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FRIDAY, JULY 01, 2005

**"1776" -- The Americablog review**

by Michael in New York on [7/01/2005 05:51:00 PM](#)

**1776 By David McCullough**

(\$32; Simon & Schuster)

\*\*\* (three stars out of four)

What a glorious year! The brave rebellion against England, the Declaration of Independence, the founding of our country -- who couldn't love 1776?

Actually, as historian David McCullough reminds us in his entertaining new book, for those living through 1776, it was a dark, dangerous and unhappy year that everyone was glad to see end. He gives some brisk context and then dives into the months just before that pivotal year, showing how desperately slim were the hopes of the colonists; how a simple olive branch might have made our destiny more akin to Canada; and how a fortunate fog, some well-placed barrels and a timely retreat can prove just as important for victory as bravery on the field.

It's easy to imagine McCullough's soothing narrative voice (which has brought so much artistry to the documentaries of Ken Burns) bringing out the drama in his writing. Take this passage describing the British rout of Americans in Brooklyn during August of that year:

"By ten o'clock [Washington's] army had been hopelessly outflanked. The British were within two miles of the Brooklyn lines. Defeated men by the hundreds were streaming in from the battlefield, many blood-spattered and wounded, all exhausted. Officers were missing. Washington was facing disaster and could do nothing but sit astride his horse and watch.

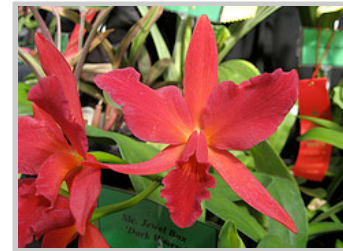
Like McCullough's blockbuster biographies of John Adams and Harry Truman (not to mention his less well-known but terrific books on the building of the Panama Canal and the Johnstown Flood), he is always adept at bringing men alive. Here he spends special attention on Nathanael Greene, a Quaker, and self-taught military strategist Henry Knox, both of whom would serve General Washington so well.

But above all he reanimates Washington. McCullough's depiction of him reminds me quite a bit of Reagan. Both were profoundly aware of "acting" a role and knew that the demeanor and perceptions of a leader were just as important as what he actually did. Washington made mistake after mistake in the early going, but he was outwardly confident and supremely inspiring...by design.

At 294 pages (not counting footnotes), this isn't the sort of mammoth enterprise people have come to expect from McCullough. Clearly he was so enthralled with this moment in history while working on his marvelous biography of John Adams that McCullough couldn't resist.

So perhaps its central flaw is timing. This title comes hard on the heels of David Hackett Fischer's "Washington's Crossing," the Pulitzer Prize-winning book that covers the same period in far more detail and insight. (One small example -- McCullough touches briefly on how the

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