Fall 1987

The Writer's Life

David McCullough
Everybody in Kentucky seems to have a gift for making you feel you’re with friends, and to be introduced here tonight by my friend Harry Caudill is one of the high points of my working life. I’m very grateful to you, Harry, and very grateful to all of you for being so gracious and friendly to both Rosalee and me.

I must say to you, Paul Willis, that your description of the University of Kentucky Library’s book sale is the best I’ve heard. When you’re working on a book, you collect everything that’s been written on the subject. As you can appreciate, there were a great many books written about the Panama Canal which were, well, worthless. But I bought them all, and every year, when we have our West Tisbury Library book sale, I donate them to the sale, seven or eight of these classics. And every year, they come right back, because some well-meaning friend sees them on sale and thinks, “Ah! I know just who would like this!”

We have just spent the most wonderful twenty-four hours at Shakertown, Pleasant Hill, as the guests of Mr. Earl Wallace. Now, the only trouble with Mr. Wallace is he’s such a reticent fellow, and he wouldn’t tell us anything about Shakertown! Really, he is the best guide, the most enthusiastic historian possible. There’s no one to walk about Shakertown with quite like Mr. Wallace. There’s a story about Bernard Baruch—when he was first starting out on Wall Street. He did a favor for J. P. Morgan, and apparently it was a favor of some importance to Mr. Morgan, who asked the young man what he could do for him in return. And Baruch, being a very intelligent young man, said “No sir.” He didn’t want any favors, he said, he just did what he did because of his admiration for Mr. Morgan. But Morgan insisted. “I really want to do you a favor,” he said. “Anything, you name it and I’ll do it.” And Baruch said, “Well, sir, in that case, would you walk down Wall Street with me at noontime?” That’s the way we felt walking around Shakertown with Mr. Wallace.

I am thrilled to be with people who care about books and who care about education and who care about libraries because, among
other things, I depend on libraries. I am totally in their debt, and have been from the time I began writing. I couldn't exist without libraries or librarians, and my indebtedness to the great libraries of this country will continue as long as I live. I can never say enough on behalf of libraries or express my feeling strongly enough that a library is an index of the health of a community, large or small.

As a writer, my interests in libraries are somewhat different from those of other people. Writers really do have a different kind of life. I have heard writers say, "I wanted to be a writer since I was a child." I always find that amusing, because I can't imagine a little seven-year-old walking around saying, "I want to be a writer." I don't think it happens that way. I think something in you needs to be expressed; something begins to touch you at an early age. And usually you don't understand it at all. It's like hearing music or birdsong, perhaps.

I did not decide to be a writer at seven years old, or at seventeen years old. I thought maybe I would like to do that, but I didn't dare say anything about it. In college there were people who said they were going to be writers, and they wore sort of writerly clothes, and they met in writerly places and talked about writing. I admired that, I envied that, but I thought it was—I couldn't do it. It seemed presumptuous. Instead, I served what I now see was an apprenticeship, writing for magazines, writing for the *Time-Life* magazines for five years, then for the U. S. Information Agency during the Kennedy Administration when Edward R. Murrow was the head of that organization, and then going back to New York to work for *American Heritage*, where I started my first book.

The first book happened because I backed into it, the way life often happens. I was at the Library of Congress, and there were a number of old photographs spread out on a table. Rosalee and I were doing research on another subject for a magazine article, and we walked by, and I saw those photographs. They had been taken in Johnstown very soon after the flood hit, by a photographer from Pittsburgh who had made his way into the town despite terrible difficulties, carrying that great, heavy equipment of early glass-plate photography. The pictures were like nothing I had ever seen before. They suggested a level of violence beyond anything I could have imagined about the Johnstown Flood. And having grown up in Pennsylvania, I'd heard about it for as long as I could remember. I looked up a book on the flood because I
wanted to read what happened, and the book was very unsatisfactory. (It was like some of those Panama Canal books I just mentioned.) So, I took out a second book from the Library of Congress, and it was, if anything, worse. I decided I would write the book I wanted to read. Some years later, in one of the best books I know about writing, the first Paris Review collection of interviews with writers, I read an interview with Thornton Wilder, in which he told how he picked the subjects in his plays and novels. He said that if a story he wished to read hadn’t been told, he would write what he wished to read. And that is pretty much what happened to me.

Now, “seek and ye shall find” is certainly true for anyone doing historical research. Again and again, if you go looking, you will indeed find that treasure trove of letters or rare documents stuffed away in an attic, or something comparable. It’s quite amazing. It still happens.

More important, however, is to look at what you find—to see it in context, to make connections. And to get help from a librarian. When I first began doing research I felt I must be very careful about saying too much about what I was working on—I was so concerned that somebody might make off with my wonderful idea. Now, I know it’s best to tell everybody who will listen—everybody—because who knows from whence will come some marvelous piece of information you would never know otherwise.

