

David McCullough Discusses John Adams

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Description

Author David McCullough discusses his book "John Adams", profiling the life of the second president of the United States. McCullough talks about the relationship between Adams and Thomas Jefferson, and also with his wife Abigail.

Keywords

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Transcript

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KATIE COURIC, anchor: Much has been written about our nation's Founding Fathers, including our first president, George Washington, and our third, Thomas Jefferson. But our second president, John Adams, has been largely overlooked. Well, now that's all about to change. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough has written John Adams, a sweeping biography that brings the surprisingly colorful Adams to life. David McCullough, so great to see you. Good morning.

Mr. DAVID McCULLOUGH (author, John Adams): Thank you. Good morning, wonderful to see you.

COURIC: Well, thank you. I know that you set out to write a biography of Adams, Jefferson and Adams. And yet you became mesmerized by Adams instead of Jefferson, why?

Mr. McCULLOUGH: Jefferson, of course, figures very prominently in Adams' life. They start out friends. They become enemies ultimately, and then they have a reconciliation.

COURIC: And then they die on the same day.

Mr. McCULLOUGH: And they die on the same day. And, of course, it's not just any day.

COURIC: July 4th.

Mr. McCULLOUGH: It's the 4th of July, the 50th anniversary. And, of course, to the country, this was inconceivable. It was, to many people, the clearest evidence yet that the hand of God was involved with the destiny of the United States of America. And who was to blame them? We can know John Adams better than any of the founders because of all that he wrote, and he was so candid in what he wrote. He once told his son, John Quincy, you should write letters the way you talk. And so when you're reading his letters, it's almost as if you're listening to John Adams talk. And it's the same with Abigail. If they had done nothing else but write the letters they wrote, they would be people we want to know about.

Mr. McCULLOUGH: Quite apart from all that they accomplished.

COURIC: What a marvelous treasure trove for historians such as yourself.

Mr. McCULLOUGH: Yes. More than 1,000 letters just between John and Abigail Adams.

COURIC: Well, let's talk a little bit about John Adams. He came out of obscurity. We, you and I were joking, he was, in a way, the Johnnie Cochran of his time because he did defend some very unpopular people after the Boston Massacre.

Mr. McCULLOUGH: The most unpopular people in the country at the time, which were the soldiers, the British soldiers, who had fired on the crowd in Boston. And not only did he defend them, when nobody else would, but he got them off. And he thought it would destroy his career that his standing as a patriot was over. It was truly a profile in courage. And that is what people would ultimately see in the action. And it was really to his advantage in the long run. He was a very brave man. He was courageous.

COURIC: A man of great principle.

Mr. McCULLOUGH: Physically courageous but a man of great moral courage.

COURIC: I know that you say that he was the force behind the Declaration of Independence.

Mr. McCULLOUGH: Yes.

COURIC: And we were tickled to learn that he had a to-do list and one was "write a Declaration of Independence."

Mr. McCULLOUGH: Yes. And I think, I can't prove this, but I think that may have been the first time it was actually ever written down. It's in the little diary that he carried. "When I get to Philadelphia, this is one of the things we have to do." And he drove it through. He made it happen when it happened.

COURIC: Tell me a little bit more about his relationship with Abigail and why their's was such a wonderful love story.

Mr. McCULLOUGH: Well, it was a love story, a true, real love story. Maybe one of the best in history that I know of anything about. He said before they were married that what he needed most was ballast.

And she became his ballast. She was truly his dearest friend as he said. And he trusted her, totally, as she did him.

COURIC: Let me read a letter from John Adams to his wife, Abigail. "Oh my dear girl, I thank heaven that another fortnight will restore you to me. But you who have always softened and warmed my heart shall restore my benevolence. You shall polish and refine my sentiments of life." They really are quite lovely and moving, aren't they?

Mr. McCULLOUGH: Yeah.

COURIC: And she was quite outspoken and a real equal partner to him in many ways before we even came up with the concept of two for the price of one in the 1990s. Let me read a letter from Abigail to John about her opposition to slavery. She writes, "I wish most sincerely there was not a slave in the province. It always seemed a most iniquitous scheme to me to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."

Mr. McCULLOUGH: You couldn't say it much better, could you? Really. Nobody said. She could have held her own and often did hold her own with the most brilliant people of her time. And yet she never went to school. And she was such a principled person. I think that's so important to understand. John Adams, and Abigail, John Adams was the only Founding Father who never owned a slave as a matter of principle.

COURIC: She also wrote about feminism in the 1770s. "In the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands." Well, I cannot wait to read the book. David McCullough, wonderful to see you. Thank you so much.

Mr. McCULLOUGH: Thank you, Katie.

COURIC: And we'll be back with more right after this.

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