullough. *Parameters*, Winter 2005-06.
6. Mah, Harold. "That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession." Review of *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, by Peter Novick. *Labour/ Le Travail*, Fall90, Vol. 26.
7. Smith, Daniel Scott. "Noble Dream, Dead Certainties, Sophomoric Stance: Historical 4 Objectivity For Adults." Review of *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, by Peter Novick. *Historical Methods*; Fall93, Vol 26 Issue 4.

WEB SITES

1. Academy of Achievement. "David McCullough." Academy of Achievement. www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/mcc2int-1 (accessed March 3, 2010).
2. Book Reporter, "Author Talk: David McCullough" BookReporter.com, <http://www.bookreporter.com/authors/au-mccullough-david.asp> (accessed March 3, 2010)

3. Cole, Bruce. "The Title Always Comes Last," National Endowment for the Humanities, <http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/mccullough/interview.html> (accessed March 3, 2010)
4. Shaver, Leslie. "The Storyteller: An Interview with David McCullough." *Information Outlook*, 2003. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_mim0FWE/is_4_7/ai_100203181/
5. Weich, Dave. "Connecting With David McCullough." Powells.com, <http://www.powells.com/authors/mccullough.html> (accessed March 3, 2010)

ONLINE JOURNALS

1. Mroz, Ann. "Leader: Historical Lessons are Priceless." *Times Higher Education*. (2010) <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=411398> (Accessed May 27, 2010)
2. Nelson, Michael. "What's Happened to History?" *History New Network* (2002) <http://hnn.us/articles/969.html#>
3. Nobile, Philip. "The David McCullough Nobody Knows." *History News Network* (2001) <http://hnn.us/articles/157.html#>
4. Novick, Peter. "My Correct Views on Everything." *American Historical Review* (1991) http://content.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu:2048/pdf14_16/pdf/1991/AHS/01Jun91/9110140237.pdf?T=P&P=AN&K=9110140237&EbscoContent=dGJyMNLr40Sep14y9f3OLCmr0iep65Ssae4SbKWxWXS&ContentCustomer=dGJyMPGtsk2vprdpuePfgex%2BEu3q64A&D=afh (accessed April 21, 2010)
5. Overy, Richard. "The Historical Present." *Times Higher Education* (2010) <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=411360> (accessed May 27, 2010)
6. Rosenfeld, Richard. "The Adams Tyranny." *Harper's Magazine* 303, no 1816 (September 2001): 82. *Academic Search Elite*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 21, 2010) <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=afh&AN=5043467&site=ehost-live>
7. Walters, Ronald. "In Our Backyard." *Perspectives* (1995) <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/1995/9503/9503VIE.CFM> (accesses April 21, 2010)
8. Weinstein, Barbara. "The Case of the Incredible Shrinking Historians?" *Perspectives* (2007) <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2007/0709/0709pre1.cfm> (accessed April 21, 2010)
9. Wilentz, Sean. "America Made Easy: McCullough, Adams, and the decline of popular history." *The New Republic* (2001) <http://www.tnr.com/article/books/america-made-easy>
10. Wood, Gordon. "In Defense of Academic History Writing." *Perspectives on History* (2010) <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1004/1004art1.cfm>

Journals

1. Epstein, Gady A. "Flat Earth Society." *Forbes* Vol. 182 Issue 5, pg. 38 (2008)
2. Knott, Stephen. "The Legacy of John Adams." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (June 2002)

NEWS ARTICLES

1. Carr, David. "New York's Revolutionary War Sites: Just Squint, and It's 1776." *New York Times*, December 23, 2005.
2. Horwits, Tony. "'1776': Revolutionary Road." *The New York Times*, May 22, 2005.
3. Italie, Hillel. "Biographer Elevates Adam's Image." *The Associated Press*, May 23, 2001, Entertainment, Television and Culture section.
4. Italie, Hillel. "Books Tell Tale o American Revolution." *The Associated Press*, February 28, 2001, Entertainment, Television and Culture section.
5. Italie, Hillel. "Historians Under Fire." *The Associated Press*, January 24, 2002.
6. Kakutani, Michiko. "A Nation Is Born, and You Are There." *The New York Times*, May 24, 2005.
7. Kirkpatrick, David D. "Media Talk; Error in Quote Stirs Arguments Over Adams Legacy." *New York Times*, July 23, 2001.
8. Pope, Justin. "Adams Book Stirs Up Controversy." *The Associated Press*, July 19, 2001, Entertainment section.
9. Sanoff, Alvin P. "Dispatches From the Past." *U.S. News & World Report*, June 22, 1992, Science & Society section.