

Harold C. Livesay, 1934–2018: A Personal View

GLENN PORTER

I first encountered Harold Livesay when we both entered the graduate program in history at Johns Hopkins in the fall of 1966. Though we were always mindful that we had come from the provinces and not from the Ivy League, our smoothed paths to Baltimore nevertheless came through the old boy network, so much a part of that privileged world. We were dispatched to Hopkins, and specifically to Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., bearing the imprimatur of our respective undergraduate mentors. In Harold's case that was Stephen Salsbury of the University of Delaware, and in mine, Louis Galambos, then at Rice University, in Houston, Texas.

By chance we were both assigned rooms in Apartment 3K at 3339 N. Charles Street, overlooking the main entrance to the Homewood campus of Johns Hopkins. The recently renovated building was one of many nearby properties gobbled up by Hopkins in the manner of rich and expansive universities. We imagined that our particular apartment had previously been occupied by an aged coupon-clipper and a maid, before Hopkins bought what had been the Cambridge Arms and remade it into Wolman Hall. The once capacious apartment now housed five novice history graduate students, each paying rent of \$60 a month. A slight whiff of glamour still attached to the premises, because in the mid-1930s F. Scott Fitzgerald had been in residence upstairs when he was writing *The Crack-Up*. Harold and I met there, and in Chandler's seminar.

The history department at Hopkins in the 1960s still operated very much in the research-dominated "German" university manner championed in the 1870s by Daniel Coit Gilman, the founding president of Johns Hopkins. It was a prestigious program. Renowned economic historian Frederick C. Lane had just retired after a long and distinguished career in Baltimore. David Herbert Donald had not long before replaced the legendary historian of the South, C. Vann Woodward, whose photo loomed down on the history seminar room in Gilman Hall.

© The Author 2019. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Business History Conference.

doi:10.1017/eso.2019.9

GLENN PORTER is Director Emeritus at the Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, Delaware.

The graduate program was also highly autocratic, with no hint of any form of democracy. It is only a mild exaggeration to say that graduate students were considered something rather like chattel, virtually the property of their respective mentors.

Harold and I were extremely fortunate to belong to the department chairman, Alfred Chandler. He had a well worked out program for speeding his best students through to completion of the PhD. Harold and I went from our BAs to our doctorates in four years, at a time when the national average in history programs was more than twice that. Chandler had recently done seminal work in business history, especially his much-anthologized 1959 *Business History Review* article on “The Beginnings of ‘Big Business’ in American Industry” and his masterful 1962 book, *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise*. Harold and I found Chandler and the Hopkins graduate history program liberating and exhilarating. Excellence was expected and rewarded in a pragmatic, adult environment with a minimum of administrative folderol. Harold later wrote, “The first years in graduate school seemed to me the best I had ever known.”

But even in that idyllic setting there were dragons. Dr. Chandler summoned us to his office not long after we had arrived. He informed us that part of his plan for our prompt completion of the doctorate was that we would pass the required German reading exam, scheduled only weeks away. This was most unwelcome news. I had taken only one course in German at Rice and had not found it especially congenial. Harold had never had any German. But we instinctively responded, “Yes, Professor Chandler,” then staggered into the hall to digest this bombshell.

Harold had heard of a magical book called *The Key to German Translation*, authored by one C. V. Pollard and allegedly available only through the Co-op at the University of Texas at Austin. Since I was a native of that state, we agreed that I would telephone the Co-op and “talk Texan” to them in order to get copies of this elixir as soon as possible, *podnah*. Pollard declared at the outset of his book that it was not for persons wishing to learn the German language. Instead it was a tool for those needing to pass a graduate reading exam in German. Oh, yes. We studied this brutally pragmatic, wholly mechanistic manual intensely. When the exam came, it consisted of several murky and ominous paragraphs from Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, dwelling on folk-iron-blood roots and the like. We were certain we had failed. But when the results were posted, *mirabile dictu*, we were among a tiny handful who passed. Somewhere in Baltimore there probably still rests a document certifying that Harold Livesay, who never had a course in German, was competent to translate that language.

