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David McCullough, *1776*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005. Pp. 386. ISBN 0743226712.

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I agreed to review David McCullough's *1776* reluctantly, under friendly pressure from an admirer of the book who wanted my supposedly expert opinion. So I came to it with an academic skepticism that a very popular author who had won the Pulitzer Prize for a biography of Harry Truman could add much, except to his bank account, in a 300-page book on one of the best known years in American history.

The story is familiar: how Washington's army lost a series of battles to defend New York City while the Congress in Philadelphia was declaring independence from British rule as the true aim of the armed struggle that began near Boston more than a year earlier; and how from the low point of late-summer American defeat in New York and the autumnal collapse of popular support in New Jersey Washington and his disintegrating army were able to strike back across the wintry Delaware River, not once but twice, thus saving the Revolutionary cause for another six years of eventually victorious warfare. That is the story McCullough tells, once again. It is a true story, and he tells it very well, with a sharp eye for the right piece of evidence and an admirable literary sense of just how to use it. He breaks the rule against long quotations with impunity by setting them in the narrative so skillfully that the reader is not tempted to skim or skip as happens with less talented writers. I recommend the book heartily to anyone who is curious about what happened in this world-changing year of military events, and who wants to learn about them enjoyably. There are no major mistakes of fact, and only a few of the sort that engage academic nit-picking.

But "Facts," as Amos Oz observed in discussing the causes of his grandmother's death, "have a tendency to obscure the truth."¹ And that tendency is just where any serious critique of this otherwise admirable book must begin. The first two chapters focus on the two Georges—the third British king of that name, and the Virginia planter named Washington. King George III rides in splendor through his cheering subjects to deliver in Parliament the speech that will declare his American subjects in rebellion. It is a fact that the king heartily if sadly agreed with this message, but it is also a fact that His Majesty's Government—the group of politicians governing in the king's name—had composed the speech after agreeing on its content, which is the constitutional reality today behind the annual Speech from the Throne opening Parliament as it was in the eighteenth century. McCullough does not trouble us with the latter fact, leaving the impression that George III personally took his nation to war, just as American Presidents have done repeatedly. The truth is that in 1775 British public opinion (made up of a small political class; a smaller "chattering" class of writers, printers, and booksellers; and a usually quiet but potentially eruptive British "street," also known as "the mob") was fed up with American behavior, and demanded a hard line against colonial rebellion by the Government. The king, even if so inclined

¹ *Tale of Love and Darkness*, tr. N. de Lange (2003; rpt. NY: Harcourt, 2004) 33.

would have found it very difficult to take a conciliatory line in the face of what seemed to be American intransigence. How had this situation come to pass? At this point, McCullough or his defenders might argue that the book is about the first year of all-out warfare, not the causes of that war. One response might be to ask whether it would make truthful sense to start an account of the American attack on Iraq in 2003 with Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations, and then move directly to the story of military operations.

Maintaining symmetry, McCullough shifts his focus in the second chapter from London to Boston, where a large body of New England militia surround the town, blockading a British army while awaiting the arrival of George Washington, just appointed by the Congress in Philadelphia to be its "Continental" commander in chief. How an estimated twenty thousand colonial militiamen had come to assemble at Boston, and how some of that ragtag force had managed to do so much damage to the British regular forces and to the psyche of their leaders, in fierce fights at Concord and on the road back to Boston, and later at Bunker Hill, are questions brushed smoothly aside with only a few words from the author. The spotlight is on the American George, who is quotably shocked by the unmilitary character of the people under his command, although the truth is that he had seen as bad or worse twenty years earlier when he commanded reluctant Virginians in the last colonial war. We are thus encouraged to see the developing war as one of "dueling Georges," with George III at the head of a great navy, an impressive professional army, and the world's most powerful economy, having what appears to be an overwhelming advantage. The chapter ends with Washington's angry response to the news, just arrived on New Year's Day 1776, of the king's speech declaring the American colonies in rebellion.

