

REMEMBERING
Henry Steele Commager
1902 - 1998

May 9, 1998
Johnson Chapel
Amherst College
Amherst, Massachusetts

“For he knew that the secret of happiness was freedom and the secret of freedom a brave heart; and he did not stand idly aside from the onset of the enemy.”

—Thucydides, *Funeral Oration of Pericles*

“But as for me, I will walk in mine integrity” *Psalm 26*

ORDER OF SERVICE

PRELUDES

St. Anthony Chorale	Franz Josef Haydn
Adagio (KV 356)	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Adagio (Suite for Mechanical Organ)	Ludwig van Beethoven
Bist du bei mir (BWV 508)	
Komm süsßer Tod (BWV 478)	
Vater unser im Himmelreich (BWV 636)	Johann Sebastian Bach

WELCOME

Tom Gerety

REMEMBRANCES

Milton Cantor
Calvin H. Plimpton
Wyatt R. Haskell

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

Ich ruf'zu dir (BWV 639)	Johann Sebastian Bach
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REMEMBRANCES

Rob Hawkins
Lucy Wilson Benson

POSTLUDE

Fantasia in g minor (BWV 542)	Johann Sebastian Bach
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Bruce G. McInnes, organist

TOM GERETY

Welcome one and all—to Mary, the Commager family, distinguished colleagues, students of Henry Steele Commager, Trustees of Amherst College, members young and old of the Amherst family. We gather to celebrate a man who, in his life and work and engagement with the world, personified those values of what I might call “fighting scholarship” that we at Amherst think are the heart and soul of the place.

Henry Steele Commager came to Amherst College as a convert in his middle age, as it were, rather than at the outset of his academic career; and, as is frequently said of converts, this only confirms us in our faith. Of course, I missed the heyday, not only of Henry Steele Commager, but of Theodore Baird, and Robert Frost, and many another. Although I am sure, years from now, it will be said that some new Amherst president missed the heyday of many a scholar and teacher here today, I did not entirely miss the Commager experience. Mary may remember that about 15 years ago I worked on a public broadcasting project on the U. S. Constitution. I arrived in town with the television crew and put up in the Lord Jeff, knowing next to nothing about Amherst College except that it was supposedly harder to get into than Harvard. The next morning we trucked off down the street to the house where the Commagers lived until the last couple of years. With a cat traipsing across Henry Steele Commager’s shoulders, he took us through his sense of Article III of the Constitution and the debates about the Constitutional Convention. Those two or three hours of interviews, later edited in a series hosted by Judy Woodruff and me, were the highlight both for the cameramen and for me. It was my one chance to see Henry Steele Commager in a guise that, I know from traveling among alumni of Amherst College, is the guise in which they most remember him: that is, not just as the fierce and brilliant lecturer, but as the warm conversationalist sitting in his book-lined study with that particular cat, or perhaps one of its predecessors in the feline world, traipsing across his shoulders.

I welcome you all to the celebration of the life of a man who was one of America’s greatest teachers and scholars and who, certainly for Amherst College, represented and still represents an ideal of scholarship, of teaching, and of engagement with the world.



MILTON CANTOR

Since Henry Commager remains, for me, so vividly alive, it is easy to fulfill my charge—to recall his Columbia University years—though doing so in five minutes is extraordinarily difficult. If what I am about to set forth are personal vignettes, that should be appropriate for a man whose scholarship was distinguished by his personalness—his lavishly gifted uniqueness—as reflected in his writing which was so artful, so artlessly conveyed, so uncompromising and yet utterly accessible, jargon-free. Memories of him roll in, beginning before I became his TA in the mid-1950s. I was drawn to apply to the doctoral program at Columbia after having stumbled upon “Who is Loyal in America,” a powerful plea for civil liberties as the lamps across America were going out on the Bill of Rights. As a first-year graduate student, I recall watching him rush down the steps of Low Memorial library.

Another doctoral candidate who was with me said, “There but for the grace of God, goes God.”

