

Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members
Receiving Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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Faculty Members Receiving Emeritus Status

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Robert Choate Darnton



Robert Darnton spent his whole academic teaching career at Princeton University, having joined the faculty in 1968 until retiring in 2007 and becoming the director of the University Library at Harvard University. For four active decades, Bob served the history department and the University as a great teacher and a great humanist.

Born in New York on May 10, 1939, Bob was a child, and an orphan, of the Second World War. His father, a war correspondent for the *New York Times*, was killed in action. But the idea of being a reporter and a writer was a natural career for Bob—and indeed his brother John would also make his name as a writer for the *Times*. After studying at Phillips Academy, and graduating from Harvard in 1960, he crossed the Atlantic to Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, where he completed a D.Phil. in history. But his calling was journalism; Bob returned to New York to join the staff of the *Times*. Placed on the crime beat of the metro section to cover robberies and murders, he learned the art of piecing together a narrative from clues, and telling a good tale under a deadline. In the end, hiding thick history books in the folds of smutty magazines so that his colleagues wouldn't tease him for being pointy-headed, Bob got tired of the beat and yearned to get back to historical research. But he always believed that a good historian should also be a good raconteur and be accessible to non-professional audiences.

As it turns out, the world of journalism, print culture, and the media—what would later be seen as critical components of a “public sphere”—were more than just vocations. They were also subjects of historical study for Bob, and as the years unfolded he would examine the role of the press and print cultures, and eventually the history of communications in a variety of settings and times, from 18th-century Switzerland to 20th-century India.

While Bob acquired great range and became one of the world's leading scholars of a topic that was of growing interest as democratic movements took fire in Latin America and in Europe (where Bob is a veritable public intellectual in a way that the more professionalized Anglo-Atlantic academies don't quite foster), his scholarly research was anchored in 18th-century France, where the historiography was emerging out of many years of dominance by Marxist and materialist historians. Bob would emerge as one of the great figures in what is now a mainstream field, "cultural history."

It began with his first book on "mesmerism" on the eve of the French Revolution, published in 1968, after several years in Harvard's Society of Fellows, and as he began his long career at Princeton. But it was really with his second book, *The Business of the Enlightenment* (1979), a history of the technological and social processes that yielded to the Encyclopédie, that Bob's name became a household word to historians. With this book, Bob made his mark on the field of the social history of ideas, moving away from the study of intellectuals and their products, to the history of the production of ideas, en route to the study of the consumption and meaning of ideas more generally. Whereas once French historians would write "total histories" of places and societies with material foundations, Bob excavated the "total history" of the cultures and ideas that kept societies together.

But Bob's work was never restricted to the social glue. He was also interested in the ideas and symbols that broke societies up—and the most famous of all being the French Revolution, which set in motion new understandings of equality and freedom. The shift to the social history of ideas meant revisiting some classical debates about the relationship between the Enlightenment and the Revolution. What Bob challenged was the automatic association—if not causal immediacy—between new "high cultural" notions and the overthrow of an ancien régime and the making of the republic. There were a number of steps in between. How did new concepts reverberate among lower circles of readers and makers of public opinion? On the eve of the

Revolution, what was on peoples' minds? While remaining concerned with the production of ideas, Bob became deeply influenced by anthropology, especially Clifford Geertz, with whom he collaborated for many years of teaching under the aegis of the Program in European Cultural Studies. This yielded to a highly influential series of essays published together under the title of *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), translated into no less than 17 languages, which plumbed the rituals and symbols of Parisian popular sectors and behavior, from the slaughter of cats, to the hounding of witches, to male sexual braggadocio. What emerged was a world turning upside down, of old verities and authorities being questioned, of texts circulating more broadly as part of a "gutter press" among French urbanites, which proved equally if not more unsettling than the polite salons that we often presumed were the incubators of revolution. It was this move that led Bob to advance through a series of important books, from *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (1982) to *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections on Cultural History* (1989), and eventually to his two-volume masterpiece *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* and *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France* (1995), which cast a sharp beam on a world of readers (not so much the writers) of salacious novels, pornographic political allegories, and all sorts of polemicists and pamphleteers with affinities to "the Enlightenment" but whose importance to the cultural shifts of the 18th century had too often been overlooked.

If the quality of Bob's work made him a famous historian worldwide, the sheer volume is no less impressive. Bob published 12 authored books, and another dozen edited volumes or critical editions. His articles fill pages and pages of his long curriculum vitae. And there are many awards, including the Guggenheim Fellowship and the MacArthur Prize Fellowship, and distinguished scholarships in Britain, France, Germany, and beyond. He has received eight honorary doctorates and served as past-president of the American Historical Association.

The interest in books and media, and of the role of the public sphere more generally, carried Bob far and wide. He spent a year in Berlin at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1989–90, which coincided with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, a saga he captured in ways reminiscent of the reporter of his *Times* days, but now informed by his thinking about public opinion and the complex ways in which societies overthrow illegitimate political systems, in *Berlin Journal* (1991). He also embarked on a major international history of censorship. It is fitting that a great historian of publishing, books, and their readers should eventually take an interest in one of the institutions responsible for mediating between the production and consumption of ideas: libraries. Bob had a lifelong commitment to the health of libraries, from Firestone to the New York Public Library system. His new job is not quite a new career, but an extension of an old passion. We wish him well. What is more, we know that his commitment to the world of libraries and the artifacts they preserve and circulate is a personal investment in a public good for us all to enjoy for generations to come.