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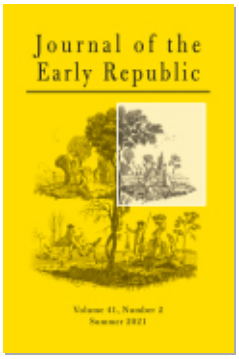

Honor Sachs

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Storytelling in David McCullough's *The Pioneers*

HONOR SACHS

Nearly every article about David McCullough and his writing process mentions his typewriter. Throughout his long career as a writer, McCullough has always relied on his trusty Royal Standard, a classic 1940s machine that he bought second-hand before starting work on *The Johnstown Flood* in the early 1960s. Fifty years and fourteen books later, both the typewriter and McCullough are still working. As he readily explains in interviews, McCullough has never been tempted by the ease of a computer or seduced by the efficiency of word processing. Words on a computer can too easily be erased and replaced, he says, too readily be revised and retooled. With a typewriter, McCullough explains, ideas emerge slowly and require deep, deliberate thought. There is permanence, familiarity, stability in words produced by hammer and ribbon. Why keep pace with changing times when the old reliable model works just fine?[1]

McCullough's latest opus, *The Pioneers*, illustrates clearly the reasons why one might want to keep up with the times. Certainly, writing is an arduous task in any medium, so I am not inclined to criticize anyone's strategies for productivity. If a typewriter, a pencil and paper, or an inkwell and quill get the job done, so be it. But in the case of *The Pioneers*,

Honor Sachs is an assistant professor of history at the University of Colorado Boulder. She is the author of *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the Eighteenth-Century Kentucky Frontier* (New Haven, CT, 2015).

1. David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (New York, 1968). McCullough, interviewed by Brian Lamb, *C-Span*, July 24, 2013, https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4460153/user-clip-clip-qa-david-mccullough-part; Liz Smith, "David McCullough: In Defense of the Typewriter—And American Authenticity," *Huffington Post*, Nov. 6, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/david-mccullough_b_2082892, accessed Dec. 5, 2020.

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McCullough's commitment to old, outdated, antiquarian technologies seems a particularly fitting symbol of the book's most glaring problems. The stories McCullough unfolds in *The Pioneers* celebrate a historical narrative that withered and died in the last century. They are triumphant tales about perfect men doing awesome things that made America great. They are stories that anyone with even a passing interest in historical writing from the last fifty years would recognize as throwback caricatures of American exceptionalism at best and tacit exonerations for Native dispossession and genocide at worst. Even grade-school children today know better than to refer to Indigenous people, as McCullough does without qualification, as "savages" (106).

In *The Pioneers*, McCullough sets out to chronicle the Anglo American settlement of the Northwest Territory during the years following the American Revolution. The subtitle of the book leaves nothing to the imagination: This is *The Heroic Story of the Settlers Who Brought the American Ideal West*. Indeed, *The Pioneers* delivers as advertised. McCullough tells a story of stalwart men with the vision, fortitude, and grit to go forth into "the immense reach of unsettled wilderness known as the Northwest Territory" (6). He weaves together tales of the founding investors of The Ohio Company of Associates and their efforts to establish a settlement in the West, an undertaking that would "change the course of history" (3). The men at the heart of McCullough's story are the "commanding" Rufus Putnam, the "patriotic, high-minded" Manasseh Cutler, and his indefatigable son, Ephraim (9, 60). He also describes other early settlers of the Ohio country, men like the tireless carpenter Joseph Barker and the selfless surgeon Samuel Hildreth who, each in their own way, helped build and protect the neat, orderly "new New England" in the West, which would become their own frontier "city on a hill" (44, 17). Through these various characters, McCullough explains how men with "habits of industry, respect for order, and strict subordination to law" transformed "virgin forests" into settlements for "intelligent and refined society" (125, 44, 125).

One might reasonably expect some level of hagiography from a writer who has built a career lionizing historical figures like John Adams, the Wright brothers, and Harry Truman. Turning men into gods is McCullough's brand. But the hero-worship in *The Pioneers* is over-the-top and, in truth, fast transforms this story of frontier settlement into a cloying narrative about the conquest of white civilization over native savagery that would make even Frederick Jackson Turner blush. It is a book about men without flaws who walk through life flawlessly. Literally,

Rufus Putnam was a man with "few human flaws" (92). Joseph Barker was "a happy man, much liked by everyone" (129). Manasseh Cutler was a Yale-educated minister "endowed with boundless intellectual curiosity" (5). Cutler married a "small trim blonde" (he did, after all, have "an eye for attractive women") raised a large family, and "was ever attentive to their needs for as long as he lived" (4, 5, 5). Ephraim Cutler was blessed with "strengths, virtues, and worthy accomplishments" (249). His conversations "commanded the attention of all who were so fortunate as to be present" (247). McCullough goes on and on like this for over two hundred and fifty pages.

