

“History Is About Human Beings” A Conversation With David McCullough

David McCullough, an esteemed historian and Pulitzer Prize winner, is the author of *John Adams*, the biography on which the upcoming HBO Films and Playtone miniseries of the same name was based. (The American history play in this issue of *JS* was adapted from the script for episode 6 of the series.)

Here are some excerpts from an HBO interview in which McCullough talks about John Adams, his importance in the nation’s history, and the world in which he lived.

Q. Why is this an important story?

A. History is about human beings and ideas, and this is a story about an intensely human American who was at the center of an age on fire with ideas. John Adams was energetic, brilliant, learned, and honest almost to a fault. He was a man of ideas, and he was brave. He had the courage of his convictions. He could also be touchy, vain, irritable, funny, and obstreperous.

Never did he fail to answer the call of his country to serve—as a leader of the Continental Congress, as a diplomat in Europe, as our first Vice President and second President. Few have ever served to such good effect.

Q. What do you hope people will take away from this miniseries?

A. I hope very much that people seeing the series will not only come away knowing more about that all-important time [in our nation’s history], but will feel the reality of what happened and of what those caught up in the struggle went through. Our founding era has too often been portrayed as a kind of costume pageant.

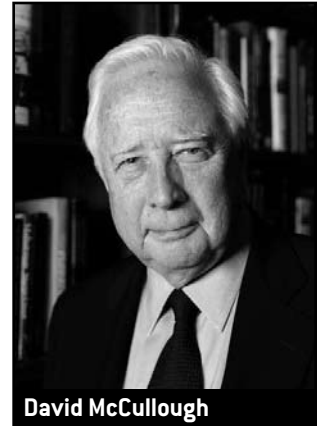
Q. What are some common misconceptions about this time period?

A. You hear people say of days gone by, “Oh, that was a simpler time.” That’s nonsense. There was no simpler time. Life was hard, harder than we have any idea. Compared to those people, we are softies. . . . Life then beat them up. You could see it in their faces: a scar, a blank eye, pockmarks, teeth missing. All reminders of hard living, hard work, [and] hard weather, if you lived in New England.

Because John Adams was stout, people often think of him as pudgy and soft. Not a bit. One of the reasons I began my book as I did—with Adams heading off to Philadelphia in the dead of winter, on horseback for nearly 400 miles—was to show what he was made of. No softie does that.

Q. What were some of the other challenges in everyday life?

A. In our lives today, transportation and communication are two different realities. It takes only a few hours to drive from New York to Washington, or we can phone or e-mail in an instant. In the 18th century, transportation and communication were



David McCullough

TODD SELBY/CORBIS

the same thing. You couldn’t send a letter or message any faster than somebody on a horse traveling bad roads, or by a ship subject to the vagaries of wind and sea.

Q. If you could witness a moment of John Adams’s life in person, which would you choose?

A. I would love to have been a witness to the moment when Adams took the oath of office as President of the United States, with Washington and Jefferson standing beside him. There they were, three of the most important protagonists of our great revolutionary drama: our first three Presidents, all together for that extraordinary moment.

During the filming of the miniseries, I watched that ceremony take place. So superbly was it all staged and performed that, believe me, I felt I was seeing the real thing. **JS**

For a biography, interview, and other information about historian David McCullough, go to: neh.gov/whoweare/mccullough