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Neil Jumonville. *Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xviii + 328 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2448-1.

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Scholarship and Engagement: Henry Steele Commager as Historian and Public Intellectual[1]

In December of 1998, midway through the House Judiciary Committee's hearings on the impeachment of President Clinton, the Committee called as witnesses a panel of historians and legal scholars who sought to cast light on the history and purposes of the impeachment process. Members of the H-LAW community would have recognized such names as Bruce Ackerman of Yale Law School, Jack N. Rakove of Stanford, and Sean Wilentz of Princeton. The odd thing about this panel, and about the other efforts of historians and other scholars to take part in the public controversy about impeachment, was that they either seemed or were treated as being out of place. Indeed, in his new book on the impeachment controversy, Judge Richard A. Posner argues that one lesson of the Clinton impeachment is just how unsuited historians are to offer guidance on matters of public policy.[2]

Twenty-five years before this puzzling episode, the nation was roiled by another crisis posing the risk of Presidential impeachment–the Watergate controversy that finally drove President Richard Nixon to resign his office. One of the foremost participants in that great public argument was the historian Henry Steele Commager, and virtually nobody questioned Commager's place in the fray. Not only was Commager probably the most famous historian of his time; he also was a highly respected participant in public debate. Indeed, his fame was rooted at least as much in his engagement with great public issues over nearly six decades of lecturing and writing–from the era of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal through the age of Ronald Reagan–as in his work as a historian or as a professor.

Commager's role as a public intellectual takes center stage in the biography under review. Its author, Neil Jumonville, who teaches American history at Florida State University, previously wrote *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), a significant examination of "public intellectuals" and their role in public debate. In his new book, Jumonville juxtaposes two worlds: "As few have been able to do in the past half century, Commager brought together the two worlds of scholarship and public intellectual activity" (p. xiii). He defines these two worlds in sharply different terms: "... I've used the example of Commager to ask whether the intellectual life is compatible with scholarly life. Can an intellectual (who writes as a partisan generalist for the wide public on contemporary issues) still operate as a scholar (who is a "neutral" archival academic who writes for his or her professional peers)?" (p. xii).

In some ways, Jumonville's sharp dichotomy makes sense–particularly when historians have come under increasing fire for writing only for one another and not for the general reader, and when young historians seeking to bridge the gap between professional and general audiences are regularly advised not to do so, at least until they have won tenure. However, Commager would have rejected Jumonville's dichotomy. Indeed, as Jumonville acknowledges, Commager is notable precisely because he scorned gaps separating professional and general audiences and rejected the idea that a historian had to choose between cloistered pursuit of scholarship and vigorous, even polemical discourse in the public realm. Jumonville's stark distinction between the role of the historian and that of the public intellectual poses problems for his attempt to understand a historian who not only was also a public intellectual but saw no contradiction between those roles.

Jumonville ably chronicles Commager's career, showing him as a man with a foot in both worlds who seemed effortlessly to maintain his balance between them. He also conveys at least some of Commager's inspiring energy, his ability to write vigorous yet elegant prose, his scholarly and political enthusiasms, and his wry, sardonic humor. In this last connection, one passage of his book is of special relevance for the writer or

reader of book reviews. In 1925, the young Commager reported to his friend Hans Duus that, while sojourning in Europe and paging through his host's extensive file of back issues of the *American Historical Review*, he had realized "that all book reviews were innocuous and not worth the effort. 'There is an unvarying formula, … and I guarantee to write an 800 word review of any book within 12 hours."' Jumonville continues, blending quotation and paraphrase (p. 15):

First, from the book's dust jacket copy you talk about the title and author. You note that the book and its style are fair, "point out typographical errors at great length," discuss the bibliography, "noting with sorrow" its missing monographs, and "end up saying that all students of the period are under debt to the author for his piece of research." He assured Duus that this latter compliment is "bunk because students of the period do their own research and no one else cares to read the book as it is too dull."

Jumonville structures his book largely by reference to two interlocking chronologies–that of Commager's life and career, and that of the public controversies and political battles in which Commager took part. He traces Commager's life from his birth in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on 25 October 1902, his orphaning at an early age and his struggles to put himself through the University of Chicago (where he earned the B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.), through his teaching stints, first at New York University and then at Columbia (1936-1956) and finally at Amherst College, which he joined in 1956 and where he taught through the early 1990s, dying on 2 March 1998.

