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A Man Worth Knowing

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Historian



DAVID MCCULLOUGH was born in 1933 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was educated there and at Yale University. Author of *1776*, *John Adams*, *Truman*, *Brave Companions*, *The Path Between the Seas*, *Mornings on Horseback*, *The Great Bridge* and *The Johnstown Flood*, he has twice received the Pulitzer Prize and twice the National Book Award, as well as the Francis Parkman Prize and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award.

The following is adapted from a public lecture delivered at Hillsdale College on March 31, 2006, during Mr. McCullough's one-week residency at the College to teach a class on "Leadership and the History You Don't Know."

I think that we need history as much as we need bread or water or love. To make the point, I want to discuss a single human being and why we should know him. And the first thing I want to say about him is that he is an example of the transforming miracle of education. When he and others wrote in the Declaration of Independence about "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," what they meant by "happiness" wasn't longer vacations or more material goods. They were talking about the enlargement of the human experience through the life of the mind and the life of the spirit. And they knew that the system of government they were setting up wouldn't work if the people weren't educated. "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization," Jefferson wrote, "it expects what never was and never will be."

John Adams was born into a poor farm family. He is often imagined as a rich Boston blueblood. He was none of those. His one great advantage, or break, was a scholarship to college—to Harvard College, which at that time had all of four buildings and a faculty of seven. Adams entered Harvard when he was 15 and discovered books. After that, he later recalled, "I read forever."

At a young age, he began to keep a diary—it was about the size of the palm of your hand, and his handwriting so small you need a magnifying glass to read it—with the idea that by reckoning day-by-day his moral assets and liabilities, he could improve himself: "Oh! that I could wear out of my mind every mean and base affectation, conquer my natural pride and conceit," he wrote. His natural pride and conceit would be among the things his critics would throw at him for the rest of his life. What's so interesting here is that he recognized this himself so early.



On July 21, 1756, at the age of 20, he wrote this memorable entry:

I am resolved to rise with the sun and to study Scriptures on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings, and to study some Latin author the other three mornings. Noons and nights I intend to read English authors I will rouse up my mind and fix my attention. I will stand collected within myself and think upon what I read and what I see. I will strive with all my soul to be something more than persons who have had less advantages than myself.

But the next morning he slept until seven, and in a one-line entry the following week he wrote: “A very rainy day. Dreamed away the time.” There was so much that he wanted to know and do, and he would have moments when he thought life was passing him by: “I have no books, no time, no friends. I must therefore be contented to live and die an ignorant, obscure fellow.”

Adams went to Harvard with the implicit understanding that he would become a minister, but he was never really drawn to that calling. In August 1756, he signed a contract with a young Worcester attorney to stay under his inspection (as they put it) for two years. The day after, inspired by a sermon he had heard and also perhaps by a feeling of relief over his decision, he walked outside and recounted that the night sky was an “amazing concave of Heaven sprinkled and glittering with stars” that threw him “into a kind of transport,” such that he knew such wonders to be gifts of God. “But all the provisions that [God] has [made] for the gratifications of our senses,” he continued,

are much inferior to the provision, the wonderful provision, that He has made for the gratification of our nobler powers of intelligence and reason. He has given us reason to find out the truth, and the real design and true end of our existence.

Making It Happen

Adams quickly rose in his profession and took an interest in politics. By the time he became president in 1796, he had served a multitude of duties for his country. He had been one of those who explained the philosophy and principles

of the American Revolution to the people of the time through what he wrote in newspapers. He had defended the hated British soldiers who were arrested and put on trial after the so-called Boston Massacre, when nobody else would defend them. Asked to do so, and knowing that it might destroy his political career, he thought it his duty in a society governed by law. And it didn’t hurt his career one bit because people saw that he was a man of conviction. He had served brilliantly in the Continental Congress. Among other accomplishments, he was the man who put the name of George Washington in nomination to become the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army; he chose Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence; later on he would put John Marshall on the Supreme Court. If he had done nothing but these three things, he would be someone we should know.