In the course of visits to Johnstown I got to know a man who ran a photography shop, and one evening he invited me over to his house. “I want to show you something,” he said. What he had was a block of typewritten sheets about so thick, all testimony taken in Pittsburgh by the Pennsylvania Railroad in anticipation of lawsuits following the Johnstown disaster. Interviews had been done with everybody connected with the railroad in Johnstown to find out exactly what they did and didn’t do, what they saw happen. It was all testimony in their own words, in the vernacular of the time. In the nineteenth century, the written word was even more different from the spoken word than it is today. So suddenly I was in touch with their own words, their feelings. And this one existing typewritten copy had been saved by that man because he thought maybe it might be important someday. It was part of a batch of material that the railroad people were going to cart off, take to the dump, and he had rescued it at the last moment.

31 MCCULLOUGH
But it didn't just change the spirit and detail of my book—which it certainly did—it marked the beginning of a whole new body of flood material collected in Johnstown. When we write a book, when we explore a subject, we raise the level of interest in the subject and of knowledge. It's like what happens when you give money to your class fund at college. It isn't just the money you give that's important; you are also helping to set a mark for the next class when its turn comes. The same thing happens with scholarship, and that's part of the excitement of it.

One of the reasons I write is because I want the reader to feel what it was like to have been alive in a different time. Most of the essential information about a subject like the Johnstown Flood, or the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, or the Panama Canal, can be found in an encyclopedia. You can look that all up. But you won't feel anything. Those who lived in the past were not simply as alive and as real as we are, they were subject to the same irrevocable problem that we all live with—they never knew how it was going to come out. The hardest thing of all to do in writing about the past in a way that makes one feel the life in the people and the intense presence of their present is to create the sense that things didn't have to go as they went. It's a very large problem, because you're writing in the past tense—that seals it as a fact. Now, if you're writing about the building of the Brooklyn Bridge or the Panama Canal, every reader knows the bridge is going to be built, every reader knows there is a Panama Canal. How do you hold their attention? How do you make them wonder what is going to happen next? And the answer, I believe, is to show that yours is a story of human beings, and to care about the human beings of your story. And to do that you need to get inside their lives. You have to get beneath the surface.

For about six months after finishing *The Johnstown Flood*, I had no idea what to do next. I was pretty low about this because it seemed to me the lessons of the flood were so discouraging—our human shortsightedness, our selfishness, our willingness to sacrifice tomorrow for our own immediate needs. And the consequences at Johnstown were so tragic—2,209 people killed. So I was looking for a symbol of affirmation, and I'm sorry to say it took me quite some time to find one. But then, one day I was having lunch in a restaurant on the lower East Side of New York with a friend who is a science writer and another friend who is an engineer and architect. They began talking about what builders of the Brooklyn...
Bridge didn’t know when they began their work and how much of the story of the bridge is hidden away out of sight, below the river. They talked of the men who died in the effort and the fourteen years it took, and the incredible travail, and the dedication of the chief engineers, the Roeblings. And I knew instantly I had my subject!

I came out of that restaurant and headed straight-away for the 42nd Street Library. If you’ve ever been to the 42nd Street Library, you know the card catalog is on the third floor. Well, I took those marble steps, I think, four at a time. I found over a hundred cards on the Brooklyn Bridge, but not one indicating that there was anything like the book that was already taking form in my mind. I wanted to treat this splendid constructive effort with all the seriousness, empathy, fairness, and scholarship that have been devoted to the destructive events in our past. There’s a popular misunderstanding that history is really about generals and politicians. What a sad notion that is and how unrealistic.

So there I was, embarked on this, to me, very exciting project, not knowing where the material was. Somebody said there was a collection of Roebling papers at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute at Troy, New York, in the library, and I went up to Troy with Rosalee on one of those intensely bright fall afternoons when everybody else is off at a football game.

The R. P. I. Library at the time was housed in an old Gothic church. We were told there were some Roebling papers up in the attic. We reached the top of the stairs. We’d been given a key to a closet, and we opened the closet. It was the size of a small, windowless room, and from floor to ceiling on all three walls were shelves stuffed with material, packed in as full and solid as possible—letters, diaries, scrapbooks, photographs, specifications, correspondence between engineers and the Roeblings, a doorknocker from the Roebling house on Brooklyn Heights, a marble bust of old John A. Roebling, Emily Roebling’s notes, Emily Roebling’s collection of newspaper clippings. It was the ultimate treasure trove found in an attic, and the attic happened to be in a library. None of the material was catalogued, nobody on the library staff knew what all was in there. I saw at once that I had found a great, thick vein of historical gold, and that I hardly dare tell anyone.

