

CHARLES CAPPER, ROMANTIC AMERICA, AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

DAVID A. HOLLINGER

Department of History, UC Berkeley

E-mail: davidhol@berkeley.edu

It was the largest antiwar demonstration in American history until that moment. Sponsored by Students for a Democratic Society, the Washington, DC march of 17 March 1965 drew more than 25,000 people to protest the Vietnam War. One of the chief organizers was a member of the SDS National Council named Charles Capper. Then an undergraduate at the Johns Hopkins University, Capper took an informal “leave” from his studies to devote himself to promoting the march. While doing so in New York City at a Carnegie Hall rally, the twenty-one-year-old Capper shared the stage with Senator Ernest Gruening and the prominent radical historian from Yale, Stoughton Lynd. The 1965 march was later eclipsed in historical memory by the larger march of 1967 memorialized by Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night*, but the earlier one was pivotal in the development of the New Left and in the growth of the larger antiwar movement. Capper, known to readers of *Modern Intellectual History* as one of this journal’s founding editors and as the justly celebrated author of the standard biography of Margaret Fuller, was right in the middle of it.¹ And then he went to Berkeley and distinguished himself as a leader of the Trotskyist movement there.

Who knew?

Well, I did.

And I have understood this all through the decades while watching Charlie’s path to the professional eminence that led *Modern Intellectual History* to commission this commentary on his career, antiphonal to the journal’s earlier essays on Nicholas Phillipson and Anthony La Vopa, *MIH*’s

¹ Capper’s role in organizing this march is mentioned by Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS: The Rise and Development of the Students for a Democratic Society* (New York, 1973), 115.

two other founding editors, on the occasion of their retirement from their editorships.²

In the fall of 1966 Charlie enrolled as a doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley. He impressed me and other history graduate students there with his eloquence as a public speaker. Within a few weeks of his arrival, Charlie's standing in SDS made it logical for him to serve as chair of a mass meeting on "black power" in the campus's Greek Theater.³ The new guy was a formidable interlocutor, strikingly more lucid and analytical in style than most Berkeley orators of the period. A debate champion in his high-school days in Arcadia, California, and already a veteran of internal SDS quarrels, Charlie as a fresh face was unafraid to challenge any and all Berkeley comers. Charlie confronted one of the university's most respected antiwar professors, the History Department's own Charles Sellers, in a widely attended debate about the role of the university in politics. Sellers wanted the antiwar movement to become more sensitive to the special character of universities, while Capper emphasized how embedded all universities were in the system that was making war in Vietnam. This confrontation took place in front of Sproul Hall, a quasi-sacred site for political events in the wake of the sit-ins of the 1964 Free Speech Movement.

Charlie gained further notoriety when the campus administration dismissed him as a teaching assistant for violating a court injunction won by the Alameda County Supervisors against a particular demonstration. Charlie, already known as a skilled politician, then ran for the student senate and won the largest number of votes cast in an election involving many candidates for several offices. Campus officials then offered to reinstate him as a TA if he agreed not to take the office. It was an easy deal for Charlie to accept. He had sought the office only as means of publicizing the injustice of his dismissal and had no interest in the sandbox politics of student government. It was a total victory for him.

Throughout these events Charlie was strongly identified not only with SDS, but also with the Independent Socialist Club. This was a Trotskyist group which exaggerated—or so it seemed to me and many others—its ability to understand just about everything. Given the highly sectarian ethos of 1960s

² Colin Kidd, "The Phillipsonian Enlightenment," *Modern Intellectual History* 11/1 (2014), 175–90; Suzanne Marchand, "Enlightened Conversations: The Career and Contributions of Anthony J. La Vopa," *Modern Intellectual History* 12/3 (2016), 777–92.

³ That summer of 1966 Capper and a collaborator had published an SDS pamphlet being widely circulated on the Berkeley campus as soon as the fall semester began; Sy Landy and Charles Capper, *In Defense of Black Power* (n.p., Independent Socialist Club, 1966). W. J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War: the 1960s* (New York, 1990), 91, correctly identifies Capper as an SDS activist and a prominent Berkeley radical but mistakenly represents him as having already been at Berkeley before he helped to organize the early 1965 antiwar march in Washington.

Berkeley, conventional left liberals like me had minimal contact with Charlie. Often, around the History Department, Charlie was known simply as “that Trot, who debated Sellers.”

