

Tributes to John Lukacs

E. Digby Baltzell

University of Pennsylvania

"Philadelphia is a very large provincial town with patrician touches. . . . Immediately I was reminded of London. . . . Here I decided to settle. . . . My soul craved the English patrician air with an immense thirst. I was twenty-four years old." These sentences are taken from the first page of an article, "Philadelphia: Franklin and Penn in the Fifties," published (1958) in *Encounter* magazine by a young Hungarian refugee, John Lukacs, who had first settled in the Valley Forge area outside Philadelphia, in 1948.

I, who was born in the city in 1915, and lived there ever since, was tremendously impressed with this young newcomer's sharp feel for the city's ways, and especially the mores of the members of the city's stolid upper class. In the course of the next three-and-a-half decades as a teacher at Chestnut Hill College, Lukacs built a solid reputation as a professional historian as well as a wider one as a stylish writer with a highly-developed historical consciousness. I came to know him as a friend in the early years and reviewed with pleasure his book on our city, *Philadelphia: Patricians and Philistines, 1900-1950* which came out in 1980. In the meantime John had published some ten books, mostly on modern European history.

A convinced Original Sinner myself, I most enjoyed his intellectual and historical autobiographical thoughts, *Confessions of an Original Sinner* (1990), and the brilliant chapter in his Philadelphia book on Agnes Repplier, born the year of the Charge of the Light Brigade who survived Franklin Roosevelt by five years, who was an exquisite essayist who always remained true to her Victorian and Catholic origins.

I value John as a friend and admire him as a stylish writer of wit and wisdom.

Jacques Barzun
Columbia University

Every generation is known in the end by its peculiar fads and fashions, which are many, and its original thinkers and doers, who are a handful. Among that handful who, by contrast with the fads, will give luster to his generation, John Lukacs is preeminent.

This rank is guaranteed by the fact that he belongs to no familiar category. He has called himself a reactionary, but the term suggests only resistance to the current. What we want to know is how that resistance was manifested. As a scholar Lukacs has written genuine history at a time when the name of this artful science was given to bits and pieces of sociology laid in the past. His response to an age saturated with pastness yet desperate for originality, was the analytical feat that makes *Historical Consciousness* a pivotal work in his own output and in the thought of all who have read it.

After that, his various studies, whether of the patriciate in Philadelphia or of the cultural life of Buda-Pest in 1900, of the democratic ethos or of the passing of modernity, showed his mastery of research and exposition and imparted modes of cultural judgment, together with factual knowledge, to a public increasingly troubled at the sight of a civilization perishing from the lack of both.

It is not likely that any books, even when brilliant and profound as are those we owe to John Lukacs, will stop the present decline in intellectual maturity and constructive genius; but they will stand as clear markers above the turbid waters of historical *unconsciousness* and thereby serve that future generation which will start rebuilding once we have leveled the ground by self-destruction.

April 30, 1994 ©1994 Jacques Barzun. All rights reserved.

* * * * *

Robert James Maddox
Penn State University

There is an old saying that applies to John Lukacs: "If he ain't in a class by himself, then whatever class he's in the roll call don't take very long." Although he has gained impressive stature as a diplomatic historian through works such as *The Great Powers and Eastern Europe*, *The Last European War*, *A History of the Cold War, 1945: Year Zero*, and *The Duel*, he has written brilliantly and provocatively on an enormous number of subjects. That he regards his *Historical Consciousness*, "a multifaceted statement and exposition of a historical philosophy," as his most important book and *Philadelphia: Patricians and Philistines, 1900-1950* a close second testifies to the depth and breadth of his scholarship.

Anyone who writes about another should declare his interest. Here is mine. About fifteen years ago I reviewed John's *1945: Year Zero*. Although disagreeing with a number of his interpretations, I emphasized the striking originality of his analyses of Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Harry S. Truman. John wrote to me shortly after the review came out, not to debate one point or another, but to compliment me on what he referred to as my "generosity of spirit." There began a friendship from which I have collected huge dividends both personally and intellectually (this has been pretty much a one-way street with regard to the latter, I am afraid, as I lack the plant capacity John has).

In my favorite book of his, *Confessions of an Original Sinner* (1990), John describes himself as a reactionary. A partial list of what he has reacted against "are such inanities as Human Rights Amendments and 'Star Wars'; Sex Education and the Intelligence Community (whatever *that* is); World Government and Making the World Safe for Democracy; Abstract Art and the Gross National Product; Nuclear Power and Genetic Engineering; Quarks and Black Holes; Ecumenicism and The Science of Economics; Cybernetics and National Security; Computer Intelligence and Opinion Research; Psychohistory and Quantification, and so on, and so on." Distrust of such things, he rightly points out "transcends the now increasingly outdated and even senseless categories of 'conservative' and 'liberal'." As I wrote in that first review, his is a school of one.

John is a superb writer in an age when many academics try to outdo one another in using impenetrable jargon, which apparently they think bespeaks great

erudition when all it really shows is intellectual poverty. He has written articles and reviews for a bewildering variety of journals on a bewildering variety of topics. A few months ago I was idly thumbing through a special travel section of the New York Sunday *Times*—idly because I rarely travel more than thirty miles in any direction—when I spotted an article of John’s on his favorite ski resort in Switzerland! As usual it was a gem.

I have no first-hand knowledge of John’s talents as a teacher, but have been told they are considerable. He denies (falsely) that he has an original mind, but prides himself on his ability to see *connections*. I am sure this ability has both delighted and baffled his students. He has left one account in what he calls his “Theological Tunafish Disputation.” Back when Catholics were prohibited from eating meat on Fridays, an enterprising company began producing ersatz hot dogs actually made of tunafish. John asked his class of Catholic girls which was the proper behavior on Fridays: “to enjoy a frankfurter that was made of tunafish but tasted like beef, or to consume one that contained meat but tasted like tunafish.” For the outcome, and much more, read his *Confessions*.

Thus the bad news and the good news. The bad news is that he has at least semi-retired from teaching. The good news is that he seems to be becoming a more prolific writer as the years pass. And that is *very* good news.
