

SMASHING ICONS:

Reflections on Thomas Jefferson and Others

Tonight, we honor Benjamin McArthur, a scholar and master teacher who died six years ago. What we are doing is certainly appropriate. One could even say, in the language of the old Book of Common Prayer, “it is very meet, right, and our bounden duty” to do so.

But we may need stronger language. Remembering Ben McArthur is not simply a fitting tribute paid by Southern Adventist University to a man who devoted almost his entire career to this school. There is an urgency, I think, to what we are doing tonight. Professor McArthur’s life has significance far beyond Collegedale or the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. He exemplified a kind of teaching, an attitude toward inquiry, and a dedication to discovery that is in danger of being neglected or lost.

If we are willing to listen to him, he can still speak to us. Think of what you already know of Ben’s life. He taught for 35 years at Southern, winning wide recognition, formal and informal, as an inspiring teacher. In 1991 he was honored with a national Zapara Faculty Teaching Award and in 1998 he was selected as the first Walter C. Utt Visiting Professor at Pacific Union College. Hundreds of students recognized him as a genius at genial provocation, a man who approached the past in a spirit of thoughtful curiosity, eager to understand rather than merely praise or condemn.

As a scholar of American cultural history, he studied a rich variety of subjects. He was the author of three books—*Actors and American Culture* and two major biographies: one of

Joseph Jefferson, the famous nineteenth-century actor, and the other on A. G. Daniells, powerful Adventist leader of the early twentieth century. He was an associate editor of *American National Biography*, an important reference work published by Oxford University Press. Ben had remarkable diversity in his interests, writing articles on subjects ranging from playgrounds and educational reform to baseball and religious history. He wrote a sparkling chapter in the 2014 study *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*. At the time of his death in 2017, he was working on a movie about Whittaker Chambers, that influential communist-turned-conservative of the Cold War era. He had earlier written a film script on the impeachment of Warren Hastings, an event crucial in the British imperial experience in India.

He had the ability to explain historical issues to general audiences, moving beyond purely academic journals to publications such as *American Heritage*, *Academic Questions*, *First Things*, and *Spectrum*. Educators, he believed, needed to have “an academic temperament,” and he was willing to serve a term as academic dean at Southwestern Adventist University as a way of proving his faith by his works. He continued to teach, even as an administrator, exemplifying a life of learning rather than aping the style of a corporate executive.

One more thing. Ben was director of the Southern Scholars program, the group under whose banner we meet tonight.

Before we turn to tonight’s theme—what some historians have called “the politics of memory”—let us remember the McArthur way. Ben was a scholar first, not an activist, and he took the trouble to be fair to arguments he rejected and to engage respectfully the people who articulated these ideas. He also had the rare ability to ask tough questions of his own side of a controversy—most famously in his penetrating 1979 essay “Where Are Historians Taking the Church?” Refusing to ask whether the truth was convenient to his career, he was the opposite of

an opportunist. In today's sharply polarized environment, which affects the academic world, Ben's approach is becoming rarer. I miss him more than ever.

As he examined idealistic hopes and unintended consequences, McArthur did not aspire to be a writer of polemics, relentlessly emphasizing real or imaginary mistakes, misunderstandings, or malice. He thought that it was possible to discover "what really happened" without being immobilized by fury or shame. He relished the subjects he studied, from calculating churchmen to self-absorbed performers to embattled imperialists. He was prepared to admire flawed men and women, people who—in Christian language—lived up to the light they had. He could, in short, puncture illusions as he looked back in wry amusement.

Ben's students were never graded on whether they agreed with him. They needed to create their own personal synthesis, he believed, not simply repeat someone else's arguments. He enjoyed laying out a range of possible interpretations and asking students to join the debate.

Like that eloquent political thinker Edmund Burke, he rejected the idea that history should be a political weapon. In Burke's words, history "may in the perversion," serve as a dangerous armory, "furnishing offensive weapons for parties in church and state." This weaponized history, he added, could supply "the means of keeping alive, or reviving dissensions and animosities, and adding fuel to civil fury."

I once assumed that the United States, unlike old Europe, had managed to avoid the folly of turning history into a partisan armory, a source of bitter division. I began thinking about this problem during a term I spent in Greece as a Fulbright professor at Ionian University. On several return visits I was struck by how much of Greek history had been turned into a weapon. The past was used to promote partisan goals or ignored as too dangerous to present-day peace.