We learned to sit in the front row of Professor Chandler's undergraduate course, in hopes of hearing his softly murmured wisdom. And we plumbed the depths of the sociology that had so influenced him, especially the work of Max Weber and the rather more obscure Talcott Parsons, whose courses Chandler had eagerly audited at Harvard. At Hopkins, Chandler was close to distinguished organizational sociologist Arthur Stinchcombe, before Stinchcombe's move to Berkeley in 1967. Chandler had, he said, taken on the editorship of the Eisenhower Papers in order to learn more about the functioning of yet another form of large organization. Unfortunately the military had proved something of a thin soup compared with business. Chandler considered himself as much a historian of organizations as of business.

We had other successes after the coup with the German exam, and Professor Chandler soon came to treat us as reliable soldiers in his undertakings outside the Eisenhower Papers. In short order he treated us almost literally as the graduate student equivalents of interchangeable parts. He would, for example, say to Harold, "Ah, Glenn, would you and Hal ..." And the same went for conversations with the other interchangeable part of the dynamic duo. I am not making this up. Eventually he did learn to tell us apart.

A good illustration of the working relationship we had with our mentor came in 1968. We had been doing a large research project for Dr. Chandler on the incidence of oligopoly and concentration in the manufacturing sector of the American economy. (Summaries of the research later appeared as an appendix to Chandler's article in the Autumn 1969 issue of the *Business History Review*, "The Structure of American Industry in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Overview.") Professor Chandler was to present a preliminary version of his work on that topic at a meeting of the International Economic History Association. This was scheduled for Bloomington, Indiana, that fall.

Shortly before the Bloomington gathering, our leader called us into his office and told us that he wanted us to be on hand at the session in Indiana at which he was to give his paper. Our presence was needed in case there were "any questions about the data." No mention was made of how we were to get from Baltimore to Bloomington, where we might stay in that university town, whether there might be a budget for our trip, or any other details. We responded as we always did with instructions from the great man, however unlikely, however Delphic: We said, "Yes, sir."

This led to a nonstop drive to Indiana in Harold's car (one of his chain of beloved Fords, of course), broken only by a stopover for a couple of hours of sleep at a rest stop in eastern Ohio. In Bloomington

we got a cheap room and subsisted on chili dogs at the Indiana University student center while anticipating our moment at the International Economic History Association. When Professor Chandler finished his presentation, we waited for our chance to shine. There were no questions about the data.

In addition to the pleasures of the graduate program, we found distraction and great joy in passing many hours at nearby Memorial Stadium, then the home of the Baltimore Orioles. We sat in the cheapest seats, and Harold taught me to keep score. At each game we wondered whether the best team in baseball (Frank Robinson, Brooks Robinson, and, one year, four twenty-game-winning pitchers) would manage to attract at least 10,000 fans in an ungrateful city besotted with Johnny Unitas and the Baltimore Colts. We dedicated our 1971 book, *Merchants and Manufacturers*, to Orioles manager Earl Weaver, “who always has another pitcher ready.”

Harold had arrived at graduate school at the relatively mature age of thirty-two. He had already come to have many of the beliefs that would appear in his writings—a mistrust of theory, a dislike for pretension in any form, a preference for pragmatism over idealism. His life had already included experiences as a small businessman and as a member (and even what he termed a “petty official”) of labor unions. Those adventures in the economy shaped his work as a historian. Indeed, he always tied his personal life to his academic work without apology, while recognizing (in his book on Samuel Gompers) that “such personal experiences obviously may foster a subjective attitude.”

He had also already developed major elements of his distinctive, highly personal, and colorful prose style. It would be an exaggeration to say that Hyperbole was his native tongue, but he would have had no trouble passing a reading exam in it. The new economic history, for example, he deemed “a kettle of quantitative voodoo and cookery.” Gentler examples of this flair appeared in his offbeat résumé. This was a creation that seldom failed to enchant academics imagining themselves sympathetic to the working class. Let Harold have the floor on the topic of his own life story.

