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A Nation Is Born, and You Are There

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

Of the miraculous turnaround that the Battle of Trenton, late in 1776, effected in the fate of the American Revolution, the British historian Sir George Otto Trevelyan once wrote, "It may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater and more lasting effects upon the history of the world."

Indeed, 1776 is remembered by historians not only as America's birth date, the year that the Declaration of Independence was signed, but also as the year in which a series of terrible setbacks for the rebels - along with dreadful suffering, illness, hunger, disillusionment, discouragement and fear - gave way in December to a stunning reversal of fortune, when for the first time it seemed possible that the fledgling country and its ragtag army might actually have a chance against the mighty British Empire, what was then, in the historian Joseph J. Ellis's words, "the most powerful and efficient machine for waging war in the world."

In his new book, "1776," David McCullough brings to bear on this momentous year the narrative gifts he's demonstrated in such absorbing histories as "The Great Bridge" and "The Path Between the Seas." As a history of the American Revolution, it is an oddly truncated volume: pivotal developments leading to the revolution like the Stamp Act, which happen to fall outside the perimeters of Mr. McCullough's rigid time frame, are not examined, and subsequent installments of the war (which would continue on after the Trenton-Princeton campaign for another half-dozen harrowing years) are ignored as well.

As for the animating ideas behind the Revolution and their enduring social and political legacy - the subject of Gordon S. Wood's critically acclaimed 1992 book, "The Radicalism of the American Revolution" - they are simply not addressed in these pages. Mr. McCullough instead focuses on creating a sort of immediate, you-are-there narrative, an account that draws heavily from contemporaneous diaries and letters to give the reader a sense of the week-by-week, sometimes day-by-day progress of the war during that one tumultuous year.

Although the reader in search of a wide-ranging overview of the Revolution would be better off turning to any number of earlier books (from Trevelyan's classic "American Revolution" to more recent works like "The Glorious Cause" by Robert Middlekauff or Benson Bobrick's "Angel in the Whirlwind"), "1776" does succeed in its limited aims. Mr. McCullough uses his descriptive powers and tactile sense of drama to lend his story a pungent immediacy, and he does an ardent job of conveying the hardships and outright specter of devastation faced by George Washington and his troops as they took on the better trained, better equipped, better disciplined British forces.

Mr. McCullough conjures up the ragamuffin state of the underdog Americans - a volunteer army of farmers and tradesmen, often lacking in arms and gunpowder and uniforms, some of them shoeless, and many of them ill, injured and undernourished. And he conjures up the daunting spectacle of British power with an armada of nearly 400 ships anchored off Staten Island - "the largest expeditionary force of the 18th century, the largest, most powerful force ever sent forth from Britain or any nation."

Indeed, Mr. McCullough's descriptions of the Continental Army make the reader marvel all over again at the Americans' ability to drive the redcoats from Boston and to survive the crushing succession of losses at Brooklyn, Kips Bay, White Plains and Fort Mifflin.

Like many historians before him, Mr. McCullough notes the role that "fate, luck, Providence, the hand of God" would play in the Army's survival (like a heavy fog that enabled 9,000 troops to escape from Brooklyn) and the role played, too, by the British command's passive, even lackadaisical approach to the war. In the end, however, Mr. McCullough credits George Washington with holding together an army riven by regional rivalries and with persevering in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds.

During the siege of Boston, Washington wrote one of his more despairing letters, bemoaning the lack of gunpowder and money and the defection of troops who had given up and gone home. Things were so bad, he wrote, that had he known what he was getting into, he would never have accepted the command. Matters would look even bleaker in the wake of the New York defeats: Washington's trusted confidant Joseph Reed and his second in command, Gen. Charles Lee, appeared to have lost faith in him, and with probably fewer than 3,000 troops, Mr. McCullough writes, "the hour had never looked darker."

And yet, for all the general's travails, for "all the high expectations and illusions that he had seen shattered since the triumph at Boston," Mr. McCullough goes on, "Washington had more strength to draw upon than met the eye - in his own inner resources and in the abilities of those still with him and resolved to carry on." In fact, the daring crossing of the Delaware and the stunning victory in Trenton would, as Washington hoped, "rouse the spirits of the people" and persuade at least some of the British that the "rabble" must henceforth be regarded with new respect.

Washington, Mr. McCullough concludes, "was not a brilliant strategist or tactician, not a gifted orator, not an intellectual," and at several crucial moments "had made serious mistakes in judgment." But "experience had been his great teacher from boyhood, and in this his greatest test, he learned steadily from experience." Above all, he adds, "Washington never forgot what was at stake and he never gave up."

Similar assessments of Washington's achievement, of course, have been made many times before - most recently by Joseph J. Ellis in his 2004 book, "His Excellency." But if "1776" remains a highly familiar story, and an incomplete story at that, it nonetheless remains a gripping read: readable, even thrilling popular history, and a graphic reminder of the parlous circumstances that attended the birth of this nation.





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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

## BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Rediscovering John Adams, The Founder Time Forgot

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

JOHN ADAMS

By David McCullough

751 pages. Simon & Schuster. \$35.

