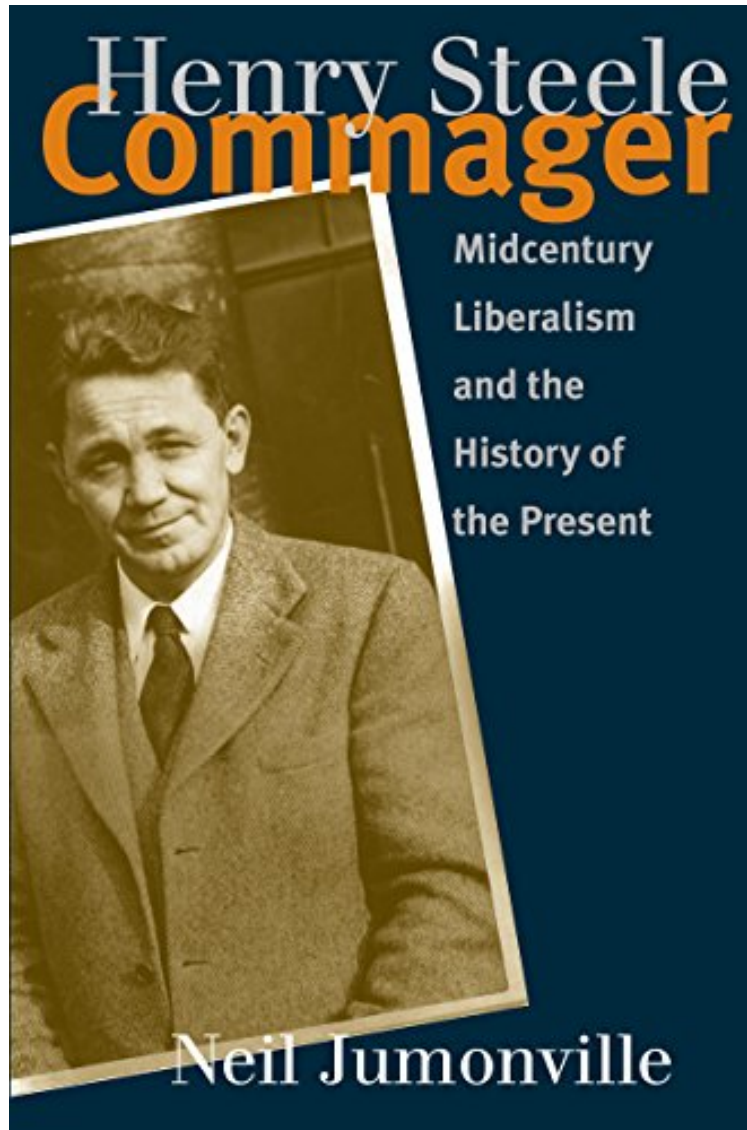


Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present

Von Neil Jumonville

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Von Neil Jumonville : Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present:

Kundenrezensionen Hilfreichste Kundenrezensionen 0 von 0 Kunden fanden die folgende Rezension hilfreich. The Historian as Scholar and Intellectual Von Steven S. Berizzi In 1950, Henry Steele Commager was one of the best-