I nearly did not get into college because I failed the physics part of the College Board exam; the last mathematics I’d had was high
school geometry. I knew nothing about civil engineering, nothing about bridge technology. But one thing I learned in the course of writing the book was you learn what you have to. I learned how to build a bridge by working my way through that closet. Nothing was in order. There was no one at my elbow to explain. Everything about the bridge was pioneering—there had never been a structure like it built before. The elder Roebling was killed in a freak accident. His son, who took over as chief engineer, was felled by paralysis caused from the bends, and he retreated into seclusion in a house on Brooklyn Heights. From there, with the help of his wife, Washington Roebling directed the entire operation for about nine years, never being seen, seldom leaving his room. He became a mythic character, hidden away like Captain Nemo in Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, the most popular novel of the day.

But by going at it that way, on my own, getting my answers through constant struggle, I learned the subject as I never would have, had it all been handed to me. And I know it now, still. I'll not ever forget it. And I wonder what it may be about that process that we need to know concerning education? Is there a direct relation between how hard we have to work to learn something and how long we remember what we learn? My wife sighed when she saw that closetful. She knew that there would go three years at least. And it was three years. The next book, The Path Between the Seas, took six years. Some few days after I had finished it, finally finished it, I was buying some things at a neighborhood store on Martha's Vineyard. The storekeeper said, “How's your book going?” And I said, “Well, I'm pleased to tell you it's finished.” He said, “What's it about?” I said, “It's about the Panama Canal.” He said, “Too bad. You should of wrote Roots.”

The hardest thing about beginning a book is beginning a book. Where to start? Where do you pick up the story? I've rewritten the beginning of every book I've ever done, because I found after I was underway that I'd begun at the wrong place. Also, some characters don't amount to what you first expected. Somebody you think very important turns out not to be, once the writing begins, because writing is a process of hard thinking—or should be. It forces you to think and to be clear. I tell students to try as hard as possible to know what they're talking about. When I first began writing books, I attempted to do all the research at the
beginning, before starting to write. I don’t work that way anymore. I do maybe half the research, sixty percent of the research, and then I begin to write. Because it’s in the process of writing that you find out what you don’t know. You begin to make a shopping list of things you’ve got to go and find. A character begins to emerge as far more important and enjoyable to write about than ever you anticipated. Writing history after all—and this may sound strange to you—is a process of self-expression. It is a creative act. I write history not because I think it’s going to be good for you, or because I think there are lessons to be learned, or because it’s important for all citizens to understand the course of their country’s past, and so forth—all of which may be true. I write history because, for me, it’s a way to say things about the country and about the human condition in a form, in a way, that I could not otherwise.

Sometimes I’m asked how I pick my subjects. I think, often as not, the subjects pick me. Maybe a sense of history is something people are born with—I don’t know—but I must tell you I am extremely distressed by the level of understanding of our past on the part not just of our students but of people who are often responsible for our understanding of our country, namely people in the media. I have two stories.

When The Path Between the Seas was published, I was being interviewed by a young man on a television station in Seattle. He was a nice fellow, a big, handsome fellow with a concrete hairdo and the big T.V. voice, and before we went on the air, he asked me what I thought we should do about the future of the Canal, which was then a subject of huge controversy. And I said it seemed to me that whether we owned the Canal or Panama owned the Canal, the Canal would always be ours, the way Normandy Beach will always be ours. He looked at me with a kind of glazed eye, and here is what he said: “Who is Norman D. Beach?”

This past summer I was having lunch in Washington with a young woman who is an Op-Ed editor of one of our largest, most influential newspapers. She said she’d been down to see the Vietnam Memorial, and asked me if I had seen it. I said I had. She wanted to know if I had found it a moving experience. I said I certainly had and particularly because earlier that same day I had been out to Antietam. And she said, “What is Antietam?” I said maybe she knew it as Sharpsburg. No. She hadn’t any idea what I
was talking about. I said, "There are fifty-seven thousand names on the Vietnam Memorial; they died over a period of ten to eleven years. At Antietam, in one day, there were twenty-three thousand casualties." Antietam is about an hour and ten minutes from where we were sitting. She had never heard of it.

Now, I believe that a country that feels that way about its past is heading for trouble. At universities and colleges where I occasionally lecture, I have found, among other things, students have no idea who Huey Long was, or Willa Cather. They don’t know Brigham Young. "Probably he founded a university," I was told. We’ve got a big job to do, and it’s easy to blame people. I think a large part of the onus has to be on television. Our television is a disgrace; it is turning our collective national brain into a big pudding. We have little or no documentary television on the commercial networks any longer; we have virtually no programming on the networks whatsoever for children. And most people in television don’t care. If Newton Minow were to give again his famous wasteland speech, reminding the networks of their responsibilities, it wouldn’t make any difference. I sometimes think it will take a situation like the Tylenol poisoning, where somebody actually dies of television, and then, maybe, something will be done. The average family now watches television seven hours a day. The most popular show in America, watched by forty million of us today, tomorrow, the next day, is "Wheel of Fortune." How does that make you feel?

