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V. History as Career Inspiration: Engineering

Pittsburgh's own David McCullough, who sadly passed away on August 7, needs no introduction to readers of American history. During his career, he received wide acclaim and a host of literary awards for his body of work, including two Pulitzer Prizes for Distinguished Biography, "Truman" in 1993 and "John Adams" in 2002. He also was honored by the National Endowment of the Humanities in 2003 by being named to deliver that year's Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities. He spoke eloquently then, including this:

"But what did they, the Founders, mean by the expression, 'pursuit of happiness'?"

"It didn't mean long vacations or material possessions or ease. As much as anything it meant the life of the mind and spirit. It meant education and the love of learning, the freedom to think for oneself."

He used Libraries extensively for his life's work, he knew their preeminent value to a life well spent, and he tried to help us know that too, through his own books and by what he spoke in his Jefferson Lecture.

David McCullough is widely recognized of course for the two Pulitzer "Presidents" books, but, among his twelve volumes, he also wrote histories rooted in notable engineering undertakings. His first book published was about a work of engineering gone horribly wrong. It is "The Johnstown Flood" (1968), his story about the May 31, 1889 coming-apart of South Fork Dam, an earthen structure designed to form Lake Conemaugh; it was built for the pleasure of members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. Earthen dams are not known necessarily to be engineering marvels, and this one was not either.

His second book, "The Great Bridge" (1972) is the story of the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, which still connects lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. Western PA's Washington A. Roebling was chief engineer; his father, John A. Roebling, designer. From start in 1869 to public opening in 1883, the tale of this great suspension bridge, its technology issues, and surrounding politics is a treat. It is a lesson in civil engineering.

McCullough wrote two other books about major engineering events. One is "The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal 1870-1914" (1977). It received a National Book Award for History in 1978. The second is "The Wright Brothers" (2015). I have not yet read either of these two, but following an avid McCullough fan's characterization of the latter as a must read, I have started it.

With other The Magic Library Card! short essays about books that carry career inspiration for young folks, this being the fifth, I have meant to emphasize fiction, the more so than non-fiction. Yet, in the case of David McCullough, as historian and author

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of non-fiction, the writing is so fluid, with so much a coherent plot being told, that I think reading him is quite as worthy at bedtime as any good fiction read. Now, in marking his passing, I encourage you to take him up on the excitement he found in revisiting notable engineering efforts, for better and, of course, for worse in one case.

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation