

Remarks of David McCullough

Charter Day

The College of William and Mary

February 8, 1997

President Sullivan, Rector Acuff, "Dr." Diamonstein, Distinguished Faculty, Ladies and Gentlemen. If one believes, as I do, that our institutions of higher education are as important as any in our national life; if one believes, as I do, that a venerable institution like The College of William and Mary is not only an emblem for the nation, because of its continuing contribution to our way of life, but because it stands as an affirmation of the importance of continuity in civilization; and if you love Virginia, as I do, then an occasion like this is an honor beyond compare. And I thank you very much.

I want to read you something that was written in the early 16th century by Francesco Guicciardini:

Past things shed light on future ones. The world was always of a kind. What is and will be was at some other time. The same things come back but under different names and colors. Not everybody recognizes them but only he who is wise and considers them diligently.

I love that for what it says, and I love it for the way it is expressed. And I love to say Francesco Guicciardini!

In the old John and Abigail Adams house in Massachusetts, the same house where John Adams carried on his memorable correspondence with Thomas Jefferson in the last years of their lives, there is an ancient clock that

stands on the floor about so high, a rather short grandfather clock. It was made in London in the year 1680 by William Mason. 1680 -- that's 13 years before the founding of The College of William and Mary.

One evening when I was working at the Adams house, one of the park service attendants came in to wind the clock. I asked her if it still runs. "Oh, yes," she said. I asked if it keeps good time? She said, "Well, it would if the house would only hold still."

It seems to me that here in Williamsburg especially, the idea of old time ticking away strikes an appropriate chord; that here in Williamsburg, and on this campus, we do truly know what life old houses have. Let us hope that the William Mason clock and its contemporaries tick on forever.

I thought it was wonderful during the reading of the Charter this morning when we heard the line, "The College of William and Mary as it will be known forever." What confidence that expresses.

On this historic ground and on this important day in the calendar of the College, and in the spirit of those worthy Virginians who 200 and more years ago set an example for all time, I would like to speak about history as a source of strength, history as a lesson in proportions. And I would like to strike a blow, I hope a civil blow, against the tyranny of the present.

We live in a time when now, today, our present, dominates nearly everything that is said and thought. It's an old theme in American life -- the new, the now. We greet each other, and have for a very long time, with "What's new?" It's our way to start a conversation and the implicit assumption, of course, is that "what's new" is good, if only because it's new.

Professor Robert Gross in his admirable book, The Minutemen and Their World, describes how the North Bridge in Concord was pulled down within 20 years after the Revolutionary War, because it had to make way for

something new. Thomas Jefferson said the world belongs to the present generation. He believed one should always look forward, and we do.

But in our time, and particularly in the last decade or so, the emphasis on the new, the present, the now has gotten out of hand. We are urged, begged, reminded constantly to buy, do, say, think whatever is new, for the reason that it's new. The sums we spend to wear the latest thing, to drive the latest car, are astronomical. When is the last time anyone asked you to turn over an old leaf?

And with the relentless rattle-gabble over the new and the now comes no end of hyperbole and hubris. Every storm that blows out of the Caribbean is declared the worst ever. Every blizzard that strikes the Middle West is a crisis like none other. How many times must we be told that the O.J. Simpson case is the "Trial of the Century," as if there were no Nuremberg trials or Brown v. Board of Education?

We hear over and over about the wonders of modern technology where by what happens in Sydney, or Amsterdam, or San Francisco, or you name it, affects wherever it is you are this morning. As if that were not always true. As if what happened up at the other end of Duke of Gloucester Street in the eighteenth century, or at Yorktown, didn't affect you and me here now today, didn't indeed turn the world upside down.

Only those who don't know better, believe that whatever happens only happens where it happens and when it happens. Every event in all time has antecedents and consequences and any other concept of reality is a child's way of looking at life.

The emphasis on the present has also affected teaching and history. Too often what should be a process of investigation, analysis, appraisal and appropriate affirmation has become history as indictment. The protagonist of

times past fail the test for no other reason than for not seeing things just as we do.

It takes a passage of about fifty years before past events come clearly into focus. The dust has to settle. Fifty years ago was 1947. In 1947 The New York Times ran a list of the fifty most important events of the year. On the list were the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, India's freedom, the return of the Republicans to Congress after fourteen years absence, the House Un-American Activities Committee's investigation of Hollywood.

But consider what was not on the list for 1947: the creation of the CIA; the breaking of the sound barrier by Chuck Yeager; the breaking of the color barrier by Jackie Robinson joining the big leagues to play with the Brooklyn Dodgers; George Kennan's article in Foreign Affairs setting forth the policy of "containment."

The New York Times list didn't include the discovery of carbon 14 dating, which changed everyone's perception of the past, nor mention the advent of methadone or the microwave oven or the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, one of the most important events ever in the study of history.

It might also have mentioned what was one of the singular press conferences ever held at the White House, the first and last time Bess Wallace Truman met with the press. Here is how it went:

Question: "Mrs. Truman, do you think there will ever be a woman president?"

"No."

"Would you want to be President?"

"No."

"Would you want Margaret to be President?"

"No."

"If you had a son, would you bring him up to be President?"

"No."

"If it had been left to your own free choice would you have gone into the White House in the first place?"

"Most definitely not?"