This was his autobiography on the website of the Department of History at Texas A&M University at the time of his death:

Harold C. Livesay was born June 13, 1934, in Louisville, Kentucky. Before turning his hand to academic pursuits, he toiled at several occupations, with fluctuating success. Among these were tomato picker, ferry boat deckhand, telephone repairman, railroad yardmaster, self-employed painter of bull-dozers, parachutist in the 82nd Airborne Division of the United States Army, steel trucker, and

numerous others. Following this period of peregrinating odd-jobbery (during which he acquired a love for travel, an expensive skiing habit, a curiosity about American history, and five children), Mr. Livesay yearned for a less laborious, more mentally stimulating way of life and, therefore, sought solace in the printed page. His singleminded dedication to his new career resulted in a B.A. from the University of Delaware in 1966, an M.A. from The Johns Hopkins University in 1968, and an uninterrupted flow of publications on topics in and out of economic history.

After receiving his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins in June, 1970, Mr. Livesay accepted a position in the History Department of the University of Michigan, where he was employed until 1978, to the benefit of the citizens of the state and to the intense relief of his creditors. In 1978 he removed his seat of operations to the State University of New York at Binghamton. In 1981, emulating many of the industries he studies, Mr. Livesay moved south, becoming Head of the History Department of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University at Blacksburg, Va. Thence, he departed in 1987 for Texas A&M University where he lived happily ever after. He held the Clifford A. Taylor Professorship in Liberal Arts from September 1988 through August 2014.

As Al Chandler sometimes said in satisfaction when presented with some piece of helpful evidence, “That certainly shows it.”

However congenial their relationship at the graduate school, Livesay and Chandler were polar opposites as scholars. In many respects Harold would probably have been intellectually more at home with the collection of savants clustered around the Research Center in Entrepreneurial History at the Harvard Business School. That institution was founded by Arthur H. Cole in 1948 and closed in 1958. It pursued the historical role of the entrepreneur as explicated by Joseph Schumpeter, and it included such participants as Fritz Redlich and Chandler himself.

Though he was a part of Cole’s center, in a few years Chandler’s work would revolutionize the field. Indeed it was so powerful in its novelty, clarity, and logic that it shifted much of the field of business history. Interest moved away from the entrepreneur toward the large corporation. The legacy of Cole’s research center soon faded, although Chandler always retained something close to a personal reverence for Arthur Cole and Fritz Redlich. Chandler’s new “organizational synthesis,” as Louis Galambos termed it, also influenced the larger academic world of American history, because it provided a persuasive alternative to the earlier historiographical debate about “robber barons versus industrial statesmen” as movers and shakers of modern America.

At Hopkins, Harold published a number of articles, and we co-authored several. Our dissertations we combined into *Merchants and Manufacturers*. The book was an attempt to trace some of the changes in distribution in the nineteenth-century American economy, very much from a Chandlerian perspective.

In Livesay's work after the Johns Hopkins years, however, he moved gradually toward an emphasis on the influence and impact of individual entrepreneurs on the American economy and the broader society. Oscar Handlin, Stephen Salsbury's onetime Harvard mentor, invited him to write a book on Andrew Carnegie for Little, Brown's Library of American Biography. Harold responded with what became a classic work, *Andrew Carnegie and the Rise of Big Business* (1975).

Carnegie was a gracefully written paean to the American Dream and a shrewd character study. It was also an implicitly Chandlerian account of the spread of the pioneering managerial and organizational innovations of the railroads to the manufacturing sector. Its success led in short order to Livesay's second contribution to the Little, Brown biography series.

This was *Samuel Gompers and Organized Labor in America* (1977). The Gompers biography negotiated terrain rather more complex and less familiar than *Carnegie* had. Carnegie's story was one of ever more dazzling triumphs, leaving its subject atop the world. Gompers's life and times were quite different. If King Lear had been an immigrant cigarmaker, this could have been his life, though Gompers never imagined yielding a scrap of his kingdom to anyone.