Yet some years later, at a 1980 event honoring the Berkeley intellectual historian Henry F. May on the occasion of his retirement, Charlie and I recognized each other as both significantly shaped by May’s teaching and scholarship.⁴ Charlie was still a doctoral student, having held down temporary teaching jobs at San Francisco State University, the University of California, Davis, and other Bay Area institutions after his eligibility for a Berkeley teaching assistantship ran out. He had continued his political involvement, but with a difference. For example, he had helped to distribute a leaflet critical of the Vietnamese Communists. For this, he was expelled from the Independent Social Club.⁵

At the May celebration, I noticed that Charlie had developed an epistemic and personal humility I had not seen in him before. May himself told me afterward that Charlie had been “the star of the show,” offering incisive and informed comments on one paper after another in the celebration’s symposium. Indeed, many people at this two-day “May-fest” held in the Berkeley campus’s campground in the High Sierra buzzed with one another about rediscovering this brilliant fellow after what some began to call “Charlie’s lost decade.” It was lost to us, but not to him. During the 1970s Charlie had reflected deeply on himself and what he wanted to do. He had chosen a dissertation on a female intellectual exactly at a historical moment when many male scholars were afraid to take on a topic that might “belong” to women. He grasped the significance of the new feminism, and wanted to integrate it in into American intellectual history at what seemed its most promising point: Margaret Fuller.

⁴ Both Capper and I wrote obituaries for May when he died in 2012: Capper’s is <https://s-usih.org/2012/10/henry-may-in-his-times-by-charles-capper> and mine is “In Memoriam: Henry F. May (1915–2012),” *Perspectives on History* (Dec. 2012).

⁵ The Independent Socialist Club was solidly “Shachtmanite,” as one of the two major traditions in American Trotskyism has been labeled since 1940. Max Shachtman and James Cannon led the factions that split the Socialist Worker’s Party in that year when the “Cannonites,” like Trotsky himself, supported the Soviet Union in its invasion of Finland following the Nazi–Soviet Pact of 1939, while the “Shachtmanites” repudiated the invasion even while maintaining opposition to Finland’s military ally, Hitler’s Germany. By the 1960s other issues divided the two factions, too, but the division remained sharp. The Independent Socialist Club was by far the most important Trotskyist organization on campus, and played a large role in the Berkeley antiwar movement even though the aged Shachtman himself had become a centrist and refused to advocate an immediate withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. The smaller Cannonite group on campus, also active in antiwar activities, was led by Peter Camejo, also a history graduate student. Camejo later left the Socialist Worker’s Party for the Green Party and was the vice presidential candidate for Ralph Nader’s presidential bid of 2004.

This was the same side of Charlie that was not afraid of Charles Sellers when almost every history graduate student was, and who as a white man supervised an angry meeting about black power in the Greek Theater, and who risked bad grades at Hopkins to stand with Senator Gruening at Carnegie Hall. When Charlie completed his degree in 1984, after eighteen years in the doctoral program, he was invited to deliver the Graduate Student Address at the department's commencement. His speech, "History Today: Notes of a Prodigal Graduate Student," was a meditation on politics and the academic calling and the insights gained from becoming a parent. It was widely appreciated around Berkeley, and later that year was published by the American Historical Association in its newsletter, *Perspectives on History*.⁶ The essay repays reading even today as a model of critical self-interrogation.

I begin with these 1960s political events and their subsequent reassessments because they help us to understand several aspects of Charlie's creativity as a scholar and editor. Careful deliberation, distinction-making precision, and diplomatic skill are not unique to those who have "movement experience," as people of Charlie's and my generation like to say, nor do all who had that experience gain these particular qualities. But Charlie's own development of these professionally crucial virtues appears to owe much to his having had to sort out the conflicting intellectual, moral, political, and personal trajectories that pressed against one another in the force fields of The Movement. Those force fields also included the incandescent emotions of Revolution: might one be on the way to a new Finland Station? Charlie was surrounded by people caught up in a feeling—can we call it "Romantic"?—that fundamental, almost apocalyptic change might be at hand and that one might play a part in it. We could see people with intense expressions carrying around copies of *The Prophet Armed*, the first volume of Isaac Deutscher's much-admired study of Trotsky—"if you see that you know the guy is really into it," observers would say about people displaying Deutscher's formidable effort to extract non-Stalinist legacies from the Bolshevik Revolution. Some Berkeley students were dropping out of school to train cadres for the revolution on the streets of Oakland, or, more common among history graduate students, putting academia behind to take jobs in major antiwar organizations or labor unions. Revolutionary fervor is easily mocked or patronized, but men and women who have been close to it are usually marked by it. I believe that Charlie was.

