

# ROBERT K. WEBB

1922-2012



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Robert K. Webb was an American historian who developed strong associations with Australia. His election citation gives some insight into the strength of these connections:

We commend to the Council of the Academy Robert Kiefer Webb (b. 1922) for an Honorary Fellowship. He succeeds our late Honorary Fellow, John Clive, as the leading ally of Australian historians and the main proponent of Australian historical scholarship in the United States and, indeed, in Great Britain. His authority, integrity, great personal charm and wide acquaintance make him a powerful advocate for Australia in American and British scholarly circles.

[...] He knows more, as John Clive did, than most Australians about Australian literature and films. Webb is a frequent visitor to Australia. He was a member of the committee which scrutinised the Australian Research Council's support for research in European History in Australia. He duly visited most of the pre-Dawkins universities and helped produce a courageous, sustaining report. He has participated in seminars and conferences on topics ranging from the history of philosophy, history of law to the history of medicine at, to my knowledge at least, the universities of Western Australia, Melbourne and

ANU. He is a creative and diligent adviser and contributor to the Australian-based Oxford Companion to the Age of Romanticism and Revolution, Webb was a reviewer of the ANU Law School and he is to chair the Humanities/Social Science review panel for the Research School of Social Sciences in the Institute of Advanced Studies.

In a letter to the Academy accepting his appointment as an Honorary Fellow in 1995, he wrote 'I hope that my future work, in or out of Australia, will continue to justify the confidence the Academy has so unexpectedly placed in me. It is certainly true that my experiences in Australia over the past decade have been central in shaping most of what I have done in that period.'

The Academy is pleased to be able to reproduce an obituary written by one of Professor Webb's American colleagues, Professor Sandra Herbert of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Professor Herbert relates that '...through Bob I was able to attend an academic meeting in Australia where I met David Oldroyd, an Australian scholar who, with Bob, was very helpful to me as I wrote my book on Charles Darwin as a geologist.'

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**R**obert Kiefer Webb, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, was born in Toledo, Ohio, on 23 November 1922, and died in Washington, D.C., on 15 February 2012. In a long life he contributed in major ways not only to his own field of British history but also to the integrity and vigor of the academic profession as a whole.

Recognised from his youth for his academic brilliance, Bob Webb enrolled as an undergraduate at Oberlin College. As for so many young men of his generation, his studies were interrupted by war. Bob served in the U.S. Army Artillery from 1943 to 1946, rising to the rank of master sergeant. He said later that he learned in the army that he was good at deploying people and resources. In May 1945 while stationed in the Philippines, he wrote to Howard Robinson at Oberlin College contemplating his own future as an historian, speculating that, while he then knew U.S. history best, he might end up at Harvard studying 19th-century Great Britain, possibly something to do with church history. At war's end Bob returned to Oberlin and took his AB summa cum laude in 1947. For graduate school,

he chose Columbia over Harvard, prompting his Oberlin professor Frederick Artz, a Harvard alumnus, to quip that 'I feel like a Baptist preacher whose daughter has gone on the stage.' (It is worth noting that Bob's family background was Baptist.) Bob Webb received his PhD from Columbia in 1951, having spent two years at the University of London partly assisted by a Fulbright Fellowship.

Robert Webb concentrated on British history from the 1780s through the end of the 19th century. One overriding problem that engaged him was explaining the relative stability of the British state during a period of revolutions in France. In his first book, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790-1848: Literacy and Social Tension* (1955), Webb sought to understand 'the challenge which a literate working class presented to its betters.'

In Webb's subsequent work he explored the British tradition of religious dissent. He was interested in studying the British non-conformists on their own terms. He also saw their movement as providing a safety valve for releasing social tensions. In this Webb's work was congruent with that of the French historian Élie Halévy. As an indication of his high regard for Halévy, Webb translated his *Era of Tyrannies: Essays on Socialism and War into English* (1966). Among the English nonconformists Bob Webb settled on the Unitarians for his own work. He was drawn to them by a shared sense of the value of rational enquiry and because he noted the prominence of Unitarians among social reformers in 19th-century Britain, as, for example, in the Martineau family.

Webb's biography of one of the members of that family is still a standard work on the subject: *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (1960). Over the course of the next 40 years, Bob published extensively on the English Unitarians, including numerous individual contributions to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Bob's last public lecture, again touching on the Unitarians, was a talk he gave in 2010 entitled 'The Very Long Eighteenth Century: An Experiment in the History of Religion'. Bob's contributions to the field of British history were honored in 1992 by the volume *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society: Essays in Honor of R. K. Webb* edited by R.W. Davis and R. J. Helmstadter.

In 1968 Webb published *Modern England*, which became the standard textbook for a generation of students. In 1980, with his former Columbia University colleague Peter Gay, Bob published *Modern Europe Since 1815*, a thoughtful and elegantly written survey of the subject.

Webb served as an instructor of history at Wesleyan University from 1951 to 1953. He then moved to Columbia University where he remained for 17 years, during some of that time chairing the university's famed Contemporary Civilization Programme. From 1968 to 1975 Webb was editor of the *American Historical Review*, then still published at the AHA's headquarters in Washington, D.C. (Bob's work on AHA projects continued; in 1995 he contributed the section on 'Britain and Ireland Since 1760' to *The American Historical Association's Guide to Historical Literature*.) From 1975 to 1992 Bob Webb was professor of history at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and served in a number of critical administrative positions, including chair of the history department and, for a time, acting vice chancellor for academic affairs. During his career, Bob received two Guggenheim fellowships, and was for many years a member of the Educational Advisory Board of the Guggenheim Foundation. During his career Bob was also active in the national leadership of the American Association of University Professors.

The University of Maryland, Baltimore County was a young school, founded in 1966, and most of its history faculty were then in their thirties. Bob was half a generation older than the majority of his peers. Somewhat to our initial surprise, Bob took up his new position with zeal, investing his considerable energies in promoting the history department and the university. Bob traded off chairing responsibilities with Jim Mohr, and then passed the leadership torch to John Jeffries and Jim Grubb. Intellectually he was a ready resource to all of us. 'Bob Webb taught the faculty', as Victor Wexler once put it. Bob was a loyal and generous colleague who could be counted on for a letter of reference, a witty anecdote, or a word of encouragement or consolation, as the occasion required. Throughout his career Bob aided other scholars in their work, most recently Linda Lear as she was writing her biography of Beatrix Potter. To the end of his life Bob was regarded with admiration and affection by his colleagues. Bob is survived by his wife Patty Webb, their daughters Emily Martin and Margaret Pressler, and six grandchildren. An annual 'Robert K. Webb Lecture' has been established by the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, which is part of a Humanities Forum series open to the public.

SANDRA HERBERT  
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, BALTIMORE COUNTY

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