It was a general feeling. Witness his lectures in constitutional history, delivered to a large and awed body of graduate students in Butler Library. That few or none of them ever asked a question owed to his daunting presence their recognition that it required courage to disagree with him, and that to do so successfully you had to think through the issues as carefully as he had—a requirement few could meet. After class, after Henry recognized me—though, more often than not, he forgot my name and called me McGillicuddy—we would walk back to his office; rather he would walk, I would trot. Henry moved very fast. Always interested in the books that I carried, he once asked me about a large volume under my arm. It was Martin Anderson Nexø's *Pelle the Conqueror*. Had he heard of the book or of Nexø, I asked. “I translated portions of Nexø's *Martin the Red*,” he replied matter-of-factly and, to my astonishment, completely deflated my effort to be boastfully cosmopolitan and impress him with my exotic literary tastes. A conversation with the Danish minister of education, who came up to the campus to see him, confirmed his ease with the Danish language. A week later, he rushed into the office with his usual pile of papers. Sitting behind his desk and behind a mountain of manuscripts and correspondence, he was uncharacteristically quiet and finally said, “I turned fifty today and am burnt out.” And a week after that, the burnt-out man flew over to Tel Aviv, accompanied by Felix Frankfurter among others, as an invited guest of the Israeli government. At that time, I should add, his feelings about Israel were strong and deep. And at that time he was furiously active, delivering lectures, writing for newspapers and journals like *Life* magazine, reading dissertations, and never missing classes—which he repeatedly mentioned with great pride. Once losing a dissertation, which was buried under a pile of papers, Henry puckishly offered his three

assistants—Leonard Levy, Harold Hyman, and myself—a Ph.D. if we could locate it; but he did first, triumphantly holding it aloft.

Recalling him as a teacher, I would not wish to imply that Henry had no defects. Like many powerful minds, he tended to overwhelm a student's resistance. I do not mean that he permitted no disagreements, which would be untrue, but he was simply impatient with what seemed shallow or of merely transitory interest. If he did not suffer fools in the seminar—which convened in his spacious office—if he seemed eager for combat, it was not because it gave pleasure but because it was his obligation to live up to the standards he had set for himself—standards he believed to be impersonal; because his curious and capacious mind engaged in a wrestling with ideas—which he expected students to participate in. He would search, sift, weigh, and savor in both spontaneous and yet intransigent manner—to distinguish between what was worthy and what was meretricious, between what enhanced life and what wasted it. Consequently he was something of an elitist, but a hard-working one who wished to share his appetite for the best with anyone who would listen. I recall one late Saturday evening in Amherst, if I may stray briefly from my mandate. We were watching television. Pablo Casals was at Marlboro conducting Mozart's Jupiter. Two of his students and their dates came in. Henry urged them to sit down, watch, listen, share some wine, but they were in a hurry to leave; and when they did he banged his flat palm on the television and sadly observed, "They were here nearly four years and missed their real education." And I remember a Saturday evening in Rye, where he lived during his days at Columbia. He had a custom of inviting his seminar to his home, where we played ping-pong with him, which was fast, furious, fierce, usually unequal combat, and where we also listened to Robert Goldsand, a nationally-known concert pianist, and heard conversation about one or another köchel, or one or another quartet. For Henry, though bred in the American grain, was cosmopolitan as well as elitist. And as both, he would eagerly help students join him, would gladly abandon his badge of superiority for the sake of coequal student cosmopolites and elitists.

It would be remiss of me to neglect Henry's political and social involvement in these New York days. And he was intensely alive, coming into the office humming an aria from *Così fan tutte*, talking about the pianism of Lili Kraus, planning his next raid on the kingdom of history. He was a living presence that dazzled his students and most of his colleagues in a department that, among history departments, was virtually *primes inter pares*. He got on well with colleagues like Jacques Barzun, and was especially close to Richard Morris and Allan Nevins, though the latter's unwavering support of the Vietnam War eventually soured their deep friendship. Their arguments, and I was privy to two of them, became bitter and abrasive. He would sadly muse, "What ails the man?" Henry at this time was perhaps at the peak of his intellectual powers. His productivity seemed

astounding. His major work, *The American Mind*, dates from this period, but he also wrote combative pieces about society, legal affairs, academic freedom, higher education in the 1950s. By now a scholar and civic man of the greatest imaginable distinction, he was combative and penetrating on issues of state and federal repression in these years of the locust, and his writings brightened the conscience of America. It was the dissenter, the contrarian, who was attracted to civil libertarians like Alexander Meiklejohn and I.F. Stone and who deplored Truman's contributions to domestic anti-communism, what with his loyalty program and Justice Department prosecution of communist leaders. Henry nonetheless admired the President, and remained a loyal Democrat, a liberal, a Stevenson supporter. We occasionally clashed on Truman's foreign policies but, as his assistant, my argument was always *sotto voce* and timorous. Still, I think he listened and pondered. However, it was I who learned.