John Adams, the second president of the United States and one of the prime movers behind the Revolution and independence, was overshadowed in his latter days by his friend and often bitter rival Thomas Jefferson, and so it would be for many years with Adams's legacy. While Jefferson became a kind of patron saint to a host of wildly divergent political movements (from states'-rights conservatives fed up with government regulations to liberals committed to the institutionalization of equality), Adams quietly receded into the mists of history.

All this began to change in 1993 with the publication of Joseph J. Ellis's impassioned and erudite study of Adams, "Passionate Sage." Mr. Ellis drew a captivating portrait of this Massachusetts native as a wonderfully contrary genius possessed of an uncommon moral intelligence and farsighted political wisdom, and his book would inspire David McCullough's new full-scale biography of Adams, a lucid and compelling work that should do for Adams's reputation what Mr. McCullough's 1992 book, "Truman," did for Harry S. Truman.

Like Truman, Adams is portrayed by Mr. McCullough as a scrupulously honest man, dedicated, hard-working and without pretense: a plain-spoken man who steered a remarkably steady course through a particularly turbulent time in the nation's political history. Mr. McCullough hails Adams for being uncannily prescient about the Revolution and the course of American democracy, foreseeing a myriad of developments, from the difficulty of defeating the British and the decisive role of naval strength to the divisive consequences of slavery. And he credits this tireless statesman, above all others, with making "the Declaration of Independence happen when it did."

It was Adams, Mr. McCullough reminds us, who in the aftermath of Lexington and Concord "rose in the Congress to speak of the urgent need to save the New England army facing the British at Boston and in the same speech called on Congress to put the Virginian George Washington at the head of the army." It was Adams who wrote the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (which became a model for the federal Constitution), establishing a government of checks and

balances around a bicameral legislature, an executive and an independent judiciary. It was Adams who secured a crucial loan from the Dutch in 1782 to help keep the fledgling nation afloat. And it was Adams who later helped negotiate a treaty with Britain that would prove "as advantageous" to America "as any in history."

As for Adams's one-term presidency -- which was conducted in a political environment of unprecedented vituperation, with Republicans facing off against Federalists, and Federalists at odds among themselves -- Mr. McCullough singles out for commendation Adams's decision not to go to war with France "when that would have been highly popular and politically advantageous in the short run" and "almost certainly" a "disastrous mistake" in the long run.

"To his dying day he would be proudest of all of having achieved peace," Mr. McCullough writes. "As he would write to a friend, 'I desire no other inscription over my gravestone than: Here lies John Adams, who took upon himself the responsibility of peace with France in the year 1800.' "

Writing in a fluent narrative style that combines a novelist's sense of drama with a scholar's meticulous attention to the historical record, Mr. McCullough gives the reader a palpable sense of the many perils attending the birth of the American nation and the heated, often acrimonious politics of the day. He conveys the momentousness of the actions undertaken by Adams and other members of the revolutionary generation, as well as the daunting odds against them, not only in winning independence but also in establishing a form of government that would endure across the years.

What comes across most insistently in this absorbing book is a sense of Adams's exuberant, conflicted and thoroughly engaging personality: an ambitious, sometimes vain statesman who was also a devoted family man; an astonishingly well-read intellectual who could see "large subjects largely" but who took his greatest pleasure in the simple chores of farm life; a politician who almost always spoke his mind.

Of course Mr. McCullough -- like Mr. Ellis, who painted an equally affectionate portrait of Adams in "Passionate Sage" -- got a huge assist in describing his subject from Adams himself, who left behind an amazing collection of diaries, letters and family papers (adding up, Mr. McCullough notes, to 608 reels, or more than five miles, of microfilm).

Adams's letters to his beloved wife, Abigail, his political sounding board and most trusted confidant, limn a marriage of enduring passion and shared ideals, and they also reveal Adams to be a man whose feelings, as Mr. Ellis observed, "seemed to move instantaneously from his soul to his mouth or pen, without passing through any filter in his head." He possessed a very modern self-consciousness, combined with an ability to step to the side and dispassionately assess his own failings and virtues, along with those of colleagues and rivals.

He was a thoroughgoing realist, and his view of human nature -- which would decisively inform his arguments about governing -- was skeptical, even dark, and stood in sharp contrast to Jefferson's more Pollyannaish faith in progress and perfectibility.

The Adams-Jefferson relationship, also documented in dozens of letters, obviously provides one of

the major through-lines in this book. Like Mr. Ellis, Mr. McCullough takes pains to be fair and thorough but cannot hide his abiding respect for Adams and his impatience with Jefferson's frequent displays of hypocrisy (over everything from slavery to his sponsoring of a professional character assassin to defame the reputation of his old friend Adams).

Opposites in so many respects -- Jefferson was subtle where Adams was blunt, remote where Adams was effusive -- the two men had a friendship that flourished during the years they served in diplomatic posts in Europe but chilled during the party wars of the 1790's. Politics and their own ambitions led to an 11-year hiatus in their relationship.