Adams more than anyone got the Continental Congress to vote for the Declaration. We have no records of what he said. Deliberations took place behind closed doors, out of fear of spies in Philadelphia. Keep in mind that only about a third of the country supported the Revolution. Another third was opposed—the Loyalists or Tories, who saw themselves as the true patriots because they were standing by their King. The remaining third, in the human way, were waiting to see who won. But Adams got the Congress to vote for the Declaration and many wrote about it afterwards. If you’ve seen the musical *1776*, you’ll remember that he is the central character. That’s as it should be. And there are many people in it singing, “Why don’t you be quiet, John Adams?” or “Why are you so obnoxious, John Adams?” When I was working on my biography, I tried to find out who called him obnoxious, and I found only one—Adams himself. He wrote to a friend many years later that he must have been rather obnoxious back then, but that he felt he had to make it happen.

Answering the Call

Adams never failed to answer the call of his country to serve, and he was called upon again and again, always to the detriment of his livelihood and often with risk to his life. He was asked to go to France during the Revolution, and set sail with his 10-year-old son, John Quincy, in the dead of winter. British cruisers were lying off the coast of Massachusetts, just waiting for someone like Adams to make a run for it to try to obtain

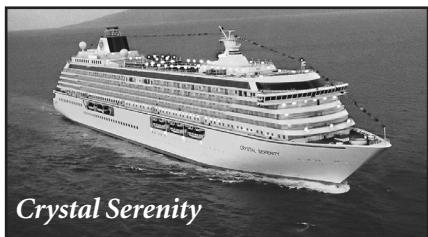
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French war support. Had he been captured, he would have been taken to England, to the Tower of London, and hanged. Keep in mind that everybody who signed the Declaration was putting his head in a noose. When our Founders pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor, that wasn't just rhetoric. Keep in mind, too, that they were up against the greatest military power on earth and had very little military experience. They had no money—there wasn't a bank in all of America in 1776. And no colonial people had ever successfully revolted against the mother country. Everything was against them.

Adams and his son took a boat out to the frigate *Boston* on February 13, 1777, from a place called Houghs Neck, near Braintree. I went with my own son to that point on February 13 at about the same time, just at dusk. It was about 28 degrees, whereas I think it was 24 or 25 degrees in 1777. We got out of a nice warm car to walk down to the shore wearing good down coats and we stood there with those big, green rollers coming in and the clouds looking very ominous and the wind blowing, and we were freezing. We thought to ourselves, how in the world did they have the courage to do it? Adams had never set foot on a ship before. The crossing would take weeks, perhaps months, *if* they made it. And as it turned out, everything that could have gone

wrong went wrong. They were hit by a hurricane. They encountered an enemy ship and fought a battle. They were becalmed for a long period. But they eventually made it. Adams served in France for about a year, then was called home.

Returning, he wrote the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—the oldest written constitution still in use anywhere in the world today—which is a rough sketch of our national Constitution ten years later. It was complete with a bill of rights and with a paragraph unlike anything in any previous constitution. Listen to it, and remember that it was written in wartime, and by a man who was the first of his family to have an education:

Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislators and magistrates in all future periods of this commonwealth to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences . . .

Many people today are saying that we should be teaching morals in our schools. They could find support in the closing line of this section of the Commonwealth Constitution, which speaks of the necessity “to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings, sincerity, good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments among the people.” Again, if Adams had done nothing but write this remarkable document, he would be someone whose character would deserve our attention. And no sooner had he finished it than he was called upon again to go to France.

No Simpler Times

Let me say a word about Abigail Adams. She probably had better political sense than her husband, and was a better judge of people. And she loved politics. There is a wonderful scene in the White House after Adams had been defeated for re-election by Jefferson. Jefferson was invited to come over and have dinner, as were many members of the Senate and the House. He sat at the table beside Abigail, asking “Who’s that man over there?” and “Who’s this one over here?” And she told him everything about them—where they came from, what their constituency was, what their interests were. She was as bright as can be and had a backbone of iron. She probably didn’t weigh 100 pounds, standing only about five feet one. I think she’s one of the greatest Americans of all time. And you can discover her, too, in her marvelous correspondence with her husband during his long absences.