Many aspects of Capper's career—I will switch from "Charlie" to "Capper" when I am talking about activities of his to which I was not a witness or in which I was not directly involved as a coworker—prompt appreciation for a

⁶ Charles Capper, "History Today: Notes of a Prodigal Graduate Student," *Perspectives on History* (Dec. 1984), 12–13.

combination I believe owes much to his early immersion in what we called The Movement: (1) empathic identification with Romantic, revolutionary subjectivity and (2) diplomatically employed distinction-making precision. This connection to the political-cultural matrix of the 1960s is suggested above all by Capper's universally praised analysis of Margaret Fuller's mind and personality in its many dimensions, especially in her direct and intimate involvement in the revolutionary politics of the Europe of 1848.

Fuller was an active revolutionary. She was closely connected to Giuseppe Mazzini and the lover of another combatant in the battles of 1848, the Italian nobleman Marquis Giovanni Ossoli, whom she secretly married. Fuller was the last American to flee Rome as soldiers she knew personally were killed near her residence by the invading armies of the Catholic coalition led by Louis Napoleon. This violent and densely complicated episode has been the most vexing segment of Fuller's life for scholars, who have understandably concentrated, instead, on her writings in the context of her American literary and religious surroundings. Rightly prominent in studies of Fuller are her lengthy and intense debates with Ralph Waldo Emerson and other New England intellectuals, culminating in her book of 1845, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. That book offered "a study of gender politics that would not be equaled," Megan Marshall has observed, "until Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*"—a book of more than a century later.⁷ Capper devotes six hundred of his 1,029 pages to these first thirty-five years of Fuller's life. While his analysis of these more accessible phases of Fuller's life has been praised by every reviewer, professional and lay readers of *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life* have been the most dazzled by Capper's research and analysis concerning the final, Europe-centered five years of Fuller's life.⁸

⁷ Megan Marshall, "Let Them Be Sea-Captains," *London Review of Books*, 15 Nov. 2007, 16. Marshall, who six years later would publish her own excellent biography, *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life* (Boston, 2013), made this observation in an admiring review of the second volume of Capper's biography. The title for Marshall's review is taken from the single most widely quoted utterance of Fuller's concerning the role of women in society, "But if you ask me what offices they may fill; I reply—any. I do not care what case you put; let them be sea-captains, if you will."

⁸ Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life*, 2 vols. (New York, 1992–2007). The first volume carries the subtitle *The Private Years*, and the second *The Public Years*. The first volume was awarded the Bancroft Prize in 1993. Of the many appreciative reviews, perhaps the most authoritative and discerning is the pair of essay reviews contributed to *New Republic* by historian Christine Stansell, "The New England Sphinx," *New Republic*, 21 June 1993, 40–42, and "A Noble Career," *New Republic*, 26 March 2008, 51–5. For other carefully argued examples see Bell Gale Chevigny's pair of reviews, "Transcendental Meditations," *Nation*, 4 Oct. 1993, 357–60, and "The Universe Was Her Oyster," *Women's Review of Books*, July–Aug. 2008, 27–9; and the detailed essay review of both volumes by Phyllis Cole, "Fuller's Transatlantic Life," *Nineteenth-Century*

The challenge for the scholar is to make as much sense as the sources allow of the multitude of crisscrossing aims, anxieties, and events that defined Fuller's life in 1848 and 1849. There was the affair with Ossoli and the resulting pregnancy, and whether to get married and whether then to share the news and with whom, all the while coping with the rapidly changing political and military situation and maintaining correspondence with American friends and family as well as producing the dispatches that she, as the only American correspondent in Rome, knew to be of special importance. No one before Capper was able to produce nearly so extensive, well-documented, and convincing an analysis of what Fuller did and why during her involvement in the abortive revolution in Italy. Perhaps I stretch a biographical point in suggesting that Capper's own political experience better enabled him to write this stunning series of chapters, but no one else had managed to do it, and the chapters are truly stunning.⁹ "Capper is the first biographer to place Fuller precisely in this landscape," Christine Stansell has observed, "for this alone" the second volume of *Fuller* "must be counted a breakthrough."¹⁰