Jumonville weaves around the central thread of Commager's career a rich but uneven account of Commager's participation in many pivotal controversies. He is effective on Commager's courageous stand against blacklisting in the 1940s and 1950s, a campaign that Commager undertook at some personal risk but with thorough disregard for that risk. Jumonville also ably limns Commager's other forms of political activism, including his enthusiasm for Adlai Stevenson in the 1950s and for John, Robert, and Edward Kennedy in the 1960s and 1970s, and his longstanding opposition to the Vietnam Conflict on political and constitutional grounds. He is somewhat cursory as his book enters the 1970s–in particular, devoting surprisingly little attention to Commager's extensive activism during the Watergate crisis of 1973-1974 and his vigorous criticism of the Reagan Administration throughout the 1980s.[3]

Jumonville presents his biography of Commager as an extended meditation on the clashing roles of the historian and the public intellectual. Unfortunately, the book's focus means that it lacks or slights discussion of other questions and topics equally important to understanding Commager's role in the intellectual life of his time–in particular, his work as a historian and the relationship between his status as a professional historian and his enthusiastic engagement in public debate.

First, Jumonville brackets Commager with other notable historians who were also public intellectuals–principally Commager's longtime friend and Columbia-colleague Allan Nevins, as well as Richard Hofstadter (also of Columbia) and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (of Harvard and later of the CUNY Graduate School). All these men function as prisms through whom Jumonville can recount and analyze the roles of historians as public intellectuals. Indeed, sometimes Jumonville focuses so much on Nevins or on Hofstadter that Commager vanishes from his own biography for pages at a time.

A second, more important gap is Jumonville's apparent reluctance to engage much of Commager's work as a historian. To be sure, he mentions Commager's major contributions to historical scholarship his 1936 biography of the Unitarian minister and abolitionist, Theodore Parker [4], his 1943 lectures on judicial review, *Majority Rule and Minority Rights*[5], his 1950 monograph *The American Mind*[6], his 1977 study *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment*,[7] and his 1993 series of lectures, *Commager on Tocqueville*.[8] And he also notes the famed *Growth of the American Republic*, the textbook that Commager wrote, first with his revered senior colleague Samuel Eliot Morison and then with his protege William E. Leuchtenburg.[9] And yet Jumonville mostly limits his comments on these books to contemporary reviewers' assessments, with little sustained effort to integrate them into an interpretation of Commager's evolving work as a historian or his place in the historiography of the fields to which he contributed. Jumonville notes Commager's admiration for Vernon L. Parrington, whose *Main Currents in American Thought* was both the inspiration and the model for *The American Mind* and, to a lesser degree, *The Empire of Reason*.[10] But Jumonville's specific attempt to situate Commager in the currents of American historiography by reference to Parrington is the exception rather than the rule.

Many readers of H-LAW may know Commager's scholarship best through his coeditorship with the late Richard B. Morris of the New American Nation series, which eventually produced more than forty volumes covering the span of American history from the earliest civi-

lizations in America to the "unraveling of America" in the 1960s and the emergence of the "New South" between the 1950s and the 1990s.[11] (Although Morris was a close friend and a valued Columbia colleague of Commager's, Morris appears rarely in this biography–perhaps because he was more firmly planted than Commager or Nevins or Hofstadter on the "scholarly" side of Jumonville's divide.) Jumonville does not address the significance for American historiography of the series as a whole or of such notable individual volumes as Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* , David M. Potter's *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, Arthur S. Link's *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917*, or William E. Leuchtenburg's *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940.*[12] To be sure, the correspondence among authors, editors , and publisher pertaining to the series is still sealed – but the lack of access to those sources does not preclude an assessment of the series' place in American historiography or of Commager's role in it. Furthermore, Jumonville nowhere refers to Commager's editorship of *Documents of American History,*[13] for more than forty years the leading documentary sourcebook for anyone studying the history of the United States. Nor does he mention Commager's two great documentary histories–*The Blue and the Gray*, on the Civil War,[14] or *The Spirit of Seventy-Six*, on the American Revolution (the latter coedited with Richard B. Morris),[15] nor Commager's programmatic *Living Ideas in America,*[16] a book that its editor deliberately designed as both a window onto the American past and a statement of Commager's vision of enlightened "midcentury liberalism" (to use Jumonville's own phrase) for its time and posterity. With these documentary anthologies, Commager not only set standards of rigor and usefulness that are models of their kind, but also helped to shape the teaching and study of American history for generations of teachers and students.