Something I always like to emphasize is that there never was a simpler past. We hear often, “Oh, that was a simpler time,” but it’s always wrong. Imagine Abigail’s life. Up in the morning at about 5 to light the fireplace that served as the kitchen, call to the children to come down, cook the breakfast, tend the stock, try to keep the farm solvent during the whole war with her husband gone and with inflation and with shortages of everything. Schools were closed, so she had to educate the children at home. Her day didn’t end until 9 or 10 at night when the children would go upstairs to their bedrooms, where it could be so cold that the water in the bowls that they used to wash their faces was iced over. And then she would sit down at the kitchen table with a single candle and write some of the greatest letters ever

written by any American.

In one plaintive letter, she writes: “Posterity who are to reap the blessings will scarcely be able to conceive the hardships and sufferings of their ancestors.” And we don’t. We don’t know what they went through—epidemics of smallpox or dysentery, which could take the lives of hundreds of people just in the little town of Quincy, Massachusetts. It was by no means a simpler time. They had to worry about things that we don’t even think about any more, and suffer discomforts and inconveniences of a kind that we never even imagine. We have little idea of how tough they were. Imagine John Adams setting off in the middle of winter to ride nearly 400 miles on horseback to get to Congress. Try riding even 40 miles sometime. John and Abigail were separated, in all, more than ten years because of his service to the country.

Much is written about Adams’ vice presidency under Washington, and about his presidency. But his diplomatic duties were as important as anything else he did. Primarily, he got the Dutch to give us massive loans, which really saved our Revolution—we would probably have lost the war with England had it not been for Holland. He went to the Netherlands on his own, knowing nobody. He didn’t speak Dutch. He didn’t have authorization from Congress because he was out of touch with Congress. But he succeeded. He once said that if anything were written on his tombstone, it should be that he was the man who got the Dutch to provide the loans to win the war. Yet this fact is little known or understood by most Americans.

Later on, Adams would say the same thing about being the president who kept us out of war with France. His presidency is often associated with the war frenzy that led to the Alien and Sedition Acts, which Adams signed and which would always stand, appropriately, as a black mark against him. Adams was not a great president. But he was a very good one and I think he should be judged as more presidents should be judged—not just by what he did, but what he didn’t do. He didn’t go to war with France. Had he done so, he would have been re-elected, and he knew it. As it was, the 1800 election was extremely close. A change in about 300 votes in New York City would have re-elected him. And let us not forget that one of the most important turning points in our country, even in the world, was that election, because there was a peaceful transition, following a bitter election, from one party to another. It was not contested by armed opposi-

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tion, which was the historical norm. Adams went home to Quincy—having traveled more in the service of his country than any other American of that time—and never went anywhere ever again, although he lived for 25 more years.

The Inward Journey

Writing a biography and realizing that your subject is going to stay at home his final 25 years, you wonder how you are going to sustain the rest of the book. But there are all kinds of surprises in life, and to me the great surprise of the last part of Adams' life is that in many ways it's the most interesting. It's at this point that the inward journey begins. He suffers as he has never suffered before. He loses not only Abigail, but their beloved daughter of the same name. Those who say that people then lived in a simpler time should imagine their daughter having a mastectomy in a bedroom of their house with no anesthetic. Adams lost his wife and daughter, he lost a son to alcoholism, he lost his teeth and hair, he lost friends, he lost all of his power, his prestige, his influence. But he kept going. In fact, curiously, having in

many ways been seen as a pessimist, he became increasingly an optimist. It's in this last part of his life especially that you feel his real fiber.