Though every one of McCullough's characters faces setbacks, each conquers adversity with faith and fortitude, vision and foresight, not to mention (it is not mentioned) an arsenal of class privilege. *The Pioneers* is an unapologetic celebration of rugged, masculine conquest over "unbroken wilderness" (7). It is a love letter to those who paved the way for the manifest expansion of "the American way of life" over an "unsettled empire" (13, 7). It is a story about white men with "noble intentions" who sought out western lands "not for money, not for possessions or fame, but to advance the quality and opportunities of life" (12, 258). Really, he says that. Reading *The Pioneers* feels like narrating the "Parks and Recreation" murals at Pawnee City Hall, only David McCullough is no Leslie Knope.

With characters like these, *The Pioneers* unfolds as a tale without tension, a story without suspense, a narrative with no surprises. These steadfast, redoubtable pillars of society faced their share of hardships—a flood, an earthquake, smallpox, and some early "Indian troubles," as McCullough calls them—but our intrepid heroes always move forward with strength of spirit and abundant courage to "to propel as best they could the American ideals" (125, 258). The predictable monotony of McCullough's book caused me to dread the task of spending afternoons with these privileged do-gooders and their sterling careers. I grew weary of all the winning.

To offset the unbearable greatness of pioneering, I found myself rooting for the marginal figures who made brief appearances in order to frustrate and upset the forward trajectory of McCullough's plucky protagonists. There is Cajoe, a man owned and enslaved by the creepy Harman and Margaret Blennerhassett (after Harman married his own niece, the couple fled Europe and settled in Ohio, where any moral scandal was offset by the vast wealth they brought with them.) McCullough describes Cajoe as "ever cordial" in his labors (135). Margaret even taught him to read and write! In fact, throughout *The Pioneers*, McCullough underscores

repeatedly how one of the greatest legacies of his Ohio settlers was their insistence on banning the institution of slavery in the Northwest Territory. Such noble intentions, however, did not prohibit the persistence of slavery or the exploitation of enslaved labor. I was relieved when Cajoe packed up and fled at his first opportunity (162).

There is the English writer, Frances Trollope, who lived for a short while in Cincinnati and held nothing back in her assessment of American manners. McCullough describes Trollope as "a short, plump, plainly dressed . . . woman in her forties" (why?) (223). In her published commentary on American ways, Trollope described western settlers' excessive drinking and tells of "feeling absolutely done in by how boring Americans could be" (I feel your pain, Frances; 224). Further, Trollope leveled scathing critiques against Americans for their hypocrisy regarding slavery and for the national disgrace of Indigenous removal. Her frankness is welcome. McCullough's criticism of destructive settler–colonial policies is elliptical at best. It is a sorely needed moment of honesty when Trollope just comes out and says it.

The token bad guys that show up periodically in *The Pioneers* provide some of the more instructive points of entry into a more complicated story. There are ingenious moments of Indigenous resistance, as when Shawnees and Miamis began slaughtering game as a strategy for starving out the Ohio settlers (63). There are the poor, indigent Virginians in need of medical attention who share their food with Samuel Hildreth, despite his opinion of them as "'simple minded people'" (175). There is Captain Pipe, the Delaware warrior who initially negotiated with Rufus Putnam, only to reverse course and enact revenge for American depredations (106). And there is Aaron Burr, who duped Harman Blennerhassett out of his money while exploring imperial ambitions in the West. Far more than any of the Ohio pioneers, the characters McCullough introduces as villains end up providing some of the deeper insights into the human and moral complexity of Ohio's history.