In the 1960s, following the publication of Arthur M. Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House,*[17] a spirited controversy raged over whether, as Commager put it in two essays he wrote at that time, "the historian should sit in judgment" and "the historian should write contemporary history." At issue in the *Thousand Days* controversy (which eerily presages elements of the current controversy over Edmund Morris's *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*[18]) was Schlesinger's remarkable access to a sitting President, his use of the information he gleaned that way, and the effects of his relationship with Kennedy on his interpretation of the Kennedy Presidency. Commager collected these essays and a series of others on various aspects of history and historiography in his 1967 collection *The Search for a Usable Past* – a book valuable for understanding Commager's approach to such matters, yet again one that Jumonville cites only in passing, despite its potential to illuminate the question that forms the core of Jumonville's interpretative enterprise.[19]

Third, Jumonville often characterizes Commager as a Jeffersonian, but his use of the term reflects a surprisingly uncritical adoption of Commager's use of the term. Commager's Jefferson was an enlightened and far-seeing philosophical statesman, a tolerant man with a sweeping commitment to human freedom and a confident, philosophically-rooted pragmatism about politics and governance.[20] But other historians have discerned other, more complex, and sometimes less recognizably modern versions of Jefferson.[21] Indeed, Commager's Jeffersonianism was refracted through his admiration for Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal – just as his friend and counterpart Arthur M. Schlesinger has often been accused of rendering in *The Age of Jackson*[22] a portrait of Andrew Jackson unnervingly reminiscent of Roosevelt. This is not to denigrate Commager's interpretation of Jefferson or his presentation of himself as a Jeffersonian. Rather, it is simply to recognize, as Jumonville surprisingly does not, that Commager was representative of his time in following Roosevelt's oft-quoted prescription of applying Hamiltonian means to Jeffersonian ends, and in regarding Jefferson and many of the other great figures of the Revolutionary generation almost as contemporaries and intellectual compatriots.

Finally, Jumonville often notes that Commager acted as a public intellectual while maintaining an academic and professional base as a historian–but he does not address sufficiently the relationship between the two. Nor, despite his apparent intention to do so, does he suggest whether Commager's linked roles as historian and public intellectual are worthy of anything more than respectful study. To what end does Jumonville propose that we understand Commager as a public intellectual and "midcentury liberal"? Is it solely to study Commager as a representative figure of a body of thought that is of historical interest only? Or does Jumonville have a more prescriptive aim in view?

For one thing, Jumonville overlooks that Commager's status as a professional historian anchored his credibility as a participant in the public controversies into which he threw himself. For another, as already noted, Commager would have insisted both that his work as a historian informed his engagement with contemporary political affairs, and that his engagement with the politics

of his day inspired his most creative and effective explorations and interpretations of the American past. Commager saw these two roles not as divided realms but as points on a spectrum of activity. It is thus not surprising that Commager was most often drawn to two earlier generations of engaged intellectuals who also worked closely with history–the Progressives of the early twentieth century and the Revolutionary generation of Americans of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries–nor that he also devoted careful and respectful study to two other nineteenth-century figures who were both scholars and engaged intellectuals, Justice Joseph Story and Alexis de Tocqueville.

Even so, Commager's primary professional identity–the way he saw and defined himself–was as a historian, and it was that sense of himself and of the historian's calling that he sought to communicate to generations of students, both at Columbia and Amherst, and to thousands or millions of readers of his books, articles, essays, lectures, documentary collections, "op-ed pieces," and letters to the editor. Indeed, he thought of, and often referred to, those activities–which Jumonville too neatly cabins off as those of a public intellectual–as teaching by other means.

In addition, Jumonville's too-neat characterization of the work of the scholar, which stresses the scholar's neutrality, does not fit with our recognition today that "neutrality" or "objectivity" are goals and aspirations rather than realities easily and unreflectively achieved.[23] There were indeed subjects and occasions, as Jumonville notes, in which Commager's political views obscured certain complexities from his view. For example, as Garry Wills acidulously complained in his study of religion and American politics, Commager never fully grasped the power of religious currents in American life and thought– a point usefully noted by Jumonville.[24] Even so, Commager's achievement–his ability to distill the history of the United States, in particular the confluence of ideas and politics, with skill and elegance–is of continuing value despite, or perhaps because of, the clarity with which Commager's formal historical writings express his values and political preferences.