Livesay sojourned in labor history with the verve he had already shown in economic and business history, hooting, for example, at "the 'Waiting for Lefty' school" prominent in parts of that field. The wildly colorful cast in the gallimaufry (a favorite Livesay word) of American politics in the Gilded Age gave him rich material with which to work. More importantly, he produced a clear account of the relentless, pragmatic struggles of his hardboiled, vain subject to drag "American trade unions from the sands of uncertainty" to what Livesay called "the rock of permanence." Gompers negotiated the distractions of socialism and the convoluted, often loony political landscape with a single-minded determination. His success led the nation's skilled, white, male trade unionists to the safe if narrow harbor of business unionism. The book was particularly cogent in explaining how and why so many of labor's battles were internecine. These included quasi-religious wars over socialism and whether to engage in politics, jurisdictional disputes, knife fights over dual unionism, and more. And, of course, Harold made his contribution to Werner Sombart's ever-lurking question: Why no socialism in America?

In the process of securing a lofty place for his unions and himself, Gompers achieved a distinctly cramped success. It came at the cost of turning a blind eye to the needs and the possibilities of all those left outside. Part of the reason for this limitation was the racism, sexism, and nativism that pervaded the American Federation of Labor leadership. Though not without sympathy and even admiration for his subject, Livesay also brought his usual clear-eyed bluntness to bear in such judgments as “Gompers was a bigot.” To bigotry was added the legal and political obstacles that waxed and waned during the late nineteenth century, the Progressive Era, World War I, and the postwar years. As a result, the AF of L and Gompers proved unable and unwilling to include in the labor movement the unskilled and semiskilled workers who made up much of the industrial workforce unfolding in the modern economy. The chieftains of the AF of L had explanations and excuses aplenty for this failure. But Livesay found Gompers’s justifications of the AF of L’s limitations lame.

Though his *Gompers* was something of a dance of the veils, in a few sentences at the beginning and the end, Livesay rendered a brutal conclusion: “By the time Gompers died in 1924, the AF of L had become moribund.” He indicted its central failure, its refusal to take on the task embraced successfully if transiently by the Industrial Workers of the World between 1908 and 1915: to organize the unorganized, to unite the “unskilled—the women, blacks, immigrants from dozens of ethnic groups—in a common cause.” “Gompers was wrong,” Livesay flatly declared, “about industrial unionism’s possibilities.” The Wobblies had shown the way, in his view.

Harold had a trove of winking bits of wisdom. One of these was: “Ambiguity is the essence of art.” It was not an essence he often displayed, but the ending of *Gompers* is profoundly ambiguous. The aged satrap, “nearly blind,” dies, still maniacally devoted to his personal power and as fiercely committed as ever to his crusty vision of pure and simple unionism. He had lived “in blinkers and far too long, straining toward the dreams of his youth.” “In this,” Livesay concluded, “Sam Gompers, so dedicated to being American, showed the most American trait of them all.” The End. But which trait was that, exactly? Could it have been individualism? Bigotry? Or perhaps just looking out for number one? The essence of art ...

In the same year in which the Gompers book appeared, Livesay returned to more familiar ground. He published in the Winter 1977 *Business History Review* an article titled “Entrepreneurial Persistence Through the Bureaucratic Age.” There he articulated his belief in the central role of the entrepreneur in the past and called for more attention to the creative individual in the history of business. This marked a decisive turn away from the work of Alfred Chandler, whose

Visible Hand was also published in 1977 and would win the Pulitzer Prize for History the following year.

Two years later Livesay expanded these themes in the first of three editions of his highly personal book, *American Made*. This was a collection of sketches of the contributions of various men to the history of American business. These included Eli Whitney, Cyrus McCormick, Carnegie (again), Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Pierre du Pont, Alfred Sloan, Edwin Land, Harold's hero Henry Ford II, and several contemporary figures. In *American Made* he intermixed autobiographical perspectives with historical storytelling, as well as with lessons he felt he had learned from his travels. He voiced there his admiration for inventors, for manufacturers (as opposed to financiers, accountants, and bureaucrats), for entrepreneurs, for the family firm, for what he saw as the links between material progress and democracy, and for many things American. These enthusiasms were never uncritical or unalloyed, and they reflected his native optimism, his great sense of humor, and his belief that "felicitous prose contributes to the power of history." Above all, the book voiced his belief in the individual and his conviction that historical determinism is wrong-headed, in part because it closes off "possibility" and (one of Harold's central themes in life) hope.