The Greeks had slight interest in the artifacts of Turkish rule, for example, doing little to preserve old mosques or explain the Ottoman era with any subtlety. The fascinating remnants of the Venetian empire, stretching from Corfu to Crete to Cyprus, were mostly ignored or downplayed by present-day Greeks. And it was difficult to talk openly about the Greek Civil War. International best sellers, such as Nicholas Gage's *Eleni* or Louis de Bernières's novel *Corelli's Mandolin* provoked howls of political protest for their negative portrayals of Stalinist guerillas. Indeed, the movie version of *Eleni* had to be filmed outside of Greece.

We are not like that, I thought. Americans don't have to reject every aspect of British colonial rule or suppress any sympathy for the people we fought. We could preserve the battlefield at the Little Big Horn without sanitizing Custer or demonizing Sitting Bull. The *Arizona* memorial at Pearl Harbor did not have to tell the story of December 7 in a way that would humiliate Japanese tourists. We could honor Confederate valor without excusing their cause. We could commemorate Jefferson's principles even as we deplored some aspects of his practice.

But I was wrong.

Over the last decade, and especially in the last three years, history and memory have become explosive issues in a way that the Greeks could understand. This weaponized approach to the past undermines the McArthur model of scholarship, weakens the discipline of history as a liberating study, and challenges the kind of learning that is central to an honors program.

It started with understandable questions about honoring Rebel leaders (and slave owners) such as Robert E. Lee but then abruptly expanded into far-reaching vandalism. Angry iconoclasts have pulled down or defaced statues to Lee's nemesis, Ulysses S. Grant, militant abolitionists

like John Greenleaf Whittier, and the heroic black soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. There is a campaign to remove a statue of Abraham Lincoln, paid for by freedmen's donations and dedicated in 1876 by Frederick Douglass, that formidable runaway slave. Fired up by misinformation or something worse, zealots have demanded the removal of monuments honoring Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Theodore Roosevelt.

There seems no limit to the statue-toppling impulse. In some cases, it attacked monuments that had broadened the historical narrative beyond generals and statesmen. In Charlottesville, Virginia, after Lee's statue was removed and Jefferson's birthday disestablished, a protest movement successfully agitated to take down a statue of Sacagawea, the Shoshone woman who helped guide the Lewis and Clark expedition. It was an insult, you see, that the artist gave her a secondary role, a background position, rather than equal billing with the leaders of the expedition. At the University of Oregon, a mob went after a monument in honor of "The Pioneer Mother" and University authorities are now afraid to punish the vandals or put the statue back up. The thoughtful woman with a Bible in her lap, sitting atop a column marked "Pax" is, to some people, a symbol of evil. Apparently, the transformation of Oregon from stone age to frontier to an advanced society, able to sustain institutions such as universities, was a thoroughly illegitimate enterprise.

Icon-busting gusto is not restricted to statues or to one country. Already, people are arguing that a law school should not be named after John Marshall, our greatest chief justice, since he owned slaves. Princeton has taken the name of the father of the League of Nations off the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs because he accepted the racism endemic in the early twentieth century, especially in his party. (I might suggest renaming the Wilson School in honor of Theodore Roosevelt, whose record on racial matters and

understanding of national interest was better than Wilson's, but I don't expect a groundswell of support.) In an action since repudiated, the San Francisco Unified School District board decided that it is inappropriate to name schools after Washington or Lincoln or Daniel Webster or Paul Revere. Based on a clumsy misreading of a single poem in *A Child's Garden of Verses*, the name of Robert Louis Stevenson was blackballed as xenophobic and racist, ignoring his actual record on indigenous rights in his final home in the south Pacific. The name of Laura Ingalls Wilder has been removed from an influential award for children's books for alleged racial "insensitivity," shown by, among other things, a brief description of an amateur blackface minstrel show, in which Pa participated.

The same spirit is at work in other countries. In Canada, people protesting the record of residential schools for natives have recently pulled down statues of Queen Victoria and of John A. Macdonald, the nation's first prime minister. In Britain, the destruction of a statue honoring a Bristol philanthropist with ties to the slave trade has been a *cause célèbre*. A statue of Winston Churchill in London was defaced and in Leicester 5,000 somewhat more sedate protestors signed a petition to remove a statue of Mahatma Gandhi who was accused of being "a fascist, racist, and sexual predator."