I am aware of no other scholarly work in the field of American intellectual history published in the last half-century that generated as much consistent respect from as many historians, literary scholars, and journalists as Capper's *Fuller*. Among the distinctive features of this truly monumental work—and here, for once, the adjective fits well—is Capper's argument that Fuller worked out her successive enthusiasms and uncertainties within "a Romantic world view." This world-view, as Capper analyzed it, centered on the conviction that "through self-consciousness one could expand that most private of spheres—the subjective self—into the limitless possibilities of intellectual and spiritual endeavor."¹¹ This overarching theme of Capper's interpretation is flagged by the subtitle, *An American Romantic Life*. Capper explains that he uses "the qualifier Romantic advisedly" to denote Fuller's "embodiment of that movement's central proposition—that the life of the subjective mind contains infinite depths of meaning and value." Capper chooses this language, he says, while searching for "the right tone to retain yet bridge the distance between Fuller's time and ours.

Prose, Fall 2008, 183–94. Later students of Fuller's life and career routinely acknowledge the monumental character of Capper's research and the perspicacity of his analysis. A 2013 commentary on the many recent books on Fuller voiced the consensus that Capper's work "has never been surpassed as a social history of the period" and that it excels in "elegance and dispassion" and in "tough-mindedness." See Judith Thurman, "An Unfinished Woman: The Desires of Margaret Fuller," *New Yorker*, 1 April 2013, 75–81.

⁹ Capper, *Fuller*, 2: 320–497.

¹⁰ Stansell, "A Noble Career," 54.

¹¹ Capper, *Fuller*, 1: xi.

However much Fuller's relentless quest for authenticity prefigured a "modern" sensibility in American intellectual life, as I believe it did, her Romantic language and transcendent spiritual hopes belong to a previous century and leave a gulf that only ironic empathy can fill."¹²

The part of "a previous century" to which Romanticism belongs is most often understood by historians of the United States to be located geographically in Europe. The concept of Romanticism has been put to remarkably little use in studies of early and mid-nineteenth-century America, which have focused on that period's intense cultural and political nationalism. When scholars describe Americans of that epoch as "Romantic," the context is usually fiction, poetry, and painting. Even when applied to politicians, reformers, theologians, philosophers, and historians, *Romantic* is usually invoked by scholars with literary preoccupations. David Levin's *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman*, published in 1959, is an enduring illustration.¹³ The most important example of this pattern was the work of Levin's mentor in the Harvard English Department, Perry Miller. But even Miller did not make Romanticism a central concept for analyzing the intellectual history of Fuller's generation, either in *Nature's Nation* or in *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War*, the two posthumous works in which Miller addressed the relevant period.¹⁴

Fuller was fluent in French, German, Italian, and Spanish (in addition to being a capable reader of Latin and of classical Greek). She was far from alone among New England intellectuals of her generation in sharing a comfortable place in transatlantic discourse. Some of Fuller's favorite authors—especially Goethe and Carlyle—were morally suspect in a Unitarian milieu, but Capper shows that even in that milieu, the concept of Romanticism captures much that is missed if we do without it. Historians of Jefferson's American generation focus extensively and appropriately on European and especially French connections, but the following era's great pride in the independence and creativity of Americans as Americans has too often directed the attention of historians away from that era's intimacy

¹² Ibid.

¹³ David Levin, *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman* (Stanford, 1959). A prominent exception to the pattern is the article of historian John L. Thomas, "Romantic Reform in America, 1815–1865," *American Quarterly* 17 (1965), 656–81.

¹⁴ Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), does include Miller's most sustained engagement with the concept of Romanticism, at 197–207, there entitled "The Romantic Dilemma in American Nationalism and the Concept of Nature." This essay was first published in 1955 and then reprinted as "Nature and the National Ego" in Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, 1956), 205–16. Evangelicalism, not Romanticism, is the central concept in Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York, 1965).

with European, especially German, thought. Part of the new nation's intellectual independence was indeed this going beyond the British and French to achieve much deeper immersion than before in things German.

