

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS PAUL BOYER

Paul Boyer, Merle Curti professor emeritus of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, passed away on March 17, 2012. A scholar of tremendous range and curiosity, he traversed virtually the entire chronology of American history, writing about subjects as diverse as early American political rhetoric and the Branch Davidians. His books dealt most centrally with intellectual, cultural and religious reactions to social dislocation and perceived moral decay: the Salem witch panic of 1692 (*Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, co-authored with Stephen Nissenbaum, 1974); nineteenth- and twentieth-century movements to fight vice, whether by conforming city dwellers' mores and behavior to reformers' moral visions (*Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920*, 1978) or by bowdlerizing texts (*Purity in Print: Book Censorship in American from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*, 2nd ed., 2002; orig. 1968); and post-1945 confrontations with the possibility of mass extinction, whether from nuclear annihilation (*By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, 1985) or the Apocalypse (*When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, 1992). Nominated for a National Book Award and given the American Historical Association's Dunning Prize, *Salem Possessed* transformed the study of New England witchcraft, but Boyer's oeuvre overall is distinguished less for its argumentative precocity than for its meticulous research, attention to nuance, the integrity of its interpretations, and an abiding concern with the effects of moral judgments both in and on history.

Born on August 2, 1935, Boyer grew up in Dayton, Ohio, attending a mission of the Brethren in Christ Church that his grandfather founded, an institution whose early history he chronicled in his most personal work, *Mission on Taylor Street* (1987). Although he eventually left the church, his background allowed him to exposit religious viewpoints—even those he strongly questioned—with clarity and insight, while its Mennonite values informed the lifelong commitment to pacifism that inspired *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons* (1998). A declared conscientious objector, he served two years in UNESCO's International Voluntary Work Camps in Paris before matriculating at Harvard, where he received his AB (1960), MA (1961) and PhD (1966). While a graduate student, he became an assistant editor for *Notable American Women* (3 vols., 1971), a signal contribution to the then-emerging subject of women's history. Assessing the compendium's status years later, his UW-Madison colleague Gerda Lerner, one of the field's foremost founders, remarked that he should be acknowledged as a fellow pioneer. In 1967, he took a position at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, moving to UW-Madison in 1980. He retired from the faculty in 2002 but not from scholarship, for he continued to edit the "Studies in American Thought and Culture" series for the University of Wisconsin Press, deliver invited lectures, contribute to both academic and popular journals, and serve as an expert consultant for the media, especially on the subjects of nuclear culture and biblical prophecy.

Boyer's research earned him an array of academic honors: Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundation Fellowships; election to the American Antiquarian Society, the Society of American Historians, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; dozens of invited lectures across the United States and Europe; and visiting appointments at UCLA, Northwestern University (where he was Henry Luce visiting professor of American culture), SUNY-Plattsburgh (as distinguished visiting professor), and, in retirement, the College of William and Mary. Professional organizations, granting agencies and presses such as the American Antiquarian Society, Syracuse University Press, and the Wisconsin Humanities Council eagerly sought his counsel. He once chaired the program committee of the Organization of American Historians, sat on its executive board, and joined the *Journal of American History's* board of editors.

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Boyer fulfilled his teaching and service functions at the university with the same distinction he brought to his research. His two-semester sequence on American intellectual history always filled to capacity, and his graduate seminar on the same topic helped anchor the U.S. history graduate program for two decades. He mentored twenty-two students for the MA and twenty-four for the PhD, guiding them through topics across the realm of his capacious interests. His academic concern with print culture—he co-edited *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America* for UW Press in 2008—underwrote his commitments to the UW Press Committee (which he chaired), the Silver Buckle Press Advisory Board, and the Wisconsin Center on the History of Print Culture, whose advisory board he ran for five years. Most importantly, he directed the Institute for Research in the Humanities between 1993 and 2001.

Boyer's intellectual breadth made him an ideal editor for general references like *The Oxford Companion to United States History* (2001), and a writer of textbooks. He authored two by himself—*Promises to Keep: The United States Since World War II* and *The American Nation*—and collaborated on two more—*The American Nation in the Twentieth Century* and *The Enduring Vision*. He was engaged in revising the latter book, among other projects, when a sudden diagnosis of terminal cancer and rapidly declining health precipitated his determined effort to fulfill all his near-term commitments, including the completion of *American History* (2012) for the “Very Short Introduction” series published by Oxford University Press. Boyer's mastery of his field allowed him to narrate American history from the Anasazi to Obama in 138 pages, achieving brevity without sacrificing cogency.

As the end approached, he confided that, although updating paragraphs that he had tended so often for textbook revisions might seem utterly inconsequential given the circumstances, he still found the task utterly absorbing. This dedication to scholarship underwrote his accomplishments as a historian; such equanimity in the face of death marks his measure as a man.

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