Spain and France have taken contrasting approaches. President Macron has declared that in France no streets will be renamed, no statues carted off to obscure warehouses. Thoughtful pedestrians in Paris can sort out for themselves the mixture of Napoleonic, Revolutionary and royal names all around them. A minority government in Spain has taken an opposite tack, moving to suppress certain interpretations of the Civil War and the dictatorship that followed. Franco's bones have been dug up and moved out of the national monument to the war dead. His remains may be moved again. According to Stanley Payne, the most eminent historian of

modern Spain, any balanced discussion of the Civil War atrocities of Left and Right is now difficult.

As the Spanish example suggests, it would be a mistake to dismiss all this renaming and removal and revision as an example of “the madness of crowds,” a phenomenon of simple ignorance. Something more complicated is at work here.

The literary scholar Alan Jacobs has recently described an attitude toward the past that helps explain the current weaponizing of history. Too many of his students, he writes, have created a catchall category that might be called “All History Hitherto.” Like souls entering Dante’s hell, they look at the past and abandon all hope. History is all bad, a sewer (or slaughterhouse) of racism, sexism, and imperialism that must be repudiated.

This viewpoint, which takes away the possibility of learning from the imperfect dead, is all around us. It shows up in surprising places. For instance, several years ago, I read a brilliant book called *Empire of the Summer Moon* by S. C. Gwynne. It is the story of the rapid expansion and ultimate defeat of the Comanches on the Texas frontier, with the particular attention to the fascinating story of Quanah Parker. As I read, I was deeply impressed with the author’s skill at explicating the motives and choices of both the Comanches and the Texans. There was tragedy in the story but no melodrama. There were admirable people and scoundrels on both sides. “This is the way history should be written,” I kept thinking as I read.

I was bewildered when a house guest saw the book on my shelf and said: “I read that. It made me ashamed to be white.” The book had presented a much more subtle picture, with no jeremiads. The author wanted his readers to be intrigued and sympathetic, to reflect on the ironies of the life of the half-white leader of the Comanches. Parker was forever dedicated to his

mother, a settler forcibly incorporated into the tribe and then rescued, compelled to return to her own relatives and original culture. The book did not ignore “Indian depredations” or white folly. (Black pioneers even made an appearance in the form of the famous “buffalo soldiers.”) But for my friend, *Empire of the Summer Moon* was just another example of that irredeemable category “All History Hitherto.”

Let’s think about what we lose—as scholars or citizens—if we take this approach to the past. I will consider several examples, beginning with Jefferson and ending with illustrations closer at hand, none of them, I might add, sculpted “marble generals” of the Lost Cause.

It would be difficult to exaggerate Thomas Jefferson’s place in American memory. The face of our third president looks down from Mt. Rushmore, dominating the national landscape. In school names, on currency, in monuments, he is everywhere. Yet Jefferson was a slave holder, and he has become a target of the iconoclastic mood. Recently a statue of Jefferson was removed from New York’s City Council chambers. “Jefferson embodied some of the most shameful parts of our country’s long and nuanced history,” said one Council member (in a rather *unnuanced* statement).

How do we understand America’s past with the Sage of Monticello removed or downplayed? Jefferson owned slaves, it is true, but he recognized that slavery was wrong, and his powerful words helped to change us for the better. Though he was (to use the latest jargon) an “enslaver,” his principles helped end slavery.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” Jefferson wrote, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

There is no question that Jefferson understood that those truths were inconsistent with the institution of slavery. In the first draft of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson called the slave trade “an infamous practice” which “deeply wounded the rights of human nature.” In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he described slavery as “unremitting despotism,” damaging to both master and slave. He added, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever . . .” Someday, he wrote, the slaves might rebel against their masters, and there was no reason to think that God would be on the side of the enslavers! Or in his words: “The Almighty has no attribute which can take sides with us in such a contest.” As a member of the Continental Congress, he sought to ban slavery in the territories. As President, he successfully promoted legislation outlawing American participation in the international slave trade.

