

Commager, Henry Steele (25 Oct. 1902-2 Mar. 1998), historian, educator and editor, was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the son of James Williams Commager and Anna Elizabeth Dan Commager. Orphaned as a child, Commager was raised by his maternal grandfather, of Danish origin, in Toledo, Ohio, and Chicago, Illinois. After graduating from high school in Chicago, he attended the University of Chicago. He received a Ph.B. in 1923, an M.A. in 1924, and in 1928 a Ph.D. in history, his dissertation, unpublished, being "[Johann Friedrich von] Struensee and the Reform Movement in Denmark." Later Commager studied at the University of Copenhagen, Cambridge University, and Oxford University. He taught American history at New York University, as instructor (1926-1929), assistant professor (1929-1930), associate professor (1930-1931), and professor (1931-1938). He then established long careers as professor at Columbia University (1939-1956) and Amherst College (1956-1972). Between 1941 and 1975 Commager, who enjoyed traveling and associating with American and foreign students, was guest professor at twenty or more universities in the United States and in Chile, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, and Trinidad. During World War II, he served in the War Department's Office of War Information (England, 1943; France and Belgium, 1945). In 1928 Commager married Evan Carroll, with whom he had three children; she died in 1968. Eleven years later, Commager married Mary E. Powlesland.

A man of great energy and self-assurance, extraordinary memory, and single-minded professional dedication, Commager interpreted the U.S. Constitution, American history, and American studies to and with responsive students for sixty-five years. He published, edited, wrote, coauthored, contributed to, or editorially supervised more than a hundred books. He wrote for popular and scholarly periodicals. His bibliography includes original interpretations of American democracy, biographies of American leaders, editions of source material, and textbooks for university and college students and juvenile readers as well. His unwavering ambition was to help scholars and ordinary readers to understand and learn from America's past, and hence to appreciate their heritage, in order to more knowledgeably advance the cause of freedom and democracy. Commager's style is down-to-earth, straightforward, unaffected, and persuasive.

It is difficult to choose among Commager's publications to demonstrate his main concerns and versatility. The following are representative: *The Growth of the American Republic* (1930), *Documents of American History* (1934), *Theodore Parker* (1936), *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880's* (1950), *The Search for a Usable Past, and Other Essays in Historiography* (1967), *Jefferson, Nationalism, and the Enlightenment* (1975), and *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (1977).

The Growth of the American Republic, written with [Samuel Eliot Morison](#), was initially an expansion of Morison's *The Oxford History of the United States, 1783-1917* (1927). In plain style, this collaboration describes the formation of the national government, Western expansion and settlement, political activities, America's evolutionary foreign policy, the Old South, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the emergence of the United States as a world power. Often revised (since 1969 partly by William Leuchtenburg), the work is enhanced by excellent maps, tables, and bibliographies.

Documents of American History originally contained almost five hundred documents illustrating the course of American history from the age of discovery, with introductory notes and a bibliography. Each document sheds light on its own era or later epochs, or both. Periodically updated to delete less vital items and make room for numerous additions, it is often referred to by grateful researchers as "Commager's Documents." He compiled a similar but more specialized documentary anthology titled *The Blue and the Gray: The Story of the Civil War as Told by Participants* (2 vols., 1950).

Commager's biography of [Theodore Parker](#) was at once recognized as a provocative, nonjudgmental account of the elusive antebellum preacher, reformer, and abolitionist, as he saw himself and as his contemporaries saw him. Parker emerges as tough-minded and brave in taking religion down from the pulpit and espousing his brand of practical idealism at ground level. Some reviewers faulted Commager for stressing Parker's energy more than its successful use, but the fact-crammed work deserved being reissued in 1960 with a new introduction.

The American Mind is Commager's most personally revealing book. He wished he could call it "Prolegomenon to an Interpretation of Some Aspects of American Thought and Character from the 1880's to the 1940's." To Commager, American thinkers, while hoping for the triumph of democracy, were caught between contrary impulses: admiring the heroes of, and feeling victimized by, social and economic Darwinism but also seeking through amelioristic governmental action to control ruthless robber barons and thus to improve the lives of ordinary people. Commager eruditely finds evidence in a range of American thought, from written words through religious to architectural achievements. Americans he especially admires are as diverse as [Henry Adams](#), [Oliver Wendell Holmes](#), [William James](#), [V. L. Parrington](#), [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#), [Louis Sullivan](#), [Frederick Jackson Turner](#), [Thorstein Veblen](#), [Lester Ward](#), [Woodrow Wilson](#), and [Frank Lloyd Wright](#). Although praised as a synthesis of history and philosophy, *The American Mind* has been criticized for hedging conclusions and lacking originality. All the same, its sure and certain sweep is awesome.

A series of volumes published fairly late in Commager's career demonstrate his abiding interest in eighteenth-century European and American thought: two collections of essays, *The Search for a Usable Past* (1967) and *Jefferson, Nationalism, and the Enlightenment* (1975), both of which mainly collect previous essays, and *The Empire of Reason* (1977). Cheerfully eclectic, he suggests that New World leaders, notably [Ben Franklin](#), [Tom Paine](#), [John Adams](#), and [Thomas Jefferson](#), did not simply echo the Enlightenment theories of Old World thinkers but instead realized and fulfilled them in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and other key documents and acts. While some reviewers lamented certain omissions, others applauded Commager's vigorous prose and detailed documentation. Toward the end of the twentieth century, revisionist historians have complained that Commager's Jeffersonian view of America ignores the significance of religion in the lives of the downtrodden, is inattentive to Native and African Americans, and remains overly optimistic and pragmatic. Such critics, however, ignore Commager's contention that 1890 was a watershed for Americans, after which, though resourceful in meeting horrific twentieth-century crises, they have declined creatively and morally.

Exigencies of space prevent more than passing mention of Commager's publications concerning the American Revolution; his 1947 anthology of descriptions of America by foreign observers over the centuries (*America in Perspective: The United States through Foreign Eyes*); his 1951 biography of [Robert E. Lee](#) for young readers; his criticism of tyrannical majorities and undemocratic Supreme Court decisions alike; his preferences for diplomacy over reliance on the atomic bomb; his faith in the United Nations; and his fear of Russia. Effective to the last, Commager, when ninety-one and nearly blind, published a book-length interpretation of *Democracy in America*, [Alexis de Tocqueville](#)'s 1840 classic analysis of the country's ethos. Commager's professional friendships included the following coauthors (in addition to Morison): Eugene Campbell Barker, Brand Blanchard, Geoffrey Brunn, Elmo Giordanetti, Robert Ward McEwen, [Richard Brandon Morris](#), and [Allan Nevins](#). All have joined in regarding him as both fiercely dedicated and inspiringly amiable. Commager died in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Bibliography

Commager's papers, including proof of a voluminous correspondence, are widely scattered. Considerable material is at Columbia University, Harvard University, the University of Illinois, Iowa State University, the Library of Congress, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and Yale University. John A. Garraty, *Interpreting American History: Conversations with Historians* (1970), includes his engaging exchange with Commager. In their preface to *Freedom and Reform: Essays in Honor of Henry Steele Commager* (1967), Harold M. Hyman and Leonard W. Levy, eds., describe their mentor as an "implacable rationalist" of "awesome" ability as teacher-lecturer and scholar-writer; an accompanying bibliography of Commager's publications lists 373 items through 1966. Commager's obituary, with an illustration, is in the *New York Times*, 3 Mar. 1998.

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