"What is your reaction to musical criticisms to Margaret's singing?"

"No comment."

"What would you like to do and have your husband do when he is no longer President?"

"Go back to Independence."

History is a source of strength. It's a source of strength because we learn by example and most of the lessons of history are taught by example. History, most importantly, is a lesson in proportions. We see our relative place in the great sweep of human experience. We begin to understand that whatever difficulties we face, whatever troubles we experience, whatever challenges we must meet as a nation, others before us have known worse.

The most savage natural calamity in American history, the Galveston Flood of 1900, took 6,000 lives. The worst epidemic took place in 1918-1919, the terrible scourge of influenza. I wonder if you know how many Americans died in the influenza epidemic? 500,000. Imagine what it was like for those, the living, who survived -- what they lost, what they faced, the terror of it. If that were to happen today, in proportion to our population, 1,300,00 people would die. That's more than all of those who died in all of our wars since the time of the Revolution. What kind of hysteria would television whip up over that?

History is an antidote to self-pity. Much of history is about misery and disappointment. The past is full of ambiguities, of tragedy, and it provides as

many questions as answers. History teaches us that there are few certainties and that nothing, nothing ever had to happen the way it happened when it happened. No more than in our own lives.

History teaches us that sooner is not necessarily better, that the whole is often equal to much more than the sum of the parts, and that what you don't know can often hurt you very seriously.

We who teach and write history like to think we're doing good work and many are. But it's not good enough. The sad truth is we are raising a generation of young Americans who to a large degree are historically illiterate. The Department of Education study released recently shows that 60 percent of all students who graduate from high school in the United States today don't know the basics of American history. If you look at the scores among grade school children, it's even more alarming. 22,000 fourth graders were tested nationwide. Here is a sample question: Which of these was one of the thirteen colonies that fought the American Revolution against the British? Illinois, California, New York, Texas. Seventy percent of all the children in the fourth grade got that wrong.

Sixty percent, well over half of the fourth grade students ^{tested} ~~tested~~, had no idea why the Puritans and the Pilgrims came to Massachusetts.

Every event, every life in its' time, is a stone dropped in the pond with ripple effects beyond anyone's reckoning.

I think if I were able to go back and have an hour's conversation with any of those who created this college, I would pick William Small, who taught natural philosophy —William Small, who, it appears, taught just about everything there was to teach and who was interested in just about everything under the sun. What he conveyed, it seems to me, is what might

be called eclectic freedom, an ideal exemplified by his student and The College of William and Mary's greatest graduate, Thomas Jefferson.

Eclectic freedom: the idea that everything is interesting and the more you know the more interesting everything becomes. This is what the life of Thomas Jefferson tells us.

William Small returned to England after six years in Williamsburg. He went to Birmingham, where he received a degree in medicine and began working with James Watt, on the steam engine. One of the great, striking coincidences of the eighteenth century is that 1776 is both the year of the Declaration of Independence and the steam engine. Talk about ripple effect! But by 1776 William Small was no longer living. He died in 1775. One of the reasons I would like to talk to him is to tell him what he did that he never knew. There's no one alive today who has not been affected by what William Small did. The reach of what happened here on this ground, in this place is beyond imagining.

History is a lesson in proportions, a lesson in courage, a lesson in the age old importance and grandeur of our great legacy, the English language. (And we've heard it spoken properly, too, this morning, haven't we?)

I am writing a book about the criss-crossing lives of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. In 1776, John Adams wrote a letter to George Wythe, which became a pamphlet called Thoughts on Government. Published in Philadelphia, it predated the Declaration of Independence. Listen to the language, listen to the quality of the prose, the quality of the thinking and remember when it was written -- when everything was untried, unprecedented, uncertain, when they were truly pledging their lives, their fortunes, their sacred honor, as Jefferson wrote. This to me is one of the most thrilling paragraphs in American literature, let alone in our history.

It has been the will of heaven that we should be thrown into existence at a period when the greatest philosophers and law givers of antiquity would have wished to live. [He begins, you see, first with the will of heaven, of providence and with history.] When the greatest philosophers and lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to live. A period when coincidence and circumstance without example has afforded thirteen colonies at once an opportunity of beginning government anew. From the foundation and building as they choose. How few of the human race have ever had an opportunity of choosing a system of government for themselves and for their children. [And here's the line I dearly love.] How few have ever had anything more of choice in government than in climate.

If I had to pick one quote, one message from Thomas Jefferson, it would be from a letter to Adams, written in 1816, when both were retired and living back where they began. "I steer my bark with hope ahead leaving fear astern," Jefferson wrote. "My hopes indeed sometimes fail, but not oftener than the foreboding of the gloomy."

How very American.

I want to conclude with something written by another Virginian, considerably less well-known. He was a Congressman, a soldier in the Revolutionary War, he served as Jefferson's secretary when Jefferson was President. And he was a graduate of The College of William and Mary.

His name was Isaac Coles. This is what he wrote: "The students of William and Mary appear at once to discover their own ignorance and the immense tract that they have to traverse before they arrive at eminence. They appear to learn merely how to be wise and retire to pursue the bare and laborious plans of study which they have chalked out for themselves. And after being buried for five or six years we see them emerge from their hiding places, and shine forth with a splendor that dazzles the continent."

May it ever be so.