He taught us all by his presence and example. Few have combined such deep conviction and such foreboding, for instance about the environment and the then lunatic assault on popular government, with so ever-fresh a joy in the play of ideas. Ascerbic at times, to be sure, and always hard-driving, he was a role model for his students. We admired both his intellectual passions and simple precepts. Regarding the latter, he believed that in America it is the people who have rights, not the state, and that the working of a democratic republic requires a noisy assembly of citizens unafraid to speak their mind. His reading of history, Pericles, for one, and of American history—especially the writings of Jefferson, Madison, and Adams—taught him as much and so he instructed us all, in and out of the classroom. He gave his graduate students much, a way of seeing and being and acting in the world; and also a model of the humanist in the old Renaissance usage of that term, connoting skepticism, wit, irony, resourcefulness, great learning, tireless labors. We took courage from his example and thought of him as a voice not only of dissent but also of conscience—restless, uncowed, at times uncomfortable. We all owed him. I owed him. I would gladly have done anything for my old teacher—except this.



CALVIN H. PLIMPTON

When they brought the news to Callimachus, he wailed "Oh, Heracitus, they tell me you are dead, but I know you are not gone!"

Today, here in Johnson Chapel, the scene of the most poignant events of Amherst College, Henry Steele Commager, "Felix," is not gone and we celebrate him. I will try only to paint him with love and admiration for he doesn't need praise and couldn't abide a eulogy.

I shall start with the question: How did Henry become Felix? It is one of the most frequently asked questions. The Georgics by Virgil may suggest a partial answer. "Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas" ("Happy he who is able to recognize the causes of things"). This is inscribed on a Commager family pot, and below it is another inscription: "Felix, qui potuit dare felicitatem" ("Happy he who is able to give happiness"). The author of this one is not known but when you wipe off the coffee stains and look at it with the light of the full moon on All Saints' Day you can faintly read, depending on your eyesight, either "Uxor Evana" or "Filius Ferreus" (the Romans had no word for steel!).

Henry was the third son and he was orphaned at the age of eight. He was too much for his aunts who took the older two while Henry was brought up in the household of his maternal grandfather, a Danish-American. It was not a warm nest and young Henry began working his way through elementary, secondary, college and graduate studies tending furnaces in winters and as a harvest hand in summers. With a 40-hour work week he was frequently so tired that he fell asleep in classes. His secondary school American history teacher, *rara avis*, said, "Henry, you are so tired, you may sleep through my classes. I'll still graduate you!"

He studied in Denmark and wrote his Ph.D. thesis for the University of Chicago on Eighteenth-Century Danish Reform. It won a prize from the American Historical Association and he started at New York University. From then on he was all American history, going from height to height. I will leave to others who are expert his immense scholarship, his activism and his successes. I will try to tell about his human sides, his super-human energy, super-caring for truth and for his students.

First of all, how on earth did Amherst College ever catch this international scholar? Nothing easier! Charlie Cole, twelfth president of Amherst, was standing in line behind Commager at the cafeteria of Columbia University. Charlie was a well-known economist, knew all about markets and, as president, was a practitioner of entrepreneurship. (In my day this was less elegantly described as the selective use of the burlap bag for kidnapping!) Between the meat and potatoes and salad, Charlie said "Why don't you come to Amherst?"

"What about my books!"

"Oh, Amherst College will house them."

And that was that. Morgan Hall, once a library, became one again—a “one-professor library”—and Henry moved in. Years later, and very excited, he came dancing into my office on at least six inches of air.

“Cal, Cal, the Danish Library has arrived!”

Damning Charlie Cole for having committed the college to a library annex, my heart sank in anxiety and, trying to look somewhat pleased so as not to crush this professorial ecstasy, I said sternly: “How many linear feet?” No talk about how many volumes for by then I had learned a little of the lingo of librarians. Henry looked crestfallen. “Why Cal, Charlie Cole didn’t know what a linear foot was!” Fortunately the Morgan Library had enough shelving for the Danish—about 60 linear feet.

People wonder how a piano “happened” into Morgan. Henry had had no official training in piano but he could give a very recognizable version of the Pathétique or Apassionata (Moonlight too easy except for the third part)!

A very long time ago and in the earliest stages of his courtship of Evan, he managed to move his piano into her apartment, ostensibly because there was more room. It seems to me that this must rank among the most skillful musical Trojan horses of all time. When he came to Amherst, naturally a piano was added to his house and to the Morgan library.

Then there was ping-pong. He was an Olympian player but also a fiend, a devil. Playing back from the table, making long driving shots and passing volleys, he quickly dispatched even the most agile and crushed the rash innocents. And when his eyesight failed, he was uncanny in his ability to use his ears, like the ultrasonic system of a bat, and so could still beat many, knowing—by the sound—the location of the ball. And you may ask what was the most renowned historian doing playing ping-pong? Toynbee, Nevins, Schlesinger, never did, but so what? They weren’t Henry and they just wished they were!