Nothing is seriously wrong with these opening chapters. The readers slips easily into the war before there is time to raise troubling questions that start with, Why? These are not questions involving academic expertise, but rather questions any alert, sensible reader might be expected to ask about the political and military situation in late 1775. That reader probably will not be disturbed by the author calling the blockade of Boston a "siege," though Washington lacked the artillery to conduct a proper siege, described inaccurately by McCullough as requiring "a great deal of prolonged standing still and waiting" (p. 51). Siege warfare, as a glance at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781 suggests, was in fact a highly active and reactive form of eighteenth-century warfare—digging, shooting, attacking, and counterattacking. Only when Washington got some artillery, heroically dragged from Fort Ticonderoga to Boston across snow-covered New England, did the fairly passive blockade of Boston threaten to turn into a siege, at which point in March 1776 the British commander abruptly decided to move the war to New York City. Nor can the general reader be expected to question McCullough's brief statement that in 1775 Washington decided to have part of the army invade Canada, a decision that was in fact a complex *Congressional* decision, having less to do with Washington than with the politics and previous wartime experience of the northern colony-states. But the general reader might sensibly wonder what strategic logic prompted this seemingly bizarre offensive operation, which would begin so well and end so tragically. Smoothing yet another lump in his progressing narrative, the author does not pause to ask or answer.

As he swings into the dramatic heart of the story, the disastrous American attempt to defend New York port against an overwhelming land and sea attack, the critical hammer

must be lifted. McCullough's account of the Battle of Long Island and its immediate aftermath is a minor masterpiece. He evokes the chaos that reigned among the Americans, only some of whom had experienced the static routine of the Boston blockade, fewer still who had taken part in a real battle at Bunker Hill where British soldiers marched straight into a fortified position, but most of whom—officers and men—were innocent of military training much less the experience of combat. Faced by a larger number of British and German professionals, who were supported by complete British control of the waterways surrounding the islands and peninsulas of the great harbor of New York, American soldiers had the further disadvantage of being led by officers, from Washington on down the chain, who were almost as clueless as themselves. Unlike so many military historians, McCullough is not judgmental about all this. How could anyone expect these men, individually brave and willing else they would not have been there, to perform like a disciplined fighting machine? Reading McCullough, we can feel the fear and indecision that gripped the rebels as if we ourselves were among them, frightened by the ordered ranks of bayonets bearing down on us and bewildered by the choices—none of them good—facing each American commander. Well-planned and well-built rebel fortifications on the heights of Brooklyn, intended to be another Bunker Hill, were utterly negated by a well-executed British night march around the American flank, and by the ensuing rout as the British force cut through the rebel rear. At Bunker Hill pride rather than stupidity had led to horrendous British losses, but their commanders had learned a lesson in 1775 that was put to good use at Long Island, where British advantages were exploited to devastating effect. Weeks before the battle, at least one American observer, a staff officer and confidante of Washington, thought that no American effort could defend New York, made indefensible by its geography, and that the very attempt was foolish; the best use of American troops, he opined, was in “a war of posts,” hit-and-run partisan attacks.

The American Revolution might have ended as the leaves turned in 1776, but it did not. Though beaten and demoralized, deserting in droves, and led by a commander whose closest associates saw him as in shock, paralyzed by indecision, the survivors of Long Island had enough luck to struggle on. Night and fog enabled them to slip across the East River to momentary safety on Manhattan Island, and a British commander was cautiously reluctant to take the risks needed to exploit fully his brilliant success. Historians have long puzzled over why the British General William Howe failed to destroy the American army in the immediate aftermath of his Long Island victory. Was he afraid of another Bunker Hill? Was he, along with his brother who commanded the Royal Navy in American waters, secretly sympathetic to American complaints against imperial misrule? Or did he fear that excessive military force might undermine the prospect of a timely political resolution of the conflict? No one knows, and McCullough sketches the riddle but does not try to solve it.

