

Note from the Editor

John Higham the historiographer would have approved of the forum in this issue on Higham the historian of ethnicity and nativism. As Alan Kraut recounts, Higham persistently applied his own critical and historiographic skills to himself. While he would have disagreed with this or that point in the four essays and the forum comment, he would have been pleased by the forum's dual agenda. The essays attempt to examine his *Strangers in the Land* as a product of the intellectual and academic atmosphere of the 1950s. Yet they also dwell on ways that the book might or might not be relevant to scholars of these same issues nearly fifty years later, when intellectual outlooks and historical methodologies have shifted. This balanced attentiveness to the past on its own terms and to contemporary uses of past thought sums up Higham as an historical thinker.

Higham was one of my graduate teachers during the 1980s, and he had one of the most unforgettably reflective and perceptive intellects I have ever encountered. At the center of his critique of the postwar scholarship that he labeled—unfortunately in my view—*consensus history* was a desire to reassert the dual stance that he believed animated the progressive historiography of his youth. The quest for balance between historical consciousness and intense engagement with the present was crucial. “At one extreme, historical thought is sterile,” he wrote, “at the other tendentious.” This statement appeared on the first page of his 1962 essay, “Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic,” an academic recasting of his famed 1959 *Commentary* article, “The Cult of the ‘American Consensus’: Homogenizing Our History.” To Higham in the early 1960s, postwar historiography had defects on both sides of this equation.

As a teacher, he lived up to his principles. I recall his giving sensitive advice on how to read, for example, the Beards' *The Rise of American Civilization*. With his guidance, I could understand why this book, so dated on the surface, had inspired him as a young person and thousands like him.

He also gave students guidance in appreciating the intellectual skills, argumentative style, and writing strategies of the targets of his critique of consensus history. That group included at least one eminent historian whom I knew that Higham disliked for personal reasons. But Higham nonetheless insisted that one needed to

understand the intellectual underpinnings of this person and recognize his strengths as a scholar. To this day, when I hear someone dismiss this particular historian, I repeat Higham's advice: If you read so-and-so's books this way, they look different, and you can see that there's a lot worth paying attention to in them. People naturally tend to underemphasize the merits of writers with whom they disagree on political, intellectual, or personal grounds. Higham set an example for not doing that.

Higham could be gruff, and he was not shy about puncturing shabby, glib, or pretentious ideas from students as needed. But I remember him listening encouragingly one day when I asserted to him that, among all the historiographic ideas that he developed, the concept of consensus history probably did the most harm. There was the obvious and oft-repeated objection: the writers in question were varied in tone, perspective, politics, and prescription, and to lump them together is a distortion. But I tried as well to offer a Higham-like objection: impatience and dismissiveness (in my view then) counted among the defects of the intellectual atmosphere of the two decades between his consensus essay and my time in graduate school. Higham had supplied a label that enabled people less broad-minded than he was to write off swaths of historical thought that needed to be absorbed and understood on its own terms. One might in the end decide that this approach or that method is misconceived, but one needs to understand what one rejects. I remember putting the objection to him in a cynical way: you don't give professors excuses to dismiss books that they haven't read, and the concept of consensus history did that wholesale. Higham, it must be stressed, eventually published similar thoughts, though more elegantly expressed.

Higham's influence, then, made one wary of labels and concepts that set boundaries to thought, curiosity, engagement, and criticism. This applied even to his own labels and concepts. That is why this issue's forum on *Strangers in the Land* evokes his spirit. Our five participants emphasize places where they differ with Higham, sometimes in substantive ways. But they all also treat his work thoughtfully and with a decent respect.

Alan Lessoff