Especially in the realm of academic fashions, everything old is new again. In part as a result of Livesay's efforts, the pursuit of the will-o'-the-wisp of entrepreneurship enjoyed a steady revival in scholarship from the late 1970s on. Louis Galambos, since the 1960s business history's most acute and perceptive historiographer, declared in a 1988 book review that it was a "hot subject" once more, in several disciplines. Shortly thereafter, Livesay's prize-winning Spring 1989 *Business History Review* article ("Entrepreneurial Dominance in Businesses Large and Small, Past and Present,") argued that history, above all business history, was definitely not yet among the fields giving entrepreneurship its due. Business history, he noted, remained firmly in thrall to Chandler's work.

The recent stagnation in many giant enterprises such as General Motors brought into question the efficiency and resiliency that Chandler had implied should inhere in what he had come to call, rather teleologically, "the modern corporation." Looking at a number of case studies in recent decades, especially the role of small steel companies such as Nucor, Livesay argued that small business was generally more creative and more innovative than large firms. And the postwar successes that did appear among big businesses customarily depended on the appearance of vital, dynamic individuals in those industries, not on organizational charts, statistical controls, or anonymous bureaucrats. Livesay forcefully stated his own case for a

return to the study of the central role of the creative individual in the history of enterprise.

Since then, efforts to revive entrepreneurial history have continued. In a 2005 working paper from the Harvard Business School, for example, Geoffrey Jones and R. Daniel Wadhvani called once more for the renewal of the research agenda in entrepreneurial history. And late in 2017, less than a year before Livesay's passing, Wadhvani and Christina Lubinski published an article in the *Business History Review* ("Reinventing Entrepreneurial History"), calling yet again for a new entrepreneurial history and addressing what the abstract candidly termed "a continuing lack of conceptual clarity." *Plus ça change ...*

The recent article by Wadhvani and Lubinski appeared exactly forty years after Harold Livesay's pioneering 1977 essay, "Entrepreneurial Persistence Through the Bureaucratic Age." Livesay's contribution, and indeed his quite early role in advocating a return to a focus on the entrepreneur, have received perhaps less recognition than they merit. Louis Galambos, who never missed much, was an exception. In Miami at the 2015 annual meeting of the Business History Conference, I heard Galambos say to Livesay that it must please him that so much of the field had followed his lead. Harold acknowledged this.

Harold Livesay was my greatest friend for fifty-two years. Though we took quite different professional paths after graduate school, we always retained a close personal friendship. This included a remarkable ability to intuit each other's thoughts, often without the need actually to articulate them. I valued his sense of humor, his great good sense, his energy, his empathy and generosity, his commitment to hope, and his charisma.

That last element was surely one of the central ingredients in his success, especially as a teacher. He loved teaching, and in fact taught a course at Texas A&M in the spring of the year he died, in his eighty-fourth year. He always spoke warmly of his students, whether those in conventional classrooms, in a course taught in a prison in Michigan, or in one given to a raucous class of United Auto Workers shop stewards.

He was a self-described optimist and, I think, more than a little proud of his own version of the American Dream. Though something of an iconoclast, usually championing the individual over the organization, he could nevertheless see worth in a number of the large institutions for which he labored at one time or another. These included the 82nd Airborne, the Pennsylvania Railroad, E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co., and a couple of giant universities. He gloried in the absurdity and endless variety in what he referred to as "life's great pageant." He became in some respects a sort of Anthony Bourdain

of business history, traveling the world and filtering what he saw through the lens of his personal background and values. In one of our last conversations about Life, he commented that he had had what he called “a good run.” And so he did.