

David McCullough on What's Wrong with History Education Today

Some of you have read historian David McCullough's books, which include *1776*, *John Adams*, and *Truman*. At the very least, you've seen his books on the shelves at *Barnes & Noble*.

In an [interview](#) conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* in 2011, McCullough had some very interesting critiques of modern history education, which I share below.

Regarding the historical knowledge of youth today:

"I know how much these young people—even at the most esteemed institutions of higher learning—don't know."

On the prevalent method of teaching history:

"History is often taught in categories—women's history, African American history, environmental history—so that many of the students have no sense of chronology. They have no idea what followed what."

On the content of contemporary history textbooks:

"[They are] so politically correct as to be comic. Very minor characters that are currently fashionable are given considerable space, whereas people of major consequence farther back are given very little space or none at all."

On the style of contemporary history textbooks:

"And they're so badly written. They're boring! Historians are never required to write for people other than historians. Most of them are doing excellent work. I draw on their excellent work. I admire some of them more than anybody I know. But, by

and large, they haven't learned to write very well."

On where to lay the blame:

"It's our fault. I mean the parents and grandparents of the oncoming generation. We have to talk about history, talk about the books we love, the biographies and histories. We should all take our children to historic places. Go to Gettysburg. Go to the Capitol."

On pedagogy:

"If I were teaching a class, I would tell my students, 'I want you to do a documentary on the building at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. Or I want to you to interview Farmer Jones or former sergeant Fred or whatever'... I have been feeling increasingly that history ought to be understood and taught to be considerably more than just politics and the military..."

I'd take one of those textbooks. I'd clip off all the numbers on the pages. I'd pull out three pages here, two pages there, five pages here—all the way through. I'd put them aside, mix them all up, and give them to you and three other students and say, 'Put it back in order and tell me what's missing'..."

Grade school children, as we all know, can learn a foreign language in a flash. They can learn anything in a flash. The brain at that stage in life is like a sponge. And one of the ways they get it is through art: drawing, making things out of clay, constructing models, and dramatic productions. If you play the part of Abigail Adams or Johnny Appleseed in a fourth-grade play, you're never going to forget it as long as you live."