

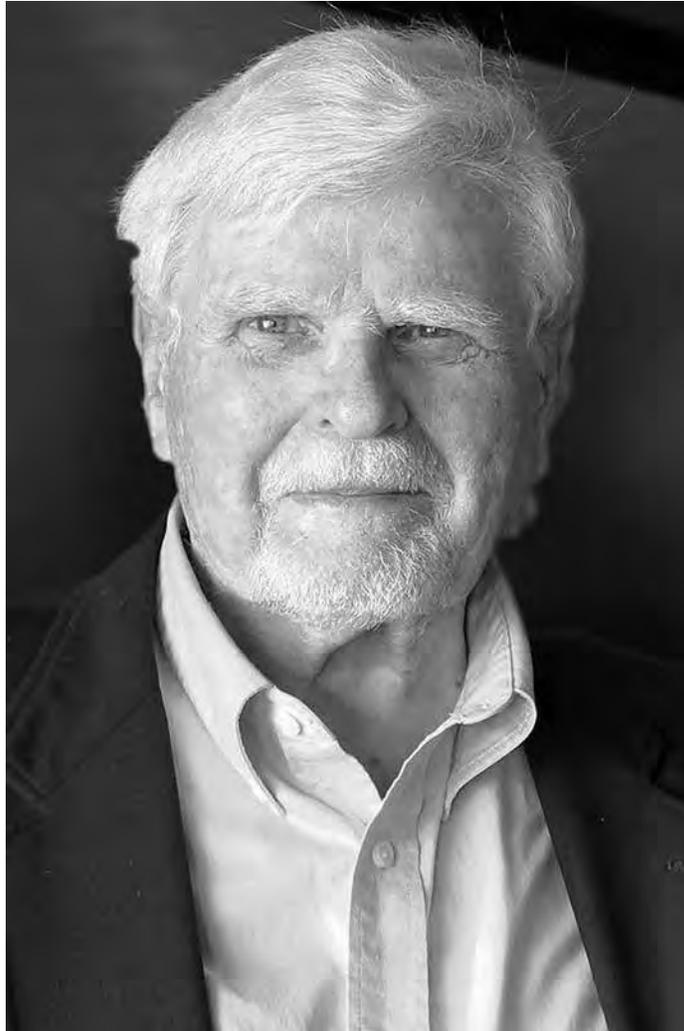
In Memoriam: Thomas J. McCormick (1933-2020)

Thomas Joseph McCormick, a distinguished scholar and teacher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison since his arrival as a faculty member in 1970, died in Madison on July 25, 2020. He was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on March 6, 1933. In high school, Tom became a noted athlete and musician (saxophone), while also finding the necessary time to spend with his future wife, Jeri. In 1956 they embarked on a remarkable 65-year-long marriage. She became a poet, published in the United States and Ireland. Later in 1956, Tom accepted the advice of his high school counselor, Ralph Nieman, and entered the Ph.D. program at the University of Wisconsin.

That year was the final year of teaching for Fred Harvey Harrington, who was on his way to becoming the president of the university. Harrington's seminar of 18 met in the Memorial Library, across the street from the Memorial Union—the closest place for lunch and the occasional ping pong match. Tom had never played that game in college, but he was a quick learner—soon too quick

for any challenger. In seminar, Tom began to develop his dissertation on U.S. policy toward China in the 1890s, a policy that climaxed with the Open Door Notes. The second year of graduate school saw something of an earthquake on the UW campus with the arrival of William Appleman Williams, Harrington's former graduate student, and a World War II navy veteran. Tom decided to remain under Harrington's guidance, but learned to know Williams quite well as a teaching assistant and by having late afternoon coffee with Williams and several of his students. Like Harrington, Williams presented the history of American expansion from colony to empire as an ongoing process involving leaders with a sophisticated understanding of the political and economic realities confronting the nation. Both of these men had a significant impact on McCormick's development as a historian—as it did on other members of the seminars over succeeding years.

At the time, Williams was finishing *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, a pioneering volume that viewed the Open Door policy as the key to U.S. policy from the 1890s



down to the 1950s. It later was chosen as one of the hundred best books in English published in the twentieth century. Tom learned from, and contributed to, Williams's work. In 1960, he received his Ph.D., and during the decade taught at Ohio University and the University of Pittsburgh, where he published his first book, *China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire, 1893-1901*. That led to his appointment at Madison in 1970. As evidenced in his initial book, Tom had a special ability to combine the granular and the aggregate in the space of a single paragraph. That talent also marked his final volume, *America's Half-Century: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (1987, 2nd edition, 1995). The two books formed superb bookends to Tom's evolving theses about the origins and ending of the so-called "American Century," made famous in Henry Luce's book of that name in 1941.

China Market played a large role in replacing the commonly accepted interpretation of how the Open Door Notes originated. The preceding view of the 1950s had largely been that U.S. expansion

into the Far East was an unforeseen consequence of the War of 1898. McCormick demonstrated that, instead, American expansion had been directed by officials who understood from bitter experience that the new industrial revolution produced a glut of goods that had resulted in economic panics and depressions in each of the post-Civil War decades until the country nearly exploded in the 1893-1896 panic. As McCormick concluded after reviewing business journals, "The Panic of 1893 and the 'awakening of China'—economic need and apparent opportunity—these were the propellants for America's expansion across the Pacific." How to do this was the question for policymakers, not whether to go abroad. Grover Cleveland had hoped to resolve the problem of methodology "with the Open Door Policy, but one with a *laissez-faire* twist; one without the insular imperialism and governmental involvement that was to mark the Open Door Policy of William McKinley and John Hay."