It was always a picnic to see the Commagers going for groceries. In the city it is rare for a family to make grocery-shopping a joint venture, but in a small town it is possible and the Commager forays were delights to one and all. There was the eclecticism of their choices. Evan would be gathering up meat, potatoes and dry cereals. Henry dancing down the aisles would pick up the caviar, shrimp and crab.

There was always conviviality at the Commagers. Henry passing champagne in one corner to a group of professors and students, and in the other, Evan. She would latch on to me saying, “Fascinating, fascinating, Dr. Plimpton. Let’s get some bourbon and read Chaucer!”

Then there was a very arcane eating society consisting of the Commagers and the Schottés. The Plimptons were invited two or three times but we have no idea who else was ever invited. It was called “The Gew’urtztraminer, Lobster, Chowder and Marching Society”^{*}—though I

^{*} Corrected by Rob Hawkins Amherst ’71 : “The Isaac Newton and Thucydides Lobster and Gew’urtztraminer Society”

am less sure of the last part. It was mysterious and sounded like something out of old high Vienna with waltzes and certainly not to be expected in little old Amherst. It was almost as if they were trying to recreate a past they never had. The meals defined gourmet cooking and were always at some private home in Springfield where the owners had decamped for the evening.

Then there was Henry as adviser to young women. When Yale became coeducational, our daughter, Polly, transferred to Yale as a junior. As soon as she sat down for breakfast, the Yalies would all shut up. I would never have thought of Henry as an adviser but at Amherst he counseled this tearful female forlornity. "Why, Polly, that's easy. Buy a *New York Times*, sit at the biggest empty table and hold up the paper. Then make a few whoops and watch the rutting bull mooses cluster!" And she was even tapped for a final club later blackballed by alumni. Henry, Psychologist or Historian? He was both!

Then there were the honorary degrees. Listing his honorary degrees, the Amherst catalog gives up and finally just says "numerous others." Henry certainly collected the "biggies," "Oxbridges," etc., but that wasn't the point. He would make a veritable pilgrimage (Chaucer pace Evan!) to lesser and even unknown colleges to give a speech and frequently accept a degree. It made all the difference to that institution and they could hold their heads up with pride—(like Saint Crispin Crispian's day!) "Yes, Commager, the great scholar is one of our Alums." Once in a state with several cities of the same name his directions landed him at the wrong one. At his unreimbursable expense, he chartered a plane daring to land him in a cow pasture and he made the ceremony on time. I hesitate to mention one of these unknown colleges because surely one has a representative at this event who will rise to interrupt and say, "What do you mean nobody has ever heard of us? Professor Commager is an Alum!"

Commencements are the moments when professors behave like little boys and girls at a costume party. There is always a little competition about who is the most "gawdy" (Caroline Sayers). Henry, too, liked dressing up and he had a whole wardrobe to choose from. The audience was flattered to see the great Professor Commager in all his finery attending their child's graduation and apparently paying strict attention. What they didn't know was that behind his tipped up mortarboard were two paperbacks which he would devour in the two-hour ceremony!

Archie MacLeish, in speaking about Robert Frost, his predecessor as Simpson Lecturer, told the old Gaelic tale of the West Highlands called "The Brown Bear of the Green Glen." I think it is proper to use it on MacLeish's Simpson successor. The tale is of a whiskey bottle so definitely full that not a drop can be added and so fabulously copious that nothing is lost no matter how you drink it. Henry Commager's fame is like that bottle. It can't be added to because it is full already, and it won't draw down however it is drunk.

We have talked of Henry, but there is another here who is very much alive in beauty and deserves our immense gratitude and our love.

Mary, Mrs. Henry Steele Commager, has given Henry life to his years, not just years to life, and gallantly at the end, found for him some shreds of living in his bare existence. From us all, "Thank you, Mary!"

William Jay Smith wrote, in *The World Below the Window*,

The geraniums I left last night on the windowsill,
To the best of my knowledge now, are out there still
And will be there as long as I think they will.
And will be there as long as I think that I
Can throw the window open to the sky,
A touch of geranium pink in the tail of my eye;
As long as I think I see, past leaves green-growing,
Barges moving down a river, water flowing,
Fulfillment in the thought of thought outgoing,

Fulfillment in the sight of sight replying,
Of sound in the sound of small birds southward flying,
In life life-giving, and in death undying.

Henry/Felix, rest in peace, warm in our gratitude and warmed by our admiration.