Thus, although Jumonville's biography is enlightening and perceptive, he does not succeed in his stated central mission: to consider the challenges facing those who would, as Commager did, blend scholarship with engagement, who would view taking part in professional discourse about the past and seeking to reach that oft-yearned for, oft-scorned "wider audience" as equal parts of the academic historian's mandate.

Notes:

[1]. A disclosure of potential conflict of interest is in order. I knew Henry Steele Commager from 1971 till his death in 1998. He was my first mentor; throughout my career as a historian he provided encouragement and moral support, and he remains a profound influence on my work as a historian and teacher. I have tried to draw on my familiarity with Commager as a historian and a teacher in preparing this review, but I have also tried not to let it prejudice me either for or against the book or its subject.

I am grateful to Professor Joanne B. Freeman of Yale University and to Felice J. Batlan for their nuanced and constructive advice in the preparation of this review.

[2]. Richard A. Posner, *An Affair of State: The Investigation, Impeachment, and Trial of President Clinton* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[3]. Jumonville also scants Commager's work as a teacher at Amherst while he held the Simpson Lectureship from the 1960s through the 1980s – partly due to his reliance on interviews with colleagues in Amherst's history and American studies departments. Had Jumonville also secured the input of students in his seminars in those years, a different portrait of an active, engaged, and inspiring teacher would have emerged. This sketchiness contrasts with Jumonville's evocative picture of Commager as a mentor to such Columbia students as Milton Cantor, Harold M. Hyman, William E. Leuchtenburg, and Leonard W. Levy.

[4]. Henry Steele Commager, *Theodore Parker* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936). Commager also edited a modern anthology of Parker's writings: Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Theodore Parker: An Anthology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960).

[5]. Henry Steele Commager, *Majority Rule and Minority Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943).

[6]. Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

[7]. Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977). Commager planned but did not complete a second volume that would address the American Revolution's effects on the United States and the American people. In 1991, Gordon S. Wood published *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991); his prize-winning and controversial study comes remarkably close to the

book that Commager envisioned as the complement to *Empire of Reason.*

[8]. Henry Steele Commager *Commager on Tocqueville* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

[9]. Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930); Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, and William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 7th ed. in 2 vols. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). Leuchtenburg assumed primary responsibility for the abridged edition. Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, and William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Concise History of the American Republic* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; 2d ed., 1983). See also Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager, *The Pocket History of the United States* (New York: Pocket Books, 1942; ninth ed., with Jeffrey B. Morris, 1993).

[10]. Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, 3 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927-1930). On Parrington, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), part IV. Parrington left his volume III, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America*, unfinished at his early death; Commager deliberately launched *The American Mind* at the point when Parrington laid down his pen.

[11]. Allen U. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Dewey W. Grantham, *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

[12]. Eric S. Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); David M. Potter (completed and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher),* The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861 *(New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Arthur S. Link,* Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917 *(New York: Harper, 1960); William E. Leuchtenburg,* Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940_ (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

[13]. Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History* (New York: Appleton, 1934; 9th ed., in 2 vols., New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1973); Henry Steele Commager and Milton Cantor, eds., *Documents of American History*, 10th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1988).

[14]. Henry Steele Commager, ed., *The Blue and the Gray* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950).

[15]. Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris, eds., *The Spirit of Seventy-Six* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967; bicentennial ed., 1975).

[16]. Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Living Ideas in America* (New York: Harper, 1951; rev. ed., Harper & Row, 1967). In this connection, it should also be noted that Commager published a pioneering anthology drawn from the revised edition of *Living Ideas in America*: Henry Steele Commager, ed., *The Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). Jumonville does not mention this anthology, either, nor does he note Henry Steele Commager and Elmo Giordanetti, eds., *Was America a Mistake? An Eighteenth-Century Controversy* New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

[17]. Arthur M Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

[18]. Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York Random House, 1999).

[19]. Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past: And Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

[20]. See, e.g., Commager, *Empire of Reason*, passim; Henry Steele Commager, *Jefferson, Nationalism, and the Enlightenment* (New York: George Braziller, 1976).

[21]. The classic study remains Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960; reprint, with new foreword, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998). See also the superb symposium volume, Peter Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

[22]. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little Brown, 1945).

[23]. Bernard Bailyn has quoted his Harvard colleague, Donald Fleming, to this effect: "Perhaps we cannot achieve perfect objectivity, just as we cannot achieve perfect antisepsis. But that does not mean that we perform brain surgery in the sewer." See generally, Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity" Question and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, Eng., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[24]. Garry Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

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