

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on March 6, 2012, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Oscar Handlin was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## OSCAR HANDLIN

BORN: September 29, 1915

DIED: September 20, 2011

Oscar Handlin, Carl M. Loeb University Professor, *Emeritus*, was the most influential and creative historian of American social life in the second half of the twentieth century. Born in Brooklyn, New York, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, steeped in the lore and learning of Jewish culture, he developed in his youngest years a passion for learning—learning, as he wrote again and again, for its own sake, simply to know and understand the world and its people. It was that passion that led him into and out of a Yeshiva in Brooklyn, through his studies at Brooklyn College, through years of encyclopedic reading in the Brooklyn and New York Public Libraries, and that led him finally to Harvard, which he considered the national citadel of learning.

He entered the Harvard graduate school in 1934, at age 18, and after receiving his doctorate under the direction of Professor Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., in 1940, except for two years of teaching in Brooklyn, he taught at Harvard until his retirement. It is an indication of the early recognition of his talents that his first appointment at Harvard (1945) was as Instructor, then Assistant Professor in Social Science, approved by the History, Psychology, and Sociology Departments. By then the publication in 1941 of his dissertation on Boston's immigrants, 1790-1865, had begun a stream of writings—at least forty books written or edited and innumerable articles and reviews—that lasted for over four decades. His *Commonwealth: a Study of the Role of Government in the American Economy: Massachusetts 1774-1816* (1947), written with his wife Mary F. Handlin, is a master work of technical scholarship that revealed, at a time when much of the economy was organized at a local level and democratic impulses had made widely accessible the instruments of state action, the forceful role of government that federalism had misled many to think did not exist. Four years later his lyric, evocative *The Uprooted* (1951)—with its famous opening “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history”—won the Pulitzer Prize and carried readers, as no work of history had done before, into the interior, emotional world of immigrant experiences. It stimulated a generation's interest in the passages of uprooted people through the tortuous strains of resettlement and assimilation.

It was his love of learning for its own sake, and of Harvard as the embodiment of it, that made the assault on the University in 1969 and 1970 such a bitter experience for him. He could understand why students might try to turn the University into a political instrument. They were ignorant. And he could understand why political activists unaffiliated with Harvard might do so. But he could never understand why some of his own colleagues, committed as he was to impartial scholarship and to the integrity of the University, would do so. It was a savage blow to everything he believed in, and he never fully recovered from it.

He was unique in his understanding and explanation of history. It was not for him an assemblage of information but a form of intellection, a cognitive process, which he expressed year after year in his books and articles and in the classroom. His lectures were unique. They contained little descriptive information. They were analyses of the structures of events and developments and the configurations they formed that explained how things came to be the way they were. The lectures were dense, the logic tight, and they were difficult for many to grasp. Yet they were popular—at one point too popular for him. When attendance in his American Social History class topped 400, he dropped it. “I did not believe,” he wrote “that an earnest desire for that kind of knowledge really moved that many undergraduates; and I feared that these lectures had become one of those experiences into which people drifted out of habit or reputation. Therefore I chose subjects which on the face of it were not likely to draw crowds . . . and I offered my courses at an hour that required students either to postpone or skip their lunch.”

He was unique too in his sheer competence. His services to the University were extraordinary. While lecturing to undergraduates, he directed the graduate work of 80 doctoral candidates, whom he drove on, inspired, and protected, contacting socially many in other fields than his own for whom he had no formal responsibility; they all felt that he cared about their interests and would do what he could for their emerging careers. An excellent administrator, he was a dominant force in the affairs of the History Department, served as the Harvard University Librarian (1979-1984), and began the Library's modernization. In a crisis he took over the Directorship of the Harvard University Press (1972). He founded and directed the Warren Center for Studies in American History as well as his own Center for the Study of the History of Liberty in America. And he was equally active outside the University. He was a co-founder of a new television station and became a TV commentator. He served as Fulbright Commissioner, as an Overseer of Brandeis University, a Trustee of the New York Public Library, and he testified in Congress, with great effect, for the reform of American immigration policy.

In his last years, with the assistance of his devoted second wife, the historian Lilian Bombach, with whom he wrote the four-volume conclusion to his study of the history of liberty in America as well as several other books, he continued his daily visits to his Widener

study. He died in September 2011, aged 95, having lived a life of true learning, devoted to its transmission to generations of students and to the public at large.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Darnton  
Richard Pipes  
Stephan Thernstrom  
Bernard Bailyn, Chair