If we take seriously the complicated story of Jefferson and slavery, we might learn the remarkable power of ideas. It would have been the simplest thing in the world for Jefferson and his colleagues to announce principles that reflected only their self-interest. Instead, they aimed higher, choosing ideals that condemned their own actions. In a time of reality TV and gossipy tabloids, we are always on the lookout for hypocrites. But we are missing an important issue. The real question about Jefferson, as Douglas Wilson wrote a few years ago, is this: “How did a man who was born into a slaveholding society, whose family and admired friends owned slaves, who inherited a fortune that depended on slaves and slave labor, decide at an early age that slavery was morally wrong and declare that it ought to be abolished?”

It is a question to ponder. Perhaps our own ideas can, in fact, rise above the level of selfish rationalization. In other words, maybe the Marxists are wrong when they assert that our philosophy is always derived from our economic interest. Certainly, the case of Jefferson

suggests the independent and inconvenient power of ideas, ideas such as “all men are created equal.”

From 1776 on, Jefferson and his words have been inconvenient for those who wanted to extend slavery or restrict freedom to one race. In the years leading up to the Civil War, defenders of slavery eventually had to repudiate Jefferson’s insight that slavery was evil, insisting, instead, that no one was born equal, and that slavery was a blessing for both master and slave. Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, underlined the problem with the Declaration of Independence in a shocking 1861 speech. Jefferson and the other founding fathers were “fundamentally wrong,” he declared, in believing that slavery “was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically.” He said that the Confederate constitution, on the other hand, recognized that black slavery was natural and right.

As defenders of slavery repudiated the author of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln, Douglass, and other anti-slavery leaders invoked him on their side of the question. Indeed, Lincoln would stand on the battlefield of Gettysburg and insist that the United States was a nation dedicated to Jefferson’s proposition—all human beings have an equal right to freedom.

Today as we seek to preserve and extend justice, there are no better first principles than Jefferson’s. As Martin Luther King said in 1965: “Never before in the history of the world has a sociopolitical document expressed in such profound, eloquent, unequivocal language the dignity and worth of human personality.” Or as he declared in his famous “I have a dream” speech, delivered from the Lincoln Memorial: “When the architects of our great republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.”

It is, of course, fair to point out that there is more to Jefferson than his principles, his “glittering generalities,” his ideals. This Enlightenment intellectual was deeply in debt and, unlike Washington and other patriots, did not free his own slaves. He may have sired children by his slave Sally Hemmings, though the evidence is more complicated than most people realize. Still, it is not “nuanced” to ignore or distort his principles.

The same mentality that simplifies Jefferson’s life, ready to push him off his pedestal for failing to anticipate present-day assumptions, is at work in almost every other examination of the past. The process extends far beyond Jefferson—or Jefferson Davis. Two recent victims of this purge of heroes or saints have particularly surprised me.

John Muir would seem to be a perfect hero for 2023. A founder of the Sierra Club, father of our national parks, this brilliant writer, gentle, white-bearded marathon walker, showed a reverence for nature in tune with the ecological emphases of the last 50 years. He is a man to be quoted on Earth Day or revered by pilgrims to Yosemite. Yet he has been denounced as a racist, a man hostile to America’s aborigines. Critics have plucked “offensive” phrases out of context, putting the Sierra Club on the defensive, forcing Muir admirers to issue abject apologies on behalf of their founding father.

Though I am no Muir scholar, I was immediately skeptical. I wondered if the charges were true, whether the naturalist joined in the hostility to Indians so common among nineteenth century settlers. I decided to check the footnotes.

I found that the Sierra Club has nothing to apologize for. Far from being an Indian-hater or a man who wanted to relocate Indians to create national parks, Muir was a candid, perceptive observer, who sympathized with America’s native population—far more than most of his fellow

westerners. Here's one of the quotations used to indict Muir. It comes from *My First Summer in the Sierra*, written in 1911, describing a trip that took place some four decades earlier. He remembers meeting a group of bedraggled California Indians.

A strangely dirty and irregular life these dark-eyed, dark-haired, half-happy savages lead in the clean wilderness—starvation and abundance, deathlike calm, indolence, and admirable, indefatigable action succeeding each other in stormy rhythm like winter and summer. Two things they have that civilized toilers might envy them,—pure air and pure water. These go far to cover and cure the grossness of their lives.

Muir is correct in describing life close to nature as a cycle of abundance and starvation, but for the hasty reader, the words “dirty,” “savages,” “indolence” jump from the page. We expect the next lines to justify harsh treatment of primitive people. Instead, Muir turns to the poet of his native Scotland, Robert Burns, and affirms the unity of mankind, repenting of feeling “such desperate repulsion from one's fellow beings, however degraded.” He wants “to pray and sing with Burns” that “man to man, the world o'er, shall brothers be for a' that.”