John Adams, a farm boy, became the most widely and deeply read of any American of that bookish time—more so even than Jefferson. At the age of 80, he launched into a 16-volume history of France in French, which he had taught himself on his Atlantic crossings. And he pours out his innermost feelings to a few remaining friends and to some of his family, including John Quincy. Let me read you two excerpts. The first deals with his growing sense of wonder:

I never delighted much in contemplating commas and colons, or in spelling or measuring syllables; but now...if I attempt to look at these little objects, I find my imagination, in spite of all my exertions, roaming in the Milky Way, among the nebulae, those mighty orbs, and stupendous orbits of suns, planets, satellites, and comets, which compose the incomprehensible universe; and if I do not sink into nothing in my own estimation, I feel an irresistible impulse to fall

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on my knees, in adoration of the power that moves, the wisdom that directs, the benevolence that sanctifies this wonderful whole.

One of the few things that Adams had left that he adored in his last years were his fruit trees. But then came one March night a terrible ice storm, and he woke up the next morning to see all of his trees shattered. This could have broken him, but it didn't. Listen to what he wrote:

A rain had fallen from some warmer region in the skies when the cold here below was intense to an extreme. Every drop was frozen wherever it fell in the trees, and clung to the limbs and sprigs as if it had been fastened by hooks of steel. The earth was never more universally covered with snow, and the rain had frozen upon a crust on the surface which shone with the brightness of burnished silver. The icicles on every sprig glowed in all the luster of diamonds. Every tree was a chandelier of cut glass. I have seen

a queen of France with 18 millions of livres of diamonds upon her person and I declare that all the charms of her face and figure added to all the glitter of her jewels did not make an impression on me equal to that presented by every shrub. The whole world was glittering with precious stones.

Adams died, as many of you know, the same day Jefferson died. Jefferson had been his closest friend, then his political rival, then his political enemy. After twelve years of neither speaking to each other, Adams initiated the first letter of what was to be one of the great reconciliations in our history. The correspondence between these former presidents lasted until their deaths, and is some of the most wonderful letters in the English language. And then they died on the same day, each in his own bed, surrounded by his books. And it wasn't just any day. It was the 4th of July, 50 years after the Declaration of Independence. People at the time saw it as the clearest sign imaginable that the hand of God was involved with the destiny of the United States—and who could blame them?

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Citizen and Leader

In ending, I'd like to go back to an incident that took place while Adams was in the White House, after he had been defeated for re-election. On the night of January 20, 1801, a fire broke out across the lawn at the old Treasury Building. Adams saw the fire from his window and was immediately out the door and across the way to lend a hand in a bucket brigade. Think about that. He obviously didn't do it because it might look good and help him to get re-elected. And he wasn't doing it because it was in the job description of the president. He did it because he was a good citizen. He had grown up in a community where people helped each other in times of trouble. And he did it also for another reason. As a leader, he knew he ought to set an example. This is how a newspaper in Washington described the event the next morning:

The fire for some time threatened the most destructive effects—but through the exertions of the citizens, animated by the example of the President of the United States (who on this occasion fell into the ranks and aided in passing the buckets), was the fire at length subdued.

Adams said once, "I am but an ordinary man. The times alone have destined me to fame." But don't believe that for a minute. Certainly they were the most interesting times imaginable. But he was an extraordinary man.

His faith in God and the hereafter remained unshaken. He was as devout a Christian as ever served in our highest office. His fundamental creed he had reduced to a single sentence: "He who loves the Workman and his work and does what he can to preserve and improve it, shall be accepted of Him." His confidence in the future of his country was, in the final years of his life, greater than ever. Human nature had not changed, however, for all the improvements his generation had brought about. Nor would it, he was sure. Nor did he love life any less for its pain and uncertainties. Once, in a letter to his old friend Francis van der Kemp in the Netherlands, he'd written: "Griefs upon griefs! Disappointments upon disappointments. What then? This is a gay, merry old world, notwithstanding." It could have been his epitaph.



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