This international frame propelled Capper to the center of what was perhaps the most important single transformation within the field of American intellectual history during the last fifty years. This has been the gradual substitution of a transatlantic perspective for the twentieth-century styles of cultural nationalism that infused the work of Miller and most of his contemporaries who worked under the sign of "American studies." That nationalism was no means uncritical of the politics and culture of the United States during the Cold War. But historians and literary scholars in the 1940s and 1950s were highly engaged by aspects of American life that appeared to differ strikingly from a Europe that produced fascism and communism. This preoccupation was visible in the classic works that every graduate student in American intellectual history read during Capper's formative years. These included Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America*, Daniel J. Boorstin's *Genius of American Politics*, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, Henry Steel Commager's *The American Mind*, David Potter's *People of Plenty*, F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, and Merle Curti's *Growth of American Thought*.¹⁵

Scholars of the 1960s and 1970s often distanced themselves from this body of literature, but usually on grounds other than its emphasis on the exceptional character of the United States. The great books of the 1940s and 1950s were said to ignore the social diversity of American society and the political and economic conflicts within it. As "consensus history," these works were disparaged. There were also methodological issues. The most trenchant critique, offered in 1972 by Bruce Kuklick, concentrated on theoretical assumptions about the study of ideas in any national context. Even the much-discussed methodological volume of 1979, *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, showed only a few signs of the coming shift to a transatlantic orientation.¹⁶ The more genuinely "new" direction became visible in several works of the 1980s, especially James T. Kloppenberg's *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920*, which attended to thinkers in Britain, France, and Germany

¹⁵ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955); Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, 1953); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*, (Cambridge MA, 1950); Henry Steel Commager, *The American Mind* (New York, 1950); David Potter, *People of Plenty* (Chicago, 1954); F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA, 1941); and Merle Curti, *Growth of American Thought* (New York, 1943).

¹⁶ Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 24 (1972), 435–50; John Higham and Paul Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979).

as well as the United States.¹⁷ Hence Capper did not initiate this change, but he did much to put in place a new historiographical dispensation in which American intellectual history has come to be juxtaposed not to “European thought” but also to British, French, German, Russian, Spanish, and other national traditions of discourse.¹⁸

Capper’s success in deploying the concept of Romanticism to explain Fuller has carried over into his work on the larger Transcendentalist movement, in which Fuller was a major figure. Capper’s most influential article, “‘A Little Beyond’: The Transcendentalist Movement in American History,” offers a detailed account of where the concept of Romanticism appears and disappears in the writings of Vernon Louis Parrington, Louis Mumford, F. O. Matthiessen, Daniel Aaron, Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, and other scholars of nineteenth-century America. Most of these authors speak casually about “American Romanticism,” but Capper observes that for all the power and insight of this body of scholarship, “what was specifically ‘American’ or ‘Romantic’ . . . remains almost as hazy as ever.” Capper also reminds readers that the Transcendentalist movement is one of the most thoroughly transatlantic episodes in all American history and is thus highly relevant to recent talk of “the US and the World.”¹⁹

Transcendentalism is the topic of another ambitious book on which Capper is currently at work, provisionally entitled *The Transcendental Moment: Liberal Romantic Intellect and America’s Democratic Awakening*. Sketches from this book circulated so far show that Capper will be analyzing racial theory, biblical scholarship, music, architecture, painting, Hegelian philosophy, Swedenborgianism, Fourierism, antislavery, and Catholicism, among other features of the period Capper is able to connect to Transcendentalism. Capper has pressed his program for a Romanticism-centered, decidedly transatlantic scholarship also in a series of conference papers, and in two coedited volumes of studies of the Transcendentalist movement that can remind us of his distinguished record as an editor.²⁰

Among Capper’s other editorial projects is the source book for college and university courses, *The American Intellectual Tradition*, which Charlie and I

¹⁷ James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York, 1986).

¹⁸ This dispensation is registered in Joel Isaac *et al.*, *The Worlds of American Intellectual History* (New York 2016).

¹⁹ Charles Capper, “‘A Little Beyond’: The Transcendentalist Movement in American History,” *Journal of American History* 85/2 (1998), 502–39, esp. 533.

