

The Jefferson Lecture

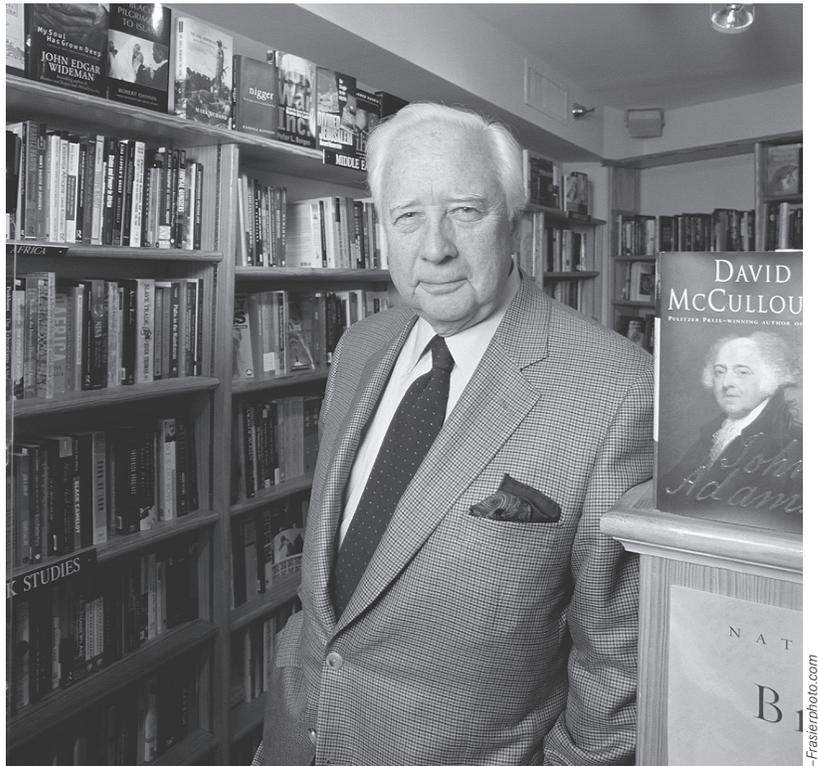
2003

On May 15, 2003, historian David McCullough delivered the thirty-second Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at the Ronald Reagan International Trade Center in Washington, D.C. In his lecture, “The Course of Human Events,” he discussed the world the Founders inhabited and the value of studying American history.

McCullough alluded to the tendency to deify the Founding Fathers and stressed the importance of remembering them as real people with passions, failings, and weaknesses. He described Adams’s vanity, Washington’s fascination with interior design, and Hopkins’s love of rum and English poetry. McCullough pointed out that these men lived in their present—not the past: “They were caught up in the living moment exactly as we are, and with no more certainty of how things would turn out than we have.”

McCullough discussed why it is beneficial to know the past. “For a free, self-governing people, something more than a vague familiarity with history is essential, if we are to hold on to and sustain our freedom,” he said. “But I don’t think history should ever be made to seem like some musty, unpleasant pill that has to be swallowed solely for our civic good.” He described the lessons that can be learned from studying history: “History teaches that there is no such thing as a self-made man or woman, that we are all shaped by the influences of others, including so many we’ve never seen because they are back there in history.” Empathy, he said, is essential for an accurate understanding of the past. “The work of history—writing history, teaching history—calls for the mind and heart.” He listed a few questions all historians should ask themselves: “Who were those people? What was it like to have been alive then, in their shoes, in their skins?”

McCullough was compelled to write about history when he saw pictures of the Johnstown Flood of 1889 at the Library of Congress. He was fascinated with the disaster that devastated a place near his hometown of Pittsburgh—and in awe of the intrepid photographer who had hauled his heavy glass plates to the scene. Unable to find a readable book on the tragedy, he decided to write one himself, even though he was working full-time at *American Heritage*. McCullough says he remembered a line from an interview that Thornton Wilder had given to the *Paris Review*: “I imagine a story I’d like to read in a book or see performed on the stage and if I find nobody has written it, I write it so I can read it in a book or perform it on the stage.” McCullough’s first book, *The Johnstown Flood*, came out in 1968 and was such a success that he quit his job and made writing a career.



Bridge, The Path Between the Seas, Mornings on Horseback, Brave Companions, Truman, and John Adams. He received a Pulitzer Prize for *Truman* in 1993, as well as two National Book Awards, two Francis Parkman Prizes from the American Society of Historians, an NEH Charles Frankel Prize, a National Book Foundation Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Award, and a New York Public Library's Literary Lion Award. Librarian of Congress James Billington praises McCullough as a "uniquely American humanist. He is interested in people rather than 'the people,'" writes Billington. "He takes the reader inside the social and mental worlds in which his subjects live; and he lets them speak for themselves with generous and illuminating citations from their own writings and speeches."

David McCullough met his wife Rosalee when they were both undergraduates: Rosalee was at Vassar, David, at Yale. They live in West Tisbury, Massachusetts, and have five children. The Jefferson Lecture is the highest honor the federal government bestows for achievement in the humanities. It was established in 1972 and carries a \$10,000 stipend.