With the urging of a mutual friend, the two former presidents -- retired to their respective farms in Massachusetts and Virginia -- would re-establish their correspondence in 1812, sharing thoughts on books and farming and politics and commiserating over the frailties of old age. Remarkably enough, the two men died within hours of each other on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Photo: David McCullough (William B. McCullough/Simon & Schuster)(pg. E8)

## BOOKS OF THE TIMES; The Founder of Healthy, Wealthy &amp; Wise Inc.

By JANET MASLIN  
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## BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

An American Life

By Walter Isaacson

Illustrated. 590 pages. Simon & Schuster. \$30.

The most important part of Walter Isaacson's "Benjamin Franklin" comes last, as the author sums up his book's *raison d'être*. It is a necessary explanation. As the 300th anniversary of his birth approaches (now a mere three and a half years away), Franklin is apt to become an increasingly attention-getting figure, although his life, inventions and extraordinary feats of government building and international diplomacy have not exactly languished in obscurity.

Many other Franklin biographies exist, and not in the fog of distant memory. The most recent, "Benjamin Franklin" by Edmund S. Morgan, was published only last year and is admirably acknowledged by Mr. Isaacson. Mr. Morgan returns the favor with a flattering assessment of Mr. Isaacson's work on this new book's back cover.

"I tried to take a different approach from his by writing a chronological narrative biography, but I do not pretend to have matched his insights," Mr. Isaacson accurately tells his readers. Instead of complex character analysis he has delivered a well-organized, highly user-friendly book with an emphasis on the contemporary rather than the quaint. In its common sense, clarity and accessibility, it is a fitting reflection of Franklin's sly pragmatism. "So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do," he once wrote.

Since the author shares his subject's way of attracting limelight (Mr. Isaacson was once the managing editor of Time magazine, which devotes a 26-page cover story to Franklin in its current issue), this may be the book that most powerfully drives a new pendulum swing of the Franklin reputation. As Mr. Isaacson's concluding chapter points out, the perception of Franklin has fluctuated between reverence (from the great 19th-century capitalists of the Gilded Age) and scorn (from Hawthorne, Emerson and D. H. Lawrence, among others).

Along the way there have been common misapprehensions. Lawrence's 1923 dismissal of Franklin as a "snuff-colored little man" credited him with "Honesty is the best policy" (actually Cervantes) and the warning not to "count your chickens before they are hatched" (actually Aesop) -- citing two of the apparently rare maxims he did not create.

This account consistently notes Franklin's skill as "the consummate networker" and his gifts for "the back-channel fandango" in matters of diplomacy, as well as his legendary attention to clever, comfort-enhancing inventions. He is renowned for the Franklin stove and bifocals, less well known for the rocking armchair attached to a pedal-controlled overhead fan. Not for nothing has Franklin been labeled this nation's "Founding Yuppie" by the social critic David Brooks.

But in Mr. Isaacson's final assessment, Franklin and his practical magic are not targets for condescension. "His focus tended to be on how ordinary issues affect everyday lives, and on how ordinary people would build a better society," he acknowledges. "But that did not make him an ordinary man."

It certainly did not. And this "Benjamin Franklin" catalogs the extraordinary range of its subject's accomplishments, which remain unrivaled in their variety and utility. Here was the man who saw that four-paned glass streetlights were easier to maintain than globe-shaped ones; here was the inventor of the lightning rod, at a time when a single bolt striking a cache of gunpowder could kill 3,000 people in Venice.

"Thunderbolts from heaven were, for him, something to be captured by a kite string and studied," Mr. Isaacson writes, acknowledging his subject's fundamental shallowness in matters of religion and philosophy. Yet this book makes a persuasive case for why the very superficiality of Franklin's thinking, his ability to "delve into the shallows of simple lessons," could yield such phenomenally important consequences.

"He wrestled more with what he called 'errata' than he did with sin," the book notes. "He frequented many antechambers, but few inner chambers." And yet his freedom from ideological constructs made him uniquely equipped to handle the give-and-take diplomacy that led to American independence. "Compromisers may not make great heroes," Mr. Isaacson writes, "but they do make democracies."

This book's overview of Franklin's diplomatic maneuvers and his amazing ubiquity throughout the formative stages of American government, is of course punctuated with colorful personal detail. His anything-but-nuclear family life (the long-distance marriage was one of his enduring if little-heralded accomplishments) and his great gifts as an aged flirt are well documented here, as is the extent of his celebrity on these matters. "I am certain you have been kissing my wife," wrote the husband of a woman reputed to have enjoyed sitting on Franklin's lap during his years in Paris. "My dear Doctor, let me kiss you back in return."

Although this "Benjamin Franklin" unfolds in a style more businesslike than hyperbolic or sentimental, it reaches a stirring epiphany in describing Franklin's demise. When he died in 1790 at 84, the largest crowd ever gathered in Philadelphia assembled to mourn him. These citizens were meeting in a city he had transformed, in the cradle of a newly independent nation that might have been very different without him.

They were there to acknowledge a lifetime's worth of influence and innovation. The crowd's diversity was a visible testament to the religious freedom that Franklin helped to implement, and to the union of individuality and communitarianism that he came to represent. This biography takes the measure of Franklin in how much that crowd lost with his passing and how much it gained from his life.

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