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Historian addresses OU students and faculty

By **Liz Lent**, *OU Writer*

History doesn't exist simply in the past. It's part of who we are today. That philosophy drives Pulitzer Prize-winning author and historian David McCullough, who spent two days at Oakland University, addressing more than 1,000 people on April 10 then spending the morning of April 11 answering questions and sharing his thoughts with students on history, politics and the writing life with OU students and faculty.

McCullough, the best-selling author of "John Adams" and "Truman," came to campus as the first speaker in the College of Arts and Sciences' Distinguished Lecture in the Humanities series.

"We are tremendously excited about this lecture series and the opportunities it will provide for our students, faculty and the community at large," said David Downing, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The lecture will bring to campus respected and nationally recognized speakers, historians, writers, journalists and others to illuminate topics of current interest or historical significance in the humanities.

The April 10 near-capacity crowd at Shotwell-Gustafson Pavilion listened as McCullough spoke passionately about the importance of history in contemporary society.

"If we don't know where we came from, then we're not just expressing ignorance, it's also a show of rank ingratitude," he said. "I don't think there's such a thing as a self-made man or woman. We are all the result of that parent or teacher or friend who influenced us. And we are influenced by those people we never met, those people who lived hundreds of years before us. We need to know about them and respect them and know that they were thinking about us."

While McCullough was referring specifically to America's founders, that idea of connecting with one's past to find one's identity permeated his lecture and talks.

Although the success of his books no doubt pleased the author, his real satisfaction seems to come in getting to know the great historical figures he chronicles, especially America's second president John Adams, whom he referred to often in the present tense. McCullough's next book, due in June 2005, will focus on the Revolutionary War.

The key to understanding America's founders, he said, is to remember that they were people.

"The mistake is to think of them as gods, as being perfect," he said. "They were human beings. They had flaws." What made them special was their ability to "rise above that and achieve something successful. They were imperfect and more importantly, they knew what they had created was imperfect," he said.

Through his many works, McCullough has seen this same theme emerge. While researching his book, "Great Bridge: The Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge," he unearthed the story of the father and son who designed it. The father died early in the building process. When his son took over, he spotted numerous flaws in his father's design, flaws that he had to correct for the bridge to stand.

"It seems to me that is the central metaphor (for our country)," McCullough said. "Those who wrote the constitution left us with a brilliant plan, but it was up to us to make it work."

McCullough, himself, has become part of that evolution. Before flying into Michigan, he spent Thursday morning testifying before Congress on history and education, issues he believes in deeply.

"George Washington was the most important figure in our history yet students are graduating without even knowing who he is," McCullough said. At least part of the solution lies in encouraging inspired, dedicated teachers. "We can't treat teachers like they're glorified babysitters, paid to take care of our kids while we're off doing something more important. Nothing is more important than the education of our children."

Without a grounding in history, this and future generations will not have the tools necessary to understand the world and events

around them, he argued.

"History can be a source of strength and patience in troubled times, as these are," he said. Looking back on the problems and crises that came before is the best antidote to self pity, McCullough said, because it provides context.

"After September 11, people were on TV saying this was the darkest time we've ever been through. But that's not true," McCullough said. "Someone who says that doesn't understand history, what our parents and grandparents went through, the perilous times they endured."

OU students voiced appreciation for his words. "This was a great opportunity to hear someone of his stature speak," said OU history major Amy Fahnstock. "I wish it had been three hours longer."

For McCullough, understanding history is more than just a key to knowledge and scholarship. "History isn't just something behind us. It's all around us. It's happening now." To not embrace it would be a personal loss. "Anybody who isn't interested in history has got some lack of connection with life. Why should we restrict ourselves to this little window of biological time when we have the whole of history open to us?"

SUMMARY

Pulitzer Prize-winning author and historian David McCullough spent two days at Oakland University, addressing more than 1,000 people April 10 then spending the morning of April 11 answering questions and sharing his thoughts with students on history, politics and the writing life. McCullough, the best-selling author of "John Adams" and "Truman," came to campus as the first speaker in the College of Arts and Sciences' Distinguished Lecture in the Humanities series.

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