His readers would also become aware of the key word in that title, *Quest*, and the irony it conveyed, because it

was a quest McCormick demonstrated that would never be fulfilled. The question of whether the United States had greatness thrust upon it—the prevailing consensus view at the time *China Market* was published, or undertook imperial ventures simply because it had the power to do so in order to satisfy transient impulses—was effectively settled by McCormick’s step-by-step analysis of how the decisions were made not to stop with controlling only Manila as an entrepot for the China market, but to annex the entire archipelago. It was the only way that the United States could be sure that one of the European continental powers did not seek to replace Spain. McCormick demonstrated the point that the United States was not in the grip of an imperial frenzy by the way that American policymakers turned down Spanish offers to cede as well “all the Carolines and all the Marianas in exchange for open door status for Spain in Cuba and Puerto Rico.”

With the Philippine question “settled” for the time being, the next big question was the danger that China would be effectively partitioned off by the European powers after the Boxer Rebellion. The American response to this threat were the Open Door Notes calling on all the powers to respect Chinese territorial integrity. Subsequent events found the United States still hoping the China market would emerge as an important solution to the cyclical problems that had plagued the American economy in the late 19th Century. “But the *potential* for trade expansion was real, and it remained so (enough to exercise vast impact upon American policy-makers for the four decades that preceded Pearl Harbor).”

In 1961, Ernest May of Harvard had published a well-received foreign policy analysis of the 1890s that employed a mostly orthodox interpretation of the era. His later review of Tom’s quite different interpretation was generous and accurate: “Impressive,” and “a significant contribution to ultimate understanding of an important and complex series of events.” The same could be said of Tom’s other book-end volume, *America’s Half-Century*. Once again, the title was in part an ironic comment, this time on the title of Luce’s widely read 1941 book. The irony did not end there. After a panoramic look at the Cold War years, and the Reagan administration’s quest to “repeal the laws of history and perpetuate American hegemony ad infinitum” with words and deeds reminiscent of Britain’s desperate effort at the end of the nineteenth century, the United States found itself in a quandary. “The Reagan militarization program created problems for the administration’s economic goal of reviving the profitability of American industry and its ability to hold its own in both domestic and foreign markets.” Military spending became more and more central to “prosperity” as America entered an era of perpetual war for perpetual peace. In the short run, the “new” Social Darwinism of the Reagan years, military spending, plus deregulation for the rest of the economy, produced large-scale benefits—but largely for certain segments of the population, notably white citizens of the middle class, although that would soon become upper-middle class while leaving the rest to scramble for what was left.

Drawing notably from Immanuel Wallerstein’s world system theory, Tom saw Luce’s “century” become a “half-century” as the United States paid a heavy price for the Vietnam war and the rise of challenges in Japan, China, and Western Europe. This perspective allowed him to avoid “the end of history” mania that characterized too many American views of the world after the collapse of communism in 1989-1991. To understand what was happening, Tom suggested that the nation-state provided a too small perspective and allowed only limited understanding.

Besides these two bookends on the rise and fall of the American Century, Tom offered other perspectives that reinforced his thesis. He co-authored *The Creation of the American Empire* (1973), a textbook that appeared just as U.S. foreign policies entered a new and more challenging phase during the final months of the Vietnam War. In 1990, Tom co-authored, with General William Westmoreland, Senator George McGovern, and Edward Luttwak, *The Vietnam War: Four Perspectives*. He also contributed to, and co-edited, *Behind the Throne; Servants of Power to Imperial Presidents, 1898-1968* (1994). Written by scholars who had worked with Harrington, and dedicated to him, the essays examined a “new breed of government officials whose first loyalties were to the Chief Executive, not the bureaucracy or the public.” Tom lived to see a climax of this development.

Like that of all other good scholars, Tom McCormick’s work built as well on the work of others, Fred Harrington and William Appleman Williams at Wisconsin, but also that of Samuel P. Hays at Pittsburgh, and still many others he recognized in his detailed essays on sources. He was open in argument to all points of view. His command of the literature was little short of phenomenal—and not only in his discipline, but in related sciences as well. One never came away from a discussion with him without learning a great deal about the latest thinking on a multitude of topics, whether world systems analysis or the Green Bay Packers.

Tom’s reputation as a gifted lecturer spread overseas as well as at home. He was appointed Distinguished Fulbright Lecturer at University College, Dublin (1993-1994). Tom and Jeri returned several times to Dublin where he gave popular lectures and Jeri joined a circle of published poets. In Japan, the McCormicks were hosted by one of Tom’s outstanding Ph.D. students, Takeshi Matsuda.

Besides Jeri, Tom is survived by a son, Michael, two daughters, Elin Malliet and Amy Kittleson, and three granddaughters, Rachel McCormick, Erin McCormick, and Abigail Kittleson. We were most fortunate to have known him for so many years as a cherished friend from graduate school and those first discussions just outside the Wisconsin Historical Society. Perhaps Yeats—a fellow Irishman—said it best: “Think where man’s glory most begins and ends, and say my glory was I had such friends.” Tom was such a friend.

Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University
Walter LaFeber, Cornell University