In a book published two years later, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, Muir described the conflict of Indians and settlers as “only an example of the rule of might with but little or no thought of the right or welfare of the other fellow if he were the weaker.” He found Indians in southeast Alaska largely uncorrupted by contact with “bad whites,” and spoke glowingly of their industry, courage, and honor. In *Travels in Alaska*, he wrote of the “noble simplicity and earnestness and majestic bearing” of one chief, a man who so impressed him that he named a glacier after him.

Now there is a certain comical pretension, I suppose, in Muir or other visitors presuming to name ancient glaciers at all. But that is not the same thing as claiming that his approach to nature was rooted in racism and unworthy of celebration today.

Another news story about a hero being debunked caught my attention. This one was close at hand, taking place at the University of the South, a distinguished Episcopal institution just down the road from Southern Adventist University. For almost a century there was an annual lecture series named in honor of William Porcher DuBose, long-time theology professor, a man once described as “a serious candidate for the title of ‘greatest theologian’ produced” by American Episcopalians. A Confederate veteran who taught in the long era of segregation, he is now seen as a man who should not be celebrated. His name has been removed from the lecture series not for his liberal theology (shaped by nineteenth century German scholars), nor because some old-time bishops smelled heresy in his understanding of the incarnation, but because he defended the culture of the old South. There is much, of course, that was false or self-deluded in his view of Southern history, including his excuses for Reconstruction lawlessness and his faith in a good side of the “peculiar institution.” But for an alleged die-hard defender of slavery, he said some surprising things. “There are none of us now who do not sympathize with [slavery’s] extinction as a necessary step in the moral progress of the world,” he wrote in an obituary for Confederate general Wade Hampton in 1902. “It was natural that we who were in it and of it should be the last to see that, and even made to see it against our will.” Like polygamy and feudalism, slavery had once been acceptable. “The time will come when war will be a sin,” wrote the old soldier, now a scholar.

Tonight’s audience can sense, I think, a problem with the cancellation of DuBose. This is getting close to home. Think of what such a relentless purge might mean here, at Southern Adventist University. For many years this school, like the University of the South, excluded black students. That was wrong, part of a much larger injustice. But would it make sense today to go through this campus changing every building name that honors leaders from that era of

segregation? Can those administrators and teachers from before 1965 be recognized for their dedication and sacrifice, even though they lacked the insight or courage to challenge a system long taken for granted? Better than combing the records for examples of blindness or outright racism, would be finding a way to honor Leroy Leiske, the Southern board chairman who, at great personal cost, successfully pushed for integration. Maybe a building or a street should be named after him.

Back to the statue topplers.

In some cases, they know exactly what they are doing. During the long Soviet domination of Czechoslovakia, the novelist Milan Kundera penned a powerful insight that is relevant, I think, to us today. The “first step in liquidating a people,” he wrote, is “to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history.”

The result is frightening: “Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was.” Or to put Kundera into religious language: “We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us.” In either vocabulary, there is a connection between forgetting the past and a blighted future.

This destructive process may begin with good intentions. But the project of cleansing history has no practical limits, as revolutionaries from Robespierre to the Chinese Red Guards have discovered to their deep regret. What begins as focused protest often expands to consume the protesters. As one editorial writer recently put it, “A society that rummages through history to hold those of the past to the woke standards of today will soon have no heroes to honor.”

The extremism that objects to a statue of Winston Churchill will eventually object to honoring Mahatma Gandhi. In the end, neither Martin Luther nor Martin Luther King is safe from the demand for flawless heroes. (I won't even mention the challenge of understanding such Old Testament heroes as Jacob or David.)

At this point, I think again of Ben McArthur and his way of seeing the past. Indeed, I can almost imagine his response to what I have been saying.

“You have made some valuable points,” he might say if he had the opportunity to critique the speaker—a regular habit with scholars. “But be careful not to spend too much time refuting the vandals, as you stand at the foot of a toppled statue. The goal is understanding. The real Jefferson or Lincoln or Muir are not discovered simply by rejecting outrageous simplifications or challenging distortions. There is a demon named ‘Numbness to Nuance.’ And it can only be cast out with subtlety—and the scholarly equivalent of fasting and prayer.”