²⁰ Charles Capper and Conrad Edlick Wright, eds., *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts* (Boston, 1999); Charles Capper and Cristine Giorelli, eds., *Margaret Fuller: Transatlantic Crossings in a Revolutionary Age* (Madison, 2007).

have coedited through seven editions.²¹ *The American Intellectual Tradition* was Charlie's idea. He raised it with me in 1986 while he was working up his first syllabi for teaching in his first tenure-track job, at the University of North Carolina. He suggested that the two of us develop a proposal for a teaching anthology in the field, and submit it to the Oxford University Press. We did so. Somewhat to our surprise, Oxford offered us a contract almost by return mail. Charlie and I then wrote to more than a dozen colleagues we knew to be teaching a course in American intellectual history at institutions of varying sizes and orientations. On the basis of the advice of these colleagues—all of whom affirmed the need for such an instructional aid—and our own classroom experience, we assembled contents for the first edition, which appeared in two volumes early in 1989. In an essay for this journal in 2012 I detailed the experience of revising *The American Intellectual Tradition* every few years, responding to changes in the priorities of our many correspondents in the field.²² I will not repeat here what I wrote there, but I do want to describe what it has been like working with Charlie as a coeditor.

Charlie has been, and remains, a perfect coworker. Flexible and responsive but persistent and exacting, if not punctilious, in style, Charlie saved us repeatedly from little mistakes that I did not catch. Although we had a loose division of labor according to which Charlie would handle volume 1 (to 1865) and I volume 2 (after 1865), I drew upon his good judgment countless times in dealing with the often conflicting advice we got from our correspondents concerning the most recent decades of American intellectual history. Agreement on what to include in the source book was relatively easy to achieve for the pre-Civil War volume, and even for the early decades of the period covered in the second volume. But every time we prepared a new edition we were buffeted with divergent suggestions, especially for the period since the 1930s. Charlie's own immersion in the culture and politics of modern America—reflecting, again, his experiences in the 1960s—was invaluable in deciding what, if anything, to use by C. Wright Mills or Harold Cruse or Catherine McKinnon *et al.*

Charlie also brought to our editorial partnership a feel for literary culture and for philosophy that has proved to be increasingly important from edition to edition as the field itself has edged away from what we might call the “Perry Miller paradigm” for American intellectual history.²³ When we asked

²¹ David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper, eds., *The American Intellectual Tradition: A Source Book* (New York, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016).

²² David A. Hollinger, “What Is Our ‘Canon’: How American Intellectual Historians Debate the Core of Their Field,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9/1 (2012), 185–200.

²³ Charlie and I agreed that the best models for what we wanted to do in *American Intellectual Tradition* were three of Miller's anthologies devoted to brief periods: *The American Puritans*

our correspondents what we might cut to make room for some new text being proposed, the response was almost always to cut back on philosophers and literary essayists and to replace them with selections from overtly political argumentation. Elsewhere in the profession, disagreements about race, class, and gender have generated more notice and contention, but in the field of intellectual history the most contentious divides have had to do with the relative significance of people with the intellectual engagements of William Dean Howells, Lionel Trilling, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Hannah Arendt, Josiah Royce, and John Rawls. Charlie and I have both resisted the trend away from literature and philosophy, but only up to a point. A source book is no value, after all, unless it meets the needs of the instructors who might actually assign it. I would probably have given in more often to the desire for an anthology more narrowly devoted to politically engaged texts, had it not been for Charlie's steadfast commitment to the philosophical and literary components of the field.

In these deliberations that now span more than thirty years, Charlie has joined me in defending the distinction between intellectual and cultural history, appreciating the latter but resolute in our belief that a relatively autonomous category of "intellectual history" ensures the presence in the larger field of American history of at least some attention to men and women—like Margaret Fuller!—who made history through argumentation and debate. "The term 'intellectual' would not come into common usage until the end" of Fuller's century, Capper notes in introducing the second volume of *Fuller*, "but she and her Romantic compatriots fully understood that was who she and they were." They were "thinkers . . . whose self-reflective ideas gave meaning to their lives, established their cultural authority, and mediated between their experiences and their impressions."²⁴

This defense of intellectual history as distinct from cultural history was closely linked to appreciation for a transatlantic perspective. Often, works of the last several decades flying under the flag of "cultural history" have analyzed the discourse of "nonelites," which usually means individuals and groups less caught up than "intellectuals" in issues being debated throughout the north Atlantic West and increasingly throughout the globe. The point is not that such studies are wrongly conceived; rather, the point is that they are different from, and are not a substitute for, the study of the Margaret Fullers and William Jameses of the United States.