The climax almost writes itself, though the author's skill is evident on every page. After a fighting withdrawal from Manhattan into Westchester County, Washington split his army, leaving a part in New York, and took what was left on a run for its life over the Hudson and across New Jersey, all the way over the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. There Washington pulled himself together and got some help from patriotic politicians and farmers. The British pursued but could not catch him, and then decided to spend a quiet winter consolidating their liberation of New Jersey. Washington during the darkest days of December saw

the urgent need to strike back at the enemy with his bedraggled forces, and a few of his staff pushed the same idea. The British capture of his putative rival, General Charles Lee, who had tarried in his march across northern New Jersey to use the few thousand men under his command to conduct a partisan war against the British flank and rear, actually seemed to raise Washington's level of confidence and determination, and he began to plan a surprise attack across the river against the German brigade posted at Trenton. The written record suggests that as the Americans started their march to the Delaware in bad weather on Christmas afternoon, the whole army saw the move as a final, desperate roll of the dice. With the crucial aid of skilled boatmen from New England, they got across the ice-strewn river, then marched nine miles through the night on rough roads to Trenton. The plan called for a pre-dawn attack, but the troops arrived an hour after daybreak. Alerted by their outposts, the German commander and his troops responded too slowly to stop the more numerous rebels. And in less than an hour Washington and his men had captured 900 European professionals after shooting almost 150 others, effectively destroying the whole German brigade, at very small loss to themselves. Eye-witness accounts converge on one vital point: that the Americans fought with a do-or-die desperation. No witness supports the legend that the Germans were too drunk or hung over from Christmas celebrations to fight effectively; instead, they were simply surprised, outfought, and overwhelmed by numbers. Washington quickly ordered a retreat the way they had come, to the safe side of the river.

That less than a week later an exuberant Washington would take his army, still bedraggled if more confident, back over the river into New Jersey is less easily explained, and McCullough does not try to do so, except to say that some American troops during the previous attack had crossed very late and were still exposed on the enemy side. But Washington was taking an enormous chance, with the British alerted by news of the Trenton debacle and strong reinforcements hurrying down from New York to the area. On the site of his first victory, Washington assembled the regiments to beg men whose enlistments expired at the end of the year to stay on. His rhetoric, as quoted, reminds us of Shakespeare's Henry V before Agincourt, but he also offered a ten-dollar bounty for an extra six months of service. Enough volunteered, and he had them dig in on high ground protected by a fordable creek along the south side of Trenton, with their backs to the uncrossable Delaware. The British vanguard soon was driving in the American outposts, and Washington's army appeared to be in a trap. Unwilling to attack at night, the British commander waited for daylight, and by then it was too late. The Americans had slipped away to their right along country roads; as lucky as they had been in escaping from Long Island four months earlier, they headed north, across the British line of communications. No evidence indicates that Washington had planned this move; he simply did what he could to escape the trap into which he had led his army. At Princeton, they ran into several British regiments starting their march to Trenton, ten miles away, and after fierce fighting, with General Washington displaying exemplary personal courage, destroyed them as they had destroyed the Germans the week before. Then Washington, unwilling to risk any more, led his army quickly to safety in the hills of northern New Jersey. Nothing said, at the time or later, can exaggerate the political and psychological importance of the two small military victories at Trenton

and Princeton. Within a week Washington had shed his reputation for ineptitude and indecision, and become the god-like immortal he has been ever since.

Near the end of his book, McCullough returns to London where in October 1776 George III once again opened Parliament. The king knew of the rebel declaration of independence in July and their military defeat at Long Island in August; his speech declares that the treasonous rebellion must be crushed. News of Trenton and Princeton much later did nothing to weaken that political imperative, and a dreary war that would drag on for more than six years, a war that neither side could win, not even when France, the other great maritime power, openly joined the rebellion. Though the rest of the war had its dramatic moments, there would be nothing to match the year 1776. Even the ultimate battle, at Yorktown in 1781, did no more than push an exhausted king and his demoralized and discredited government simply to give up on the Americans, and to concentrate on the true enemy—France—which Britain fought to a standstill in the last years before the peace treaty in 1783. A really good book on the whole war would be a hard slog, just as it was in reality, so McCullough may fairly be said to have cherry-picked his subject for its dramatic appeal.

A last critical thought is that in this book thousands of American soldiers, both volunteers and mobilized militia, who did not keep diaries or write letters that have survived down the centuries, are hazy figures drifting in and out of the drama, vital to the action but mysterious, inexplicable, almost invisible until one (untypical of their number) is quoted by the story teller. It seems fair to ask that this mass of people with its mixture of backgrounds and motives be made a subject, like George III and George Washington, for serious attention and explanation. Even if we are left with no better than estimates and informed conjectures, a historian as capable as McCullough could have made them his subject, and still kept the book under 400 pages.