

Don't Know Much About History

By **BRIAN BOLDUC**

Boston

'We're raising young people who are, by and large, historically illiterate,' David McCullough tells me on a recent afternoon in a quiet meeting room at the Boston Public Library. Having lectured at more than 100 colleges and universities over the past 25 years, he says, "I know how much these young people—even at the most esteemed institutions of higher learning—don't know." Slowly, he shakes his head in dismay. "It's shocking."

He's right. This week, the Department of Education released the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress, which found that only 12% of high-school seniors have a firm grasp of our nation's history. And consider: Just 2% of those students understand the significance of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Mr. McCullough began worrying about the history gap some 20 years ago, when a college sophomore approached him after an appearance at "a very good university in the Midwest." She thanked him for coming and admitted, "Until I heard your talk this morning, I never realized the original 13 colonies were all on the East Coast." Remembering the incident, Mr. McCullough's snow-white eyebrows curl in pain. "I thought, 'What have we been doing so wrong that this obviously bright young woman could get this far and not know that?'"

Answer: We've been teaching history poorly. And Mr. McCullough wants us to amend our ways.



Ken Fallin

The 77-year-old author has been doing his part—he's written nine books over the last four decades, including his most recent, "The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris," a story of young Americans who studied in a culturally dominant France in the 19th century to perfect their talents. He's won two Pulitzer Prizes, two National Book Awards and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award.

"History is a source of strength," he says. "It sets higher standards for all of us." But helping to ensure that the next generation measures up, he

says, will be a daunting task.

One problem is personnel. "People who come out of college with a degree in education and not a degree in a subject are severely handicapped in their capacity to teach effectively," Mr. McCullough argues. "Because they're often assigned to teach subjects about which they know little or nothing." The great teachers love what they're teaching, he says, and "you can't love something you don't know anymore than you can love someone you don't know."

Another problem is method. "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."

What's more, many textbooks have become "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"—such as, say, Thomas Edison—"are given very little space or none at all."

Mr. McCullough's eyebrows leap at his final point: "And they're so badly written. They're boring! Historians are never required to write for people other than historians." Yet he also adds quickly, "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."

Unlike Mr. McCullough. His new book possesses the same vitality that won his biography of John Adams critical and popular acclaim. And "The Greater Journey" was an even more elaborate tapestry to sew. "In writing conventional history or biography, the plot and the characters are pretty well set for you," Mr. McCullough says. "But with this, I put in or left out as I wished."

Luckily, he is judicious in his choice of characters, and he weaves together their seemingly disconnected lives seamlessly. In Mr. McCullough's Paris, Samuel F. B. Morse, the future inventor of the telegraph, tries his hand at painting, scooting on a scaffold in the Louvre as he makes copies of famous portraits. Outside, his friend, the novelist James Fenimore Cooper, braves a cholera epidemic to visit Morse at the museum every day.

Across the Seine River, Oliver Wendell Holmes, a student at the École de Médecine, watches surgeons dissect cadavers—a procedure that was banned in Massachusetts until 1831. Meanwhile, Charles Sumner, who would become a powerful senator from the Bay State, attends lectures at the Sorbonne, where he notices blacks seated among whites. Soon, he realizes "the distance between free blacks and whites among us is derived from education, and does not exist in the nature of things." To diminish that distance, Sumner dedicates his life to abolition. Through these vignettes—and many more—Mr. McCullough highlights these Americans' ambition to excel.

Mr. McCullough learned to write from a series of great teachers, most notably Thornton Wilder, the Pulitzer Prize winning playwright and novelist who was also a resident scholar at Yale, where Mr. McCullough graduated in 1951. To this day, he remembers Wilder's teaching that a good writer preserves "an air of freedom" in his prose, so that the reader won't know how a story will end—even if he's reading a history book.

"You know that the Brooklyn Bridge exists," Mr. McCullough explains, referring to one of his former subjects. "I've got to get you so involved in the story of how it was done that you begin to wonder, 'Oh my God! Are they ever going to be able to do this?'" Thus, via his writing style, he hopes to impart a lesson of history: "There's no such thing as a foreseeable future."

Wilder's example, he believes, provides another lesson. "Teachers are the most important people in our society. They need far more pay, obviously, but they need more encouragement. They need more respect. They need more appreciation from all of us. And we shouldn't do anything to hinder them or to make their job harder."

Despite his indictment of what's wrong with our teaching of history, Mr. McCullough maintains a cheerful demeanor as we talk. His dress is simple: a sedate blue blazer with grey slacks and a dark plaid tie—a tribute to his Scotch-Irish heritage. Yet this plain costume doesn't detract from the former off-Broadway actor's performance: His face does all the talking.

It's not their fault our children are ignorant, he says animatedly. "It's our fault," he says, pointing to his chest. "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." He continues, "We should all take our children to historic places. Go to Gettysburg. Go to the Capitol."

And teach history, he says—while tapping three fingers on the table between us—with "the lab technique." In other words, "give the student a problem to work on."

"If I were teaching a class," he says, "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.'" He adds, "I have been feeling increasingly that history ought to be understood and taught to be considerably more than just politics and the military."

What about textbooks? "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.'" You'd know that book inside and out.

Mr. McCullough advises us to concentrate on grade school. "Grade school children, as we all know, can learn a foreign language in a flash," he says. "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."

"We're too concentrated on having our children learn the answers," he summarizes. "I would teach them how to ask questions—because that's how you learn."

Fittingly, Mr. McCullough says he got the idea for "The Greater Journey" by asking a question. One day he was stuck in traffic near Sheridan Circle in Washington, D.C. In the center of the circle stood the statue of "good ol' Phil Sheridan," a Union general in the Civil War, "with the requisite pigeon on his head."

Staring at the statue, Mr. McCullough wondered: "How many people that go around this circle every day have any idea who that is?" (My guess: Nobody.) As he was mulling this over, George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" came on the radio, and a realization rushed over him: America's artists and musicians were too little appreciated. "The Gershwin side of American accomplishment"—and here Mr. McCullough looks me straight in the eye—"is too seldom given credit."

Thanks to Mr. McCullough, our ledger of historical appreciation is a bit more balanced.

Mr. Bolduc is a fellow at the National Review Institute.