We have the most magnificent "learning device" ever invented, and it’s called the book—you can pick it up, you can carry it with you on an airplane, read it in the privacy of your home, in bed, you can pass it on to a friend, you can keep it and take it down again another time, you can go to libraries, and you can go to bookstores. And in libraries and bookstores, what do you have? Choice! Vast freedom of choice, and we don’t have that in newspapers, and we don’t have it on television, God knows. In libraries as nowhere else we are offered a whole spectrum of opinion, personality, insight, nonsense, humor, information. And it is for us to choose, not the network producers or newspaper editors. There are, I believe, forty-thousand trade books published a year. Think of what that represents in choice—not necessarily quality—but in choice. And books can change your life. I’m sure you all feel that—I know it’s true for me.

In my last year in college, my Aunt Marty gave me a book
called *A Stillness at Appomattox*, by Bruce Catton, and when I read that book, something clicked. I knew that some way or other, I wanted to do something like that some day. The book was a turning point. It led me to more works on the Civil War, it led me to Margaret Leach’s magnificent *Reveille in Washington*, the first pages of which I still read over and over for the sheer pleasure of how she writes.

I just reread St. Exupéry’s *Wind, Sand and Stars*—what a superb book! And Paul Horgan’s beautiful novel *Things as They Are*. Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*. And Willa Cather. I’ve been rereading nearly all of Willa Cather. I think she may be the greatest American novelist. *My Antonia* is so much better than I had any idea.

And Harry Caudill’s *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*—what a book!

These are the highest expressions of our society, and the repositories for them, our great libraries, are the capitals of our cities. The idea that we are cutting back on funds for the Library of Congress, reducing services for the blind, reducing the number of hours that the library is open, is scandalous. It’s the kind of thing that some future historian will pick up and say, “Ah, see, here is where it began. Here is where the trouble started, when a country didn’t care any more about its greatest library!”

I am currently at work on a biography of Harry Truman and rely heavily on the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri. Harry Truman, in a sense, came from Kentucky. My book begins in Kentucky in the 1840s, when hundreds of families went out from Kentucky to western Missouri. Half or more of the people who settled in Jackson County came from Kentucky. Truman’s Kentucky people were mostly Scotch-Irish, and, as so many did, they left from Louisville, went down the Ohio, up the Mississippi, changed boats at St. Louis and went on up the Missouri to the great bend, where the river turns north. And there they got off to settle land that looks very much like Kentucky. This was the era when George Caleb Bingham was doing his great Missouri River paintings. You have only to look at “The Jolly Flatboatmen,” or some of the other great Bingham paintings, and you get the exact spirit of time and place, the feeling of the river as those Kentucky people went west, following the lead of Daniel Morgan Boone, the son of Daniel Boone, who might be called the founding father of Jackson County. Harry Truman is in many respects the last
president who was associated with what we think of as pioneer America. He is also the only president, I suspect, we are going to have for a very long time, if ever again, who poured his heart out on paper, who, because he hated to use the telephone, wrote letters, kept diaries, sent notes, put his personal feelings on paper in thousands of pages of correspondence, most all of which is in the Truman Library. So, consequently, the biographer can get inside his life, get beneath the surface and find him as a human being, a fellow human being, which I suppose is the point of it all.

There is no good reason why we should be limited in our experience in life to the time in which we live. It is perfectly possible to be as parochial in time as it is in space. Why deny ourselves the experience of knowing those people? Why stay only in our present? Why think of it as the past? Because it wasn’t the past to them. Nobody who ever lived before us ever thought they were living in the past; they were living in their present and that’s the only difference. It was their present, not ours. Not the same time, necessarily, not the same kind of people. It’s a mistake to think they were just like we are; they weren’t. It’s also, in my view, rude to ignore them. Ignorance of history is rude and limiting, it’s putting the blinders on, and it can be dangerous to a society, because if we don’t know where we come from, we don’t know who we are. And a country, a community can suffer from amnesia as much as an individual. And we can’t afford that, not now especially, because these are perilous times, and history is the best aid to navigation in perilous times.

We need our libraries, we need these great repositories, we need books, we need to exchange books, we need to keep good books in print. Read, read, read, and be alive.

"The Writer’s Life," the Fifth Edward F. Prichard Lecture, was delivered at Spindletop Hall, Lexington, Kentucky, on 11 March 1986.