known and most widely-read historians in the United States, and he would eventually be honored with over 40 honorary degrees. Today, he is virtually unknown to the public and, I dare say, is rarely read even by professionals in his field, American intellectual history. What a difference 50 years makes in the life of a historian's reputation and influence! The explanation may lie in part in a useful distinction, drawn early by Neil Jumonville, professor of history at Florida State University, between scholars, who write for professional audiences, and intellectuals, who write for the general public. Jumonville makes clear that Commager trained to be a scholar but, notwithstanding long appointments at New York University, Columbia University, and Amherst College, spent a good part of his career practicing as an intellectual. As a result, he was very popular in his own time but had relatively little lasting influence on scholars in his field. Jumonville takes Commager's life from birth to burial in this wide-ranging and solid, if not entirely stimulating, biography. The ultimate issue for any biographer of Commager is: Why did he become pass, even while he was still teaching and writing? (Commager died at the age of 95 in 1998.) Jumonville posits several explanations for Commager's quick descent from national authority to obscurity. The first is that much of Commager's scholarly work had encyclopedic breadth but lacked analytic depth; his opinions and judgments were intuitional rather than carefully deductive and simply have not withstood the test of time. Second and not unrelated, Commager clearly, if unconsciously, showed a preference for being prolific rather than profound. His insistence upon writing, lecturing, and speaking to a large audience, largely for financial reasons, enhanced his popularity but may have contributed to limiting the impact he made on his professional peers. According to Jumonville: "Commager as a popularizer was not a major influence on the direction taken by intellectual historians." Although Commager aspired to recognition for a high level of scholarship, "he was not a research scholar." Commager preferred anecdotes, biographical sketches, and narrative over searching analysis. According to Jumonville: "Many historians felt [Commager's] work lacked appropriate sophistication." Third, some historians clearly resented the "breezy manner" in which Commager wrote, although that was not necessarily a criticism. Commager believed that "history is a branch of literature," and even critics of the substance of his oeuvre tended to admire his style. Fourth and finally, I believe, is the fact that he lost his intellectual curiosity and ceased to read his professional peers, which is an essential activity for scholars in any field. In the middle decades of the century, Commager was nationally known as an activist in "liberal Left politics." In particular, Commager was an outspoken foe of McCarthyism, and this brought him into sustained conflict with conservative commentators. (William F. Buckley once inquired, puckishly if not maliciously, whether Commager's middle name was a tribute to Stalin. It was, instead, a family name.) Later, Commager was an energetic critic of the Vietnam War, and he tended to be sympathetic to the student protesters of the 1960s. One of the issues which Jumonville attempts to address is whether Commager was a consistent Jeffersonian liberal. In my opinion, Jumonville spends too much time attempting to locate Commager along the liberal-conservative political continuum, although, in fairness to the author, Commager spent a lot of time thinking about it, too. This exercise would be profitable if it were necessary to explicate hidden biases, but Commager was an outspoken liberal in most senses of the mid-20th century use of that term. Furthermore, it also must be noted that, although Commager enjoyed engaging in public discourse about contemporary issues, his scholarly books were not partisan. Is professionalism in the writing of history inconsistent with partisan advocacy in public discourse? Or, as Jumonville puts it: Must there be a clear dividing line between "the role of the historian as a scholar and as an activist intellectual"? Commager's life indicates that the answer is: Not necessarily. But, in purely practical terms, there may simply not be enough hours in the day to perform both functions well. Time magazine criticized one of Commager's books for lacking in thoroughness and suggested that he was a dilettante. That was unfair, but the tendency to write and speak glibly, which punditry requires, does not serve the scholar well because depth of insight is what proves the professional historian's mettle. Jumonville's Commager is likeable, if somewhat eccentric. When friends were invited to his home to dine, his wife entertained them during the cocktail hour, while Commager continued to work, and, when dinner was served, Commager joined them for the meal and conversation, invariably with himself as chief conversationalist. Although he was an energetic teacher, he rarely learned the names of his students. And I especially enjoyed the anecdote during which Commager was arguing with a colleague about the author of a line of Scottish poetry; when Commager could not find the line in an anthology, he concluded that the book was incomplete and tossed it out a window. On the other hand, Jumonville's periodic discussion of Commager's long friendship and correspondence with historian Allan Nevins is interesting but not especially revealing. And Jumonville's frequent references to Commager's relations with the New York Intellectuals do little, in my opinion, to add to Jumonville's thesis. Some readers will not find this book very exciting. But to the extent that intellectual history is a spectator sport, it is more akin to golf than football. I believe this book is a major achievement, but I also suspect that there still is room for another, more searching intellectual biography of Commager, especially one which examines his scholarly output in greater detail. What I am suggesting may be the equivalent of "inside the Beltway" political analysis, and, were he alive, Commager might object to this narrow focus, but it is the standard by which every professional historian is ultimately judged.

0 von 0 Kunden fanden die folgende Rezension hilfreich. Disappointing treatment of a man who deserves better. Von Ein Kunde Flatly written and repetitive, this book misses many chances to illuminate the life and work of one of the most significant public intellectuals between the 1930s and the 1980s. Jumonville keeps calling Commager a Jeffersonian liberal but seems to

have no idea about the difference between Jefferson's thought and the way that thought was understood in the era of the New Deal. Also, though Jumonville stresses that Commager used history to justify political arguments, he is silent on Commager's place in the 1960s controversy about historians writing contemporary history, on which Commager wrote extensively. The sad thing is that this book is just scholarly enough to seem to occupy the field, but not scholarly enough to be the treatment that the subject deserves

Kurzbeschreibung Historian Henry Steele Commager (1902-1998) was one of the leading American intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century. Author or editor of more than forty books, he taught for decades at New York University, Columbia University, and Amherst College and was a pioneer in the field of American studies. But Commager's work was by no means confined to the halls of the university: a popular essayist, lecturer, and political commentator, he earned a reputation as an activist for liberal causes and waged public campaigns against McCarthyism in the 1950s and the Vietnam War in the 1960s. As few have been able to do in the past half-century, Commager united the two worlds of scholarship and public intellectual activity. Through Commager's life and legacy, Neil Jumonville explores a number of questions central to the intellectual history of postwar America. After considering whether Commager and his associates were really the conservative and conformist group that critics have assumed them to be, Jumonville offers a reevaluation of the liberalism of the period. Finally, he uses Commager's example to ask whether intellectual life is truly compatible with scholarly life. Pressestimmen Jumonville's elegant style engages the reader and compels one to read on. This is an important book. "Journal of Illinois History" Kurzbeschreibung Historian Henry Steele Commager (1902-1998) was one of the leading American intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century. Author or editor of more than forty books, he taught for decades at New York University, Columbia University, and Amherst College and was a pioneer in the field of American studies. But Commager's work was by no means confined to the halls of the university: a popular essayist, lecturer, and political commentator, he earned a reputation as an activist for liberal causes and waged public campaigns against McCarthyism in the 1950s and the Vietnam War in the 1960s. As few have been able to do in the past half-century, Commager united the two worlds of scholarship and public intellectual activity. Through Commager's life and legacy, Neil Jumonville explores a number of questions central to the intellectual history of postwar America. After considering whether Commager and his associates were really the conservative and conformist group that critics have assumed them to be, Jumonville offers a reevaluation of the liberalism of the period. Finally, he uses Commager's example to ask whether intellectual life is truly compatible with scholarly life.