

# **An American Great Passes from the Scene**

By Don Sutherland

Last week was a consequential week in American history. By a razor-thin 51-50 vote, the U.S. Senate adopted legislation that broke a seemingly unbreakable impasse on federal investments aimed at addressing climate change. That same week, FBI agents raided former President Trump's Mar-a-Lago Mansion in pursuit of evidence concerning his suspected mishandling of classified documents. But beneath the tumult of these watershed events and the headlines that broadcast them to the world, the United States lost one of its premier chroniclers of history and historical figures. David McCullough passed away at age 89.

The passage of time is unidirectional and irreversible. One stands in the present as the vast river of time sweeps future through the present and into the past. What's gone can never be recovered. What's happened can never be undone. The "Law of Time" is omnipotent.

But not when historical literature is concerned. The great power of McCullough's work is that he could defy time in his writing. In his works, he took readers back into the past to the time of his subjects as they went about life, living, and, winding encounters with destiny.

*In the cold, nearly colorless light of a New England winter, two men on horseback traveled the coast road below Boston, heading north. A foot or more of snow covered the landscape, the remnants of a Christmas storm that had blanketed Massachusetts from one end of the province to the other. Beneath the snow, after weeks of severe cold, the ground was frozen solid to a depth of two feet. Packed ice in the road, ruts as hard as iron, made the going hazardous, and the riders, mindful of the horses, kept at a walk.*

McCullough had transformed his painstaking research of the weather and circumstances leading up to January 4, 1776 into a dramatic opening to his biography, *John Adams*. One did not hear of the snow, the cold, or the start of Adams' journey to Philadelphia in a sterile but accurate recitation of events. One experienced the start of Adams' journey. One was suddenly riding with Adams across the snowy New England landscape in the bracing cold.

What was Adams' business? How would his trip unfold? What would Adams encounter along the way? The reader had been swept into the account, caught up in the drama that faced Adams. The reader was now a part of unfolding events and experiences. Neither reader nor subject knew what the future held. Neither reader nor subject knew how things would turn out.

"Things could have gone any way at any point," McCullough explained of his approach to writing in an August 12, 1992 interview with *The New York Times*' Books Reporter, Esther B. Fein. "The challenge is to get the reader beyond thinking that things had to be the way they turned out and to see the range of possibilities of how it could have been otherwise."

McCullough's research sometimes led to more than one book. Four years after *John Adams*, he returned to the American Revolution with *1776*. One then gained an even fuller context of the times in which Adams played such a pivotal role helping shape the fate of the Thirteen British Colonies.

In that book, one started in London. Events had gained a sort of unstoppable momentum and the ties that bound the Colonies to Great Britain were fraying and at growing risk of all-out disintegration. Londoners were watching every event, news of which took weeks or longer to arrive. The prospect of war was increasingly on minds everywhere in that great European metropolis.

*On the afternoon of Thursday, October 26, 1775, His Royal Majesty George III, King of England, rode in royal splendor from St. James's Palace to the Palace of Westminster, there to address the opening of Parliament on the increasingly distressing issue of war in America.*

*The day was cool, but clear skies and sunshine, a rarity in London, brightened everything, and the royal cavalcade, spruced and polished, shone to perfection... An estimated 60,000 people had turned out...*

*It was as though the very grandeur, wealth, and weight of the British Empire was rolling past—an empire that by now included Canada, that reached from the seaboard of Massachusetts and Virginia to the Mississippi and beyond, from the Caribbean to the shores of Bengal. London, its population at nearly a million souls, was the largest city in Europe and widely considered the capital of the world.*

Again, the reader had been taken back in time. Now, the reader stood among the throngs witnessing George III's dazzling passage. The reader wondered what the weeks and months ahead would bring, knowing that once news arrived, the events would have long moved on.

There was no linear progression of time toward a certain outcome. Many paths lay open before the reader. The future was as mysterious to the reader as it was to those gathered crowds more than two centuries earlier. That was the point of McCullough's unique approach to historical revelation.

In an address before Hillsdale College in 2005, McCullough explained:

*The task of teaching and writing history is infinitely complex and infinitely seductive and rewarding. And it seems to me that one of the truths about history that needs to be made clear to a student or to a reader is that nothing ever had to happen the way it happened. History could have gone off in any number of different directions in any number of different ways at almost any point, just as your own life can. You never know. One thing leads to another. Nothing happens in a vacuum. Actions have consequences. These observations all sound self-evident. But they're not—and particularly to a young person trying to understand life.*

*And just as we don't know how things are going to turn out for us, those who went before us didn't either.*

McCullough made history memorable, because he spiced it with the mystery of an uncertain future. History was no longer the recorded past. History was a dynamic, living, and emotional experience. That was the McCullough magic. He will be missed, but his works will captivate and inform readers for as long as there are readers.