How is it that McCullough, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist renowned for writing narrative history, could produce such an anemic story? Part of the answer lies in McCullough's myopic understanding of historiography. A review of the bibliography in *The Pioneers* make clear that McCullough has very little interest in historical scholarship published during his own professional lifetime. The secondary literature consulted for *The Pioneers* largely ignores anything published after the 1950s. Most of the works cited that were published during more recent decades are genealo-

gies, historical reprints, or biographies of founding fathers. It is, in other words, a project based on Cold War-era scholarship. This helps explain the triumphalism of his story. To rely on historiography written before the Vietnam War is to echo scholarship written at a time when Americans still harbored fantasies of winning wars and making the world safe for democracy. *The Pioneers* yearns for a return to consensus while willfully ignoring that the world is now a very different place.

A few contemporary scholars pass muster for McCullough. His bibliography includes the work of Colin Calloway as well as a handful of scholars who study the Ohio River Valley, such as Kim Gruenwald, Douglas Hurt, and Elizabeth Perkins. Andrew Cayton's *Frontier Republic* makes a notable appearance. Much of *The Pioneers* repurposes Cayton's research on the history of early Marietta. In McCullough's hands, however, Cayton's arguments about the conflict, grift, and scandal that shaped the Ohio Company are stripped away. McCullough shellacs over any internal corruption and unsavory practice with an avuncular veneer of nostalgia for values, principles, and good intentions. *The Pioneers* is a revival of Cayton's work, but a rejection of his conclusions, tied up with a ready-for-Father's-Day bow.[2]

I am not alone in calling attention to scholarship *The Pioneers* overlooks. Many of the authors in this forum have cataloged the decades of work that McCullough ignores. Collectively, this forum underscores the consequences of such oversight. Since the 1960s, scholars have dismantled the monochromatic, triumphant tropes that frame *The Pioneers* by giving voice to displaced people; recognizing Indigenous agency; acknowledging the consequences of settler–colonial violence; highlighting the fragility of local, state, and national institutions; understanding the exploitative practices of financial systems; recognizing the widespread ill-treatment of the poor; and demonstrating the extent of environmental and economic devastation wrought by American expansion. Far from being "entirely unknown" subjects (259), McCullough's stories are, in fact, among the most exhaustively studied subjects of the past sixty years.

2. Kim M. Gruenwald, *River of Enterprise: The Commercial Origins of Regional Identity in the Ohio Valley, 1790–1850* (New York, 2002); R. Douglas Hurt, *The Ohio Frontier: Crucible of the Old Northwest, 1720–1830* (Bloomington, IN, 1998); Elizabeth A. Perkins, *Border Life: Experience and Memory in the Revolutionary Ohio Valley* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998). Andrew R. L. Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780–1825* (Kent, OH, 1986).

From Richard Slotkin to Richard White, Peter Onuf to Dan Richter, Jean O'Brien to Kathleen DuVal, Philip Deloria to Gregory Dowd, Patrick Griffin to Bethel Saler, Rob Harper to Jacob Lee, Michael Witgen to Ned Blackhawk, Elizabeth Fenn to Susan Sleeper-Smith (dare I include myself in this list?), it is not hard to find work on the Ohio River Valley, the Northwest Territory, Indigenous people at the heart of the continent, or the men and women who participated in the Anglo American invasion of the early West. The body of work that addresses the very themes, ideas, and places central to McCullough's story is vast, dynamic, and not that hard to track down. To dismiss such work is to make a deliberate choice to devalue historical scholarship and the historical profession.[3]

Far more alarming than the scholarship that is missing, however, is the work that McCullough includes. Steering clear of scholarship from the last several generations of historians, McCullough relies heavily on histories written during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He draws from the memories of the Ohio pioneers themselves and allows their own

3. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Norman, OK, 1973); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 1991); Peter Onuf, *Statehood and Union: A History of the Northwest Ordinance* (Bloomington, IN, 1987); Daniel Richter, *Facing East From Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (2001; repr. Cambridge, MA, 2003); Jean M. O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis, 2010); Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia, 2006); Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT, 1999); Gregory Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore, 1992); Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York, 2007); Bethel Saler, *The Settlers' Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America's Old Northwest* (Philadelphia, 2015); Rob Harper, *Unsettling the West: Violence and State Building in the Ohio Valley* (Philadelphia, 2018); Jacob Lee, *Masters of the Middle Waters: Indian Nations and Colonial Ambitions Along the Mississippi* (Cambridge, MA, 2019); Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia, 2012); Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Elizabeth Fenn, *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People* (New York, 2014); Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indigenous Prosperity and American Conquest: Indian Woman of the Ohio River Valley, 1690–1792* (Williamsburg, VA, 2018). See also Honor Sachs, *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the Eighteenth-Century Kentucky Frontier* (New Haven, CT, 2015).

family members to tell the histories of their forebears, to craft their own legacies, and to preserve their own versions of the past for posterity. This is not just a simple case of reading sources. All historians read sources. But an essential part of the historians' craft is understanding sources within the context they were written, recognizing historical actors as reflections of the worlds where they lived, and analyzing language for meaning, motivation, and intent. It is here that McCullough especially fails at his job.