Ben continues: “I seem to remember, by the way, that you had your own issues with Jefferson. Didn't you think he was wrong in his enthusiasm for the French Revolution, naïve in his foreign policy, and shortsighted in his objection to Hamilton's financial plans? You wouldn't have voted for Jefferson if you had been around in 1800, I am sure.

“Have you forgotten what Arthur Mann taught us at the University of Chicago? You are not a truly creative or original scholar if all you do is refute or debunk someone else's theory. If, for example, you spend a professional lifetime picking apart the ‘Frontier Hypothesis,’ when you are finished Frederick Jackson Turner is still the one dictating the questions.

“We both know the sterility of writers who devote all their time to finding flaws and embarrassing mistakes in Ellen White, but never explaining how her leadership succeeded or

how she motivated people to act. Did you see Jonathan Butler's recent insightful essay in *Spectrum*? He is eloquently impatient with the simple muckraking approach to the Adventist prophet—she is a fraud if she made any mistakes.

Ben pauses for a moment. “You wanted to talk more about Jefferson than Jefferson Davis, I know. But you probably should have commented on the climate of opinion that produced so many Confederate statues in the years between 1890 and 1920—the low point for American race relations since 1865. It is in your area of specialty.”

“I agree,” I think I hear Ben saying, “that the main task for the future is not tearing down or erasing or denying. If you were a citizen of Tennessee, however, I know that you would not want your state to be represented in the National Statuary Hall by Nathan Bedford Forrest, that old slave trader and Klansman. By the way, is that Currier and Ives print protesting the Confederates' Fort Pillow Massacre still hanging in your office?”

“Personally, I am more interested in putting up new statues than removing old ones. Can you envision a statue of Ulysses S. Grant, looming over Richmond? Or a generic “Fugitive Slave” standing next to the representative ‘Pioneer’? How about this—a statue of General George H. Thomas, the Rock of Chickamauga? He was a Virginian whose decision was the opposite of Lee's—he put the nation above the state. He needs to be honored for his loyalty by today's Virginia, where black and white have equal citizenship rights—unlike 1910.

“The point is not to attempt to change the past or suppress it, but to recognize its full complexity. There is a wonderful quotation from Wallace Stegner that I am trying to remember. Something about a bridge.”

Ben might add, with a twinkle in his eye: “I am surprised that you did not quote Orwell. Do you remember the frightening totalitarian formula from *1984*: ‘Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past’?”

“In that direction lies madness, of course,” says Ben gently. “We would be inviting a re-run of Mao’s Cultural Revolution with its slogans against old customs, old culture, old habits, old ideas, and its fruitless pursuit of perennial revolution. The best we can hope for is incremental progress, building on the best in old ideas or old customs, as Edmund Burke would tell us.”

“One more thing,” Ben concludes. “I expect honors students—indeed, all curious college students—to be able to learn from people with whom we disagree on important points. Across the chasm of time and custom and change, we have the audacity to believe that we can be taught by Plato or Augustine or Confucius or Jefferson.”

When Ben finishes this hypothetical response, I am deeply impressed. Indeed, I couldn’t have said it better myself.

Later, I stumbled across the quotation from Wallace Stegner that Ben was searching for. In *Wolf Willow*, his memoir about growing up in Saskatchewan on the “last plains frontier,” the distinguished historian and novelist remembered how history works on all of us. “The past becomes a thing made palpable in monuments, buildings, historical sites, museums, attics, old trunks, relics of a hundred kinds; and in the legends of grandfathers and great-grandfathers; and in the incised marble and granite and weathered wood of graveyards; and in the murmurings of ghosts.”

In a striking metaphor, Stegner compared history to a pontoon bridge. “Every man walks and works at its building end, and has come as far as he has over the pontoons laid by others he may never have heard of. Events have a way of making other events inevitable; the actions of men are consecutive and indivisible.”

Tonight, I am haunted and inspired by that image.

If we tear up the bridge we are standing on, cutting away the imperfect work of earlier pontoon makers, we will find ourselves suddenly isolated from either shore, swept along by powerful currents into disastrous, rock-strewn rapids. Safety and understanding lie in adding to the bridge, tightening the ropes, straightening floats, and securing planks.

Southern Scholars, tonight I urge you to build bridges, rather than smash them. I am sure that’s what Ben McArthur, himself a master bridge builder, would want us to do.