

## HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

Commager is one of America's most widely read and influential historians. His two dozen books, plus as many anthologies and children's books, and scores of articles reflect his elegant and vivid style. He earned his B.A., M.A., and in 1926 his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and taught for over sixty years at New York University, Columbia, and Amherst. He held the Harmsworth professorship at Oxford University, the Pitt professorship at Cambridge University, and the Gottesman professorship at Uppsala in Sweden; he was also visiting professor at universities on four continents including most countries in western Europe. At Amherst College, he was the John Woodruff Simpson Lecturer in History, a position held by Robert Frost and Archibald MacLeish. Commager lectured effectively at many levels, whether before a Senate committee, a grade-school class, or the supporters of Brandeis University, where he was also a visiting professor. He was a philo-Scandinavian and especially loved Denmark. His doctoral thesis was on a Danish prime minister.

His first book, *The Growth of the American Republic* with Samuel E. Morison, has been a standard text for over six decades and is a model of clarity, comprehensiveness, and balance. His *Documents in American History*, often updated since its original publication in 1934, dominates its field and is extraordinarily broad in its coverage, including mainly political, diplomatic, economic, literary, and social documents. That book is an outstanding teaching tool. His *Theodore Parker: Yankee Crusader* (1936) is a riveting study of a Massachusetts transcendentalist reformer. *Majority Rule and Minority Rights* (1943) is a critique of judicial review based on Commager's devotion to majoritarianism, respect for dissent, and admiration of the opinions of Justice Felix Frankfurter. When, however, the Warren Court espoused liberal opinions, Commager supported judicial activism—in the right causes. Commager's *Civil Liberties Under Attack* (1951) and *Freedom, Loyalty, and Dissent* (1954) blasted McCarthyism and defended constitutional freedoms.

With Richard B. Morris, Commager edited the *New American Nation* series in over forty volumes and co-authored *The Encyclopedia of American History* (1953). His *Search for a Usable Past* (1967) is historiographical, and *Freedom and Order* (1966) is an incisive commentary on contemporary America. *The American Mind* (1960) is a highly regarded interpretation of American thought and culture since the 1880s as influenced by constitutionalism, pragmatism, evolution, and economics. It is perhaps his most memorable book. *The Empire of Reason* (1977), another splendid book, stresses the ways America fulfilled Enlightenment ideas by institutionalizing them, as in constitutional conventions, federalism, and bills of rights. His three Gaspar Bacon Lectures on Justice Joseph Story are brilliant, yet he was unable to write the definitive book on Story that he very much wanted to do. He knew he was regarded as an impressionistic and suggestive historian and wanted to change that image by writing a 'life and times of' someone and to show his scholarship by including dense footnotes. But he could not; doing that sort of book was not his forte. He abandoned a proposed life of William Jennings Bryan as well as the life and times of Story.

Commager concerned himself with describing the American national character as a product of history, which he regarded as a branch of *belles lettres*. His books reveal the influence of Emersonians as well as pragmatists such as William James, Lester Frank Ward, and John Dewey, whom he depicted as exponents of Americanism. His work also reflected his liberalism and acceptance of government as an agency of popular welfare. His political hero was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He was a flaming civil libertarian and defended even the right of Communists to teach in universities. During the war in Vietnam, he sharply criticized American involvement and acted as chairman of dissenting Democrats in Massachusetts.

Commager was vivacious in person as well as in his lecturing. He was a gifted and exciting teacher and continued in the classroom well after he passed his eightieth birthday. He spoke

finished English nonstop without a note, peppering his lectures and even his conversation with quotations from heart, not only from other historians but also from novelists, literary critics, and philosophers. He was amazingly learned and insightful, yet he had considerable difficulty remembering the names of his students. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of Massachusetts and worked for Commager in his office as his research assistant for two years, yet he persisted in calling me 'young Shaw.' Years passed before he called me by the right name and before I could address him by his nickname, 'Felix,' which aptly means happy.

He was a versatile person. He could 'sing' all of Gilbert and Sullivan, play ping pong (badly), and talk compulsively about almost anything. He was not a good listener, and he had some eccentric notions. He thought one graduate student was 'a perfect Aryan type,' which he meant as a hearty compliment. He was not remotely anti-Semitic but made comments that in someone else might have been so regarded. He instructed me not to talk with my hands at my doctoral dissertation defense, though he chose Jewish students as his assistants at Columbia and Amherst. On one occasion, when I was unable to change the ribbon on his World War I Woodstock typewriter, he said, 'Let the old man try it,' and inserted the ribbon easily. He then remarked, 'I thought all people of your race were great engineers. Look at Oppenheimer, Einstein, and Teller.'

Commager was a generous person. After I lectured to his classes when he had an appendectomy, he gave me a mint set of the *Dictionary of American Biography*, and once when he learned that I had financial problems, he left a \$1,000 check for me at my table in his office. For all his erudition and achievements, he remained unaffected. One day at his home, I stood before a Currier and Ives depiction of a Civil War battle scene. He informed me that in that battle one of his grandfathers had led the Union forces while the Confederates were led by a grandfather of his wife. Impressed, I inquired whether the crossed swords beneath the battle

scene had belonged to those grandfathers, and he replied, 'No, they are just something I picked up in a Pittsburgh junk shop.'

Commager was a member of a score of institutions, including for more than half a century the American Antiquarian Society, before which he delivered three papers. In 1982 the *New York Times* published his photograph and a long article about him, entitled 'A Bouncing, Zestful Commager Turns 80 Today.' On that occasion, the American Civil Liberties Union, the New England Teachers, and the National Unitarian Church presented him with awards. He had honorary degrees from forty-four colleges and universities, and he won the Gold Medal for History from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He died in Amherst at the age of ninety-five on March 2, 1998. He leaves his wife, Mary, two daughters, Nell and Lisa, five grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

Leonard W. Levy

### ARCHIE KIMBROUGH DAVIS

The pilgrimage followed a fixed route. From the Carolina Inn it led to the Old Well at the center of the Chapel Hill campus of the University of North Carolina, then across Polk Place (named for the eleventh president of the United States) and, finally, to Wilson Library, home to the North Carolina and South Carolina Historical Collections.

No individual in North Carolina did more over the second half of the twentieth century to influence the economic development of his native state than the man who ritually followed this path. None was more dedicated to the support and study of history. And none took more to heart the notion of the scholar gentleman.

Born on January 22, 1911, Archie K. Davis graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1932, fifty years before his 1982 election to membership in the AAS. In 1956, at the age of forty-four, he became chairman of the

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