

NAMED PROFESSORSHIPS

Making a ‘Lasting Imprint’

History professor Robert Westbrook turns to moral and political philosophy to frame his writings on the American past.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

ROBERT WESTBROOK ONCE CONFESSED TO A room full of graduate students that his doctoral dissertation advisor at Stanford had called the first draft of his dissertation prospectus “constipated.”

The comment came in a talk, titled after the Rolling Stones classic, “You Can’t Always Get What You Want, But If You Try Sometimes, You Get What You Need,” in

from Yale, where, he explained, as part of his financial aid package, he had landed a job as assistant to Howard Lamar, then the chair of Yale’s history department and a noted scholar of the American West. It led him to appreciate, he recalled, that “professors are among the few lucky artisans left in the modern world of work.” That realization, as well as the “rush” he says he experienced with the publication of his first work—an entry in *The Reader’s Encyclope-*

(Cornell, 1991), that eventually came of that allegedly burdened first effort.

James Kloppenberg, the Charles Warren Professor of History at Harvard, says the book was “an instant classic.” Daniel Borus, a professor of history who has been Westbrook’s colleague at Rochester since 1990, calls it “one of those rare books that redefine a field.”

Dewey, a late 19th- and early 20th-century social reformer and one of the found-

ers of the American philosophy of pragmatism, had long been written about as a major contributor to modern American liberalism. To the contrary, Westbrook argued, Dewey was “a minority, not a majority, spokesman within the liberal community, a social philosopher whose democratic vision failed to find a secure place in liberal ideology—in short, a more radical voice than has been generally assumed.”

In 1993, the book earned the 1991–92 Merle Curti Award, an honor given biennially to the best book in social or intellectual history by the Organization of American Historians. The critic Louis Menand found the book significant enough to devote a 7,000-word essay to it—entitled “The Real John Dewey”—in *The New York Review of Books* in 1992.

Casey Blake '87 (PhD), a professor of history and founding director of the American studies program at Columbia, says of Westbrook “where I think he really is quite unique is in drawing on debates in moral and political philosophy to frame historical questions.”

Westbrook’s second book, *Why We Fought: Forging American Obligations During World War II* (Smithsonian Books, 2004), was cast as an examination of the claim made by many political theorists that Enlightenment liberal states, such as the United States, founded on the principle of



which, with characteristic candor and wit, Westbrook advised his listeners that “the alertness to contingency and the unintended consequences of human action that we cultivate as historians is one that we might well extend to our own lives.”

Westbrook had gone to Stanford directly

▲ **HISTORIANS’ ART:** “Professors are among the few lucky artisans left in the modern world of work,” says Westbrook, a historian who was installed this spring as the first Joseph F. Cunningham Professor of History.

dia of the American West on barbed wire—sealed his decision to become a historian.

Westbrook, who has taught at Rochester since 1986, this spring became the first Joseph F. Cunningham Professor of History, a professorship named for Washington, D.C., attorney Joseph Cunningham '67 (MA).

He has supervised more than 20 doctoral dissertations, a sizeable number in the history department’s small graduate program. And many of those students came to study with Westbrook in part because of the book, *John Dewey and American Democracy*


individual liberty, generally fail to foster deep conceptions of civic obligation. Westbrook put that claim to the test, attempting to excavate the political philosophy implicit in the artifacts of everyday life—advertisements, cartoons, posters, Norman Rockwell paintings, and even the pinups of Hollywood starlets—distributed to Americans with federal sanction during the war.

Through a discerning and at times colorful analysis of these artifacts, Westbrook concluded, in accord with the political theorists, that the reasons for which Americans fought were to carry out essentially private obligations—to families, children, parents, and “an ‘American Way of Life’ defined as a rich (and richly commodified) private realm of experience.”

Westbrook was drawn to Rochester 25 years ago by the prospect of teaching and working alongside Christopher Lasch, the historian and social critic who taught at Rochester from 1970 until his death in 1994. Over the years, Westbrook has consistently attracted a loyal following of undergraduates as well as graduates to his courses on American intellectual history, American culture during the Great Depression and World War II, and many others in a wide and ever-changing repertoire.

Jennifer Ratner-Rosengarten '92, the Merle Curti Associate Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison who took several courses with Westbrook as a history major, calls him “transformative” in her personal and intellectual development.

“I’d grown up in a shopping mall. I said ‘like’ every sixth word. I didn’t come in a package that at all announced that I could be a scholar,” she says. “But he took me deadly seriously, hearing past the ‘likes’ and ‘you knows’ and could see what was possible in me and helped me cultivate that.” These days, Ratner-Rosengarten is among the scholars to whom Westbrook regularly sends his essays for feedback.

Says Kloppenberg (with whom Ratner-Rosengarten studied in graduate school): “Robb has left a lasting imprint on the fields of American intellectual history, American political science, and the history of American philosophy. Those are three distinct fields. And not many people make a mark in more than one academic discipline during their careers.” 

McCally is an associate editor at Rochester Review and earned her PhD in history, under Westbrook’s supervision, in 2002.



NAMESAKE: Cunningham studied history at Rochester while waiting to be called to active duty and later established a career as an attorney in Washington, D.C.

Joseph Cunningham: ‘A Lifelong Interest in History’

“I was born and raised down the street from the University,” says Joseph Cunningham ’67 (MA), recalling “sledding on the slopes behind the football field” and playing basketball on campus. Urged by his mother to attend a Catholic college, he earned his bachelor’s degree not at Rochester, but at John Carroll University, he told the audience in Rush Rhees Library’s Hawkins-Carlson Room last May at the installation of the first Joseph F. Cunningham Professor of History.

After college, he pursued a law degree at Columbia. In 1962, a newly minted attorney who was also a commissioned officer awaiting a call for active duty, Cunningham had the time and the inclination to sample Rochester’s academic offerings. He eventually pursued a master’s degree in history, for which he was awarded a tuition scholarship.

“I’ve had a lifelong interest in history, and a great regard for the University of Rochester,” says Cunningham. He says he and his wife, Andrea, endowed a professorship out of “gratitude for the spontaneous generosity that the University extended to me when I wanted to pursue graduate studies.”

Cunningham’s master’s thesis, “Religious

Aspects of American Government in the Philippine Islands,” was a first-rate work of scholarship, says Stewart Weaver, a professor of history and chair of the department, who checked it out of Rush Rhees Library and read it prior to Cunningham’s visit to campus in May.

“Joe’s thesis anticipated by decades the recent scholarly interest in the cultural dimensions of Western colonialism and might well have been published had his career not taken him in other directions,” says Weaver.

Cunningham has practiced law for more than four decades and is the founder of the Washington, D.C.-area firm Cunningham & Associates, specializing in insurance defense and civil litigation. He has also taught law at Georgetown University and the University of Maryland.

Says Weaver: “The endowment of the Cunningham Professorship is a tribute not only to Joe’s extraordinary generosity but also an important statement of faith in the historical discipline. It will heighten substantially the visibility of our program and make it possible to retain and benefit from the presence of one of our most outstanding scholars.”

—Karen McCally