One of the main resources McCullough draws from is Samuel Hildreth himself, the Ohio doctor who chronicled the early settlement of Marietta and its environs. In 1848, Hildreth published his first work, *Pioneer History,* a collection of first-person accounts from the early years of settlement in Marietta, Ohio, and the Northwest Territory. Four years later in 1852, he published a collection of biographical sketches and memoirs of famous Ohio settlers. McCullough leans heavily on Hildreth's accounts and gives the frontier doctor full authority over his own self-serving narrative. In many ways, this is a missed opportunity. Hildreth had reasons for writing, and those reasons are instructive. In one instance, Hildreth takes pains to restore any doubt that Ohioans might have harbored treasonous sentiments during the Burr Conspiracy. He claims emphatically that none "would have harkened for a moment to a separation of the western from the eastern states" (157). There is a clear agenda here, and it is one that McCullough shares. McCullough accepts Hildreth's "absolute conviction" that the Ohio pioneers were never anything but deeply loyal Americans (157). To confess otherwise would tarnish the larger civics lesson in patriotism that frames *The Pioneers*.

But as any undergraduate history major knows, audience and context matter. When Hildreth published his memoirs in 1848, pioneer stories were fast becoming national gospel. He wrote within a moment of fevered territorial expansion, while Americans waged war on Mexico and George Caleb Bingham painted heroic portraits of Daniel Boone escorting white families through the Cumberland Gap. Hildreth's writing was a reflection of his time and, as such, it demands thoughtful reading and critical analysis to fully grasp its meaning and significance. By failing to do this basic work, McCullough presents a nineteenth-century vision of American conquest, replete with all the racist justification of violence and faith in white conquest as destiny, as timeless truth. He is unable fully, or even partially, to understand the complexity of the story he attempts to tell.

The consequences of such cursory attention to sources creates some truly jaw-dropping moments. When Hildreth passed through Cleveland

in 1839, for example, he made a stop to address the Physicians Society of Ohio. There he gave a speech in which he reflected upon the fate of Indigenous people on the continent. He described the beauty of the landscape during the early years of the pioneers, calling it a time when "the red man pushed his light canoe, rejoicing in the wild freedom of the forest, and happily unconscious of the approaching fate which threatened his race, and was soon to banish all but his name from the face of the earth" (233). Hildreth gave this speech during the era of Indian removal. He addressed his audience while the Second Seminole War raged in Florida. The language of banishment and fate seems a profoundly important opportunity to interrogate larger questions about race, violence, and white nationalism in the nineteenth century. At the very least, such a statement demands some critical analysis on the part of the historian reading the source. But instead, McCullough sympathizes with Hildreth's best intentions, calling his words a "hymn to the vanished wonder of the wilderness and to the natives for whom it had so long been their kingdom" (232). It is the literary equivalent of saying, "oh well, so it goes." Without a pause, McCullough places Hildreth safely aboard a steamboat named the *Splendid* and sends him off to New Haven, Connecticut, where the good doctor spends the weekend looking over John Trumbull's masterpieces of American history with the artist himself.

The flippancy with which McCullough goes from Indigenous genocide to a splendid weekend at Yale is chilling. I would expect such nonchalance from Hildreth, a historical figure writing with a personal axe to grind and the full gale force of white supremacy at his back. I would not expect such an apologia from a twenty-first-century author, writing while a groundswell of scholarship has undone celebrations of colonial conquest and forced a national reckoning with the legacies of racial violence and territorial war. Does McCullough believe that readers today are so unsophisticated that they cannot handle serious stories with complexity, ambiguity, or nuance? Or was he just too busy tap-tapping away at his Royal Standard for the past fifty years to notice that his stories have been supplanted by scholarship that is far more serious, complex, ambiguous, and nuanced? I cannot answer these questions, but I do believe that readers deserve histories with deeper analysis and greater complexity than *The Pioneers* provides.