



## IN MEMORIAM

Gunther Barth  
Professor of History, Emeritus  
Berkeley  
1925–2004

Gunther Barth, a highly distinguished historian of the United States, died in Berkeley on January 7, 2004. Barth joined the University of California, Berkeley faculty in 1962, and taught Western American and urban history until his retirement in 1995.

Barth came to the United States and to the study of American history on an unusual path. He was born in Düsseldorf in 1925 and attended local schools until his 16th year. The Second World War had attained one of its dreadful peaks by this time and young Barth was called into the army. His military service carried him to several fronts — Crete, North Africa, Sicily, Russia, and Italy — saw him wounded twice, and captured by British forces. After the war, and out of the army, he worked as a journalist in Düsseldorf until 1951. During two of those years he studied literature and art history at the University of Cologne; he also won a year-long fellowship, awarded by the U.S. State Department, which enabled him to study at the University of Oregon. After another year in Cologne, he returned to the United States, worked in New York City in construction and, for a short time, as a nightclub bouncer. By 1957, armed with an A.B. and an M.A. from the University of Oregon, he felt ready for doctoral work in history and entered Harvard University. Five years of study followed, and in 1962, Barth received the Ph.D. degree.

Harvard in these years, and for many following, housed one of the great history departments in the United States. Its faculty was especially strong in United States and Chinese history, and Barth studied with two of its finest scholars, Oscar Handlin, in the American field, and John K. Fairbanks, then probably the most distinguished historian of China in the United States.

Barth's doctoral dissertation, published under the title *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850-1870* (Harvard University Press, 1964), came out of these years, and in it he acknowledged handsomely his indebtedness to Handlin and Fairbanks. Although he undoubtedly learned much from his two mentors, the insights he offered in the book are his own. The story he tells is of the Chinese as sojourners in America, brought to the new country to work in its mines and its railroads. Long-standing prejudices of white Americans kept these people from assimilating — initially they had no intention of remaining in America but desired only to make enough money to help families still in China. But life in America was so harsh that few were able to return with a surplus, and all found putting down roots extraordinarily difficult. As their historian, Barth shows an acute sensitivity to their plight and a striking ability to reconstruct the misery of their lives. The Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association recognized his achievement in 1965 by awarding him its prize for the best historical work of the year.

The publication of *Bitter Strength* forecast a body of scholarship that brought Barth to the top of his field, the history of the American West with a keen emphasis on urban history. When Barth entered the academic world, historians of the American West were usually a pretty parochial breed. For years, many had suffered under the delusion that all knowledge about the West began with Frederick Jackson Turner. Disciples of

Turner (who died in 1932) spent their lives in amplifying his insights and spreading his fame. Turner deserved better.

Though respectful of Turner's great distinction, Barth set out on his own course. But when the inevitable and destructive criticism of Turner began about 30 years ago, he did not join the ranks of the "new Western history," as the social historians of the West have called their field. His own work cannot be easily classified. Indeed his scholarship demonstrated Barth's originality over and over again. Its major themes appear in the three books that followed *Bitter Strength*. The first of these and perhaps Barth's most distinguished book was *Instant Cities*. The instant city, he explains, is a type of urban organization which first appeared in ancient Greek colonization. His emphasis here is on the city as an institution of empire. In America he finds different types of the form, different variants — San Francisco as an emporium and Denver as a mining camp. Not content with analysis of these two, he takes up four towns which provide examples of variations of such urban experience. They are Santa Fe, the economic town; Monterey, the colonial outpost; Salt Lake City, the temple city; and Champoege, Oregon, the market place. San Francisco and Denver, his principal examples, were different from these lesser cities, for they emerged from an isolation imposed by the absence of an advancing rural or urban frontier. Barth points to the discovery of gold in the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains as key stimulants in their development. Most American-authored urban histories do not have Barth's reach and do not draw on European concepts of urban history. Among other things, Barth's book is distinguished by its subtle blending of the very general and the very local.

The book *City People* followed *Instant Cities* and revealed Barth's sensitivity to the experience of ordinary people in the past. The book shows how such institutions as vaudeville houses, newspapers, streetcars, apartment houses, baseball parks, and department stores helped tie together and educate the varied populations of American cities. The reviewer in *The New York Times* suggested that *City People* was "rather like an old Cecil B. DeMille 'spectacular,' only better." It was clearly a book appreciated by nonspecialist readers as well as historians.

The same appreciation surely applies to Barth's final scholarly book, *Fleeting Moments*. In it Barth used such familiar sources as the writings of Lewis and Clark and Olmstead to bring together his insights into nature and culture. He does not offer us the usual dreary march through the history of conflicts between nature and culture. Rather the fleeting moments of the title refer to the transition periods in which the two have been in harmony. The approach and the analysis make for a rich and suggestive study.

Barth's teaching attracted excellent undergraduate and graduate students. He was formal in bearing in and out of the classroom, but his wit, which ran to the dry side of things, pleased students of all kinds. He was loyal to them, held them to high standards, and gave them an example of a fine intellect that never compromised in the face of difficulty.

His teaching and scholarship often blended well with his service. He lectured widely, from the Oakland Museum of California to the University of Munich. He never shirked his responsibilities to the Department of History, the Berkeley Division of the Academic Senate, professional associations — or any organizations which called on him with a great variety of assignments. On the campus from his early years on, he provided a valuable link to The Bancroft Library, and in his quiet and unobtrusive way gave the library much helpful counsel. Here as in so many other settings, Barth's wide learning and European perspectives made him a valuable servant of the university.

Indeed, Barth was in all ways valuable to students, colleagues, and often to non-university communities. Such a tribute does not do him justice, and we cannot. We will simply say, in an attempt to sum up what we know of a distinguished life that he was wise, kind, and generous. His passing is a heavy blow, for until his final illness he retained his own considerable vitality. He is survived by his wife Ellen, who worked closely with him; and three children, Dominic of Cambridge, Massachusetts; Gilbert of Boulder, Colorado; and Giselle of New York City. He was predeceased by his oldest child, Christina of London.

Robert Middlekauff  
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