



## In Memoriam

---

OSCAR HANDLIN  
1915–2011

IN 1939, Oscar Handlin made his first contribution to *The New England Quarterly*. A review, it was published when he was only twenty-four years old, a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard University less than a year from receiving his degree. His relationship with *NEQ* extended for an additional seventy-two years, during which he not only established himself as one of his generation's leading historians but promoted *NEQ*'s reputation as a leading academic journal of New England life and letters.

In 1944, with his wife Mary, he wrote an essay for *NEQ* entitled "Radicals and Conservatives in Massachusetts after Independence." When one of the authors with whom they took exception wrote the editors to advise that "before any interested reader draw conclusions . . . he look at the pages in my study cited by the Handlins," the Handlins responded, "We are naturally content to leave the accuracy of our statements to the judgment of readers of *The New England Quarterly*. It is to facilitate such judgments that we go to the trouble of supplying footnotes with specific page references."

His research Professor Handlin preferred to embody in books, but his reviews in *NEQ* were numerous and as far-ranging as his vast interests, including music (*Anthony Philip Heinrich: A Nineteenth-Century Composer in America*), politics (*Lincoln and the Radicals*), geography (*Atlas of American History*), and of course social history (*The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*), his area of special expertise. His reviews are a model of judicious thought expressed in clear language. When necessary, he offered pungent criticism, as when he identified a "serious weakness" in one author's grasp of his subject. In another instance, when a second title in a series appeared, he observed, "this volume adds to its own shortcomings all the faults of its predecessor." When reviewing Merle Curti's classic *Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report on the Committee of*

*The New England Quarterly*, vol. LXXXV, no. 1 (March 2012). © 2012 by The New England Quarterly. All rights reserved.

*Historiography*, he imparted to his fellow historians this sage advice: “avoid both perils of facile uncritical relativism and of dogmatic absolutism.”

In recognition of his many contributions to *NEQ*, Professor Handlin was appointed in 1951 to the board of editors, a position he held until his death on 20 September 2011. Whereas his book reviews left no doubt about his dedication to his calling and its rigorous demands of logic, evidence, and disinterested inquiry, his manuscript reports were invariably warm and encouraging. He enjoyed promoting the work of young scholars, and he enjoyed sharpening their prose with his #2 pencil. When in his company, one never automatically assumed his respect, but setting out to earn it was a personal journey that would be rewarded in due course, a reward all the more cherished because it drew out of one a commitment to excellence that Professor Handlin himself so thoroughly exemplified.

In 1980, Professor Herbert Ross Brown of Bowdoin College retired from his post as editor of *NEQ*. It fell to the Colonial Society of Massachusetts (CSM), a longtime supporter and partner of the journal, to find a new home and editor for it. The CSM Council turned to Professor Handlin and asked him to chair a committee toward that end. Joined by Jason Aisner, Frederick S. Allis, Andrew Oliver, and Lyman Butterfield, the committee legally established the New England Quarterly Inc., entered into an agreement with Northeastern University to host the journal, and appointed a new managing editor. At its first meeting, the directors of *NEQ* Inc. elected Professor Handlin president, a position he held until 2000.

Under Professor Handlin’s leadership, *NEQ* thrived. Guided by his unyielding commitment to the highest standards of scholarship and fiscal responsibility, *NEQ* has managed to continue its existence as an independent journal, a rarity in the world of scholarly publishing. At meetings over which he presided, Professor Handlin was always direct and succinct. He was also a kind and generous mentor. We at *NEQ* miss him greatly.

—WILLIAM M. FOWLER JR., PRESIDENT, *NEQ* INC.  
LINDA SMITH RHOADS, EDITOR