Yet it was as a co-editor of *MIH*, not of the source book, that Capper's editorial contribution was the greatest. Dozens and dozens of authors of articles and review

(New York, 1956); *The Transcendentalists* (New York, 1950); and *American Thought: Civil War to World War I* (New York, 1954).

²⁴ Capper, *Fuller*, 2: ix.

essays know well Capper's combination of diplomatic skill and high standards for clarity and rigor. The journal itself was more his idea than anyone else's, although he was far from alone in advancing it. A number of intellectual historians had conversed throughout the 1980s and 1990s about the need for a scholarly periodical more focused on the modern period than the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, a distinguished journal with strong constituencies in the study of early modern Europe and Mediterranean antiquity. This buzz was the loudest among scholars specializing in American history, who established the *Intellectual History Newsletter* in 1979 and gradually broadened this annual publication to incorporate work on studies of European thought since the eighteenth century. From the start, there was always the question, should the *Newsletter* be expanded into a fully fledged journal? I was among those who doubted the need for a new journal (how mistaken I was!), arguing that the existing journals served us well enough. Capper was increasingly vocal on this issue during the late 1990s when he was serving on the *Newsletter's* editorial committee. He often called attention to the narrowing of chronological and topical priorities of *American Quarterly*, which, before it came to concentrate on the very recent past and on ideological critique, had been a capacious forum for a great variety of kinds of scholarship under the sign of "American studies." He repeatedly pointed out that the American diplomatic historians, a group comparable to intellectual historians both in international connections and in feeling pushed aside by the social-history enthusiasms of the era, had in 1977 established their own journal, *Diplomatic History*, which was flourishing. Capper became coeditor of the *Newsletter* in 2001, jointly with the Europeanist, Anthony J. La Vopa.

Capper found in La Vopa an ally eager to support the transition to a real journal. But both knew that the enterprise, in order to be viable, should have a coeditor based in the United Kingdom, where the study of European intellectual history was practiced with great distinction. The two recruited the eminent Enlightenment scholar Nicholas Phillipson, and proposed to the Cambridge University Press that the *Newsletter* be expanded into a fully fledged journal. *MIH* would have its editorial offices at Boston University, Capper's new institutional home, to which he had just moved—in 2001—from North Carolina. The press agreed in 2002, and the first issue of *MIH* appeared in April 2004.

Capper's fourteen years in place make him the longest-serving of *MIH's* coeditors. It implies no disrespect for the others to recognize his place as the host for the journal's editorial office, including the hiring and supervision of graduate assistants. Capper was there first, stayed the longest, and had the heaviest day-to-day responsibility. Capper's special role in *MIH* has made him all the more central to the movement, noted above, by which the field of American intellectual history has come to engage "American thought" as deeply embedded in a Europe-centered discourse that American-based thinkers helped to lead. In his editorial

work on *MIH* he has labored on virtually a daily basis to advance this expansion of the field of American intellectual history.

“Ideas that enter the mind under fire remain there securely and forever,” wrote the exiled Leon Trotsky in 1930.²⁵ The claim is profoundly untrue if it is taken to mean that revolutionary ideas can never be reassessed on the basis of later experience and reflection. But Capper’s life and career illustrate the element of truth in this dictum. The Trotskyist movement was global in ambition. Trotskyism, like the Bolshevik movement before it, advanced a species-wide vision. Marxism is not the only attempt to embrace the world in a single analytic frame, but it is the one that launched Capper on a life-project of cosmopolitanism. “Rootless cosmopolitan” was Joseph Stalin’s hostile epithet for men and women insufficiently committed to Stalin’s own Communist regime, and Capper was one of countless sometime Marxists who identified with Stalin’s enemies yet looked for some specific terrain in which to “root” their own strivings for broader and deeper engagements. This search was for a domain that was in reach, where one’s own talents and dispositions might actually accomplish something. Individuals of Capper’s cohort of American leftist intellectuals took this search for the right calling to many widely dispersed locations. That is what Charlie’s “lost decade” was about. Where to land? The history profession? And within it, the study of the intellectual history of the United States? Yes, Charles Capper has shown us what a cosmopolitan understanding of that domain can look like. That Trot, who debated Sellers.

²⁵ Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (New York, 1930), 340.