DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
ROBERT MORSE CRUNDEN

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Robert Morse Crunden, professor, history, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
ROBERT MORSE CRUNDEN

Robert Morse Crunden, professor of American studies and history at The University of Texas at Austin, died suddenly at home on March 23, 1999, after suffering a heart attack. For more than 30 years he played a major role in the development of the University’s American studies and American civilization programs (later the Department of American Studies). He earned wide respect as a cultural historian for his understanding of the “climates of creativity” animating American artistic, literary, and political movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As one of the first Americans to hold a Fulbright chair at a foreign university, he helped define the duties and opportunities of such appointments. His vigorous intellect, his tireless dedication as a scholar and teacher, and his generosity as a colleague have indelibly marked the fields of American studies and history at the University and beyond.

Robert M. Crunden was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, on December 23, 1940. His sister recalls that Bob excelled in intellectual pursuits even as a young boy. Reading and writing were his passions. During summers at the family home in Nova Scotia he spent long hours sitting quietly with his books. From an early age he was fiercely independent and relished a good argument on almost any topic. He entered Yale College as a freshman in 1958 and received a BA magna cum laude in 1962. While still an undergraduate, he collaborated with his grandfather on the writing of a self-published mystery, A Chicago Winter’s Tale (1960). He devoted his senior thesis to the journalist and cultural critic Albert J. Nock, in whom he discovered a kindred spirit. He internalized Nock’s reverence for high culture, his devotion to good writing, his role as a skeptical curmudgeon, and his self-conscious identification as a conservative. But conservatism for Bob Crunden was not necessarily a matter of politics. As he later wrote in the introduction to his anthology of writings by The Superfluous Men: Conservative Critics of American Culture, 1900-1945 (1977), conservatism involved “an assumption about which areas of life are generally rewarding for the intelligent person to concentrate upon.” For him, those areas encompassed the life of the mind and the study of those who had devoted their own lives to it. With the encouragement of his grandfather, he published his thesis as The Mind and Art of Albert J. Nock in 1964.

After graduating from Yale, Bob entered the graduate program in the history of American civilization at Harvard University, where he studied with Frank Freidel. He received a PhD in 1967 for a dissertation on the Progressive reformer and novelist Brand Whitlock, a study he published two years later as A Hero in Spite of Himself: Brand Whitlock in Art, Politics and War. This project set the tone for much of his later work as a scholar. In examining Whitlock’s varied career as a reformer, politician, diplomat, and novelist, the young graduate student trooped across disciplinary boundaries and came to appreciate the significance of the biographical. Although his study of Whitlock proved to be his only full-scale biography, throughout his career he employed and perfected a methodology that involved juxtaposing short biographies of carefully selected individuals as a means of discovering and presenting the tensions, conflicts, and meanings of a particular historical moment.

Soon after completing graduate study, Bob Crunden received an invitation to join the faculty of the University for the fall 1967 semester. William H. Goetzmann, who had taught him as an undergraduate at Yale, recruited him to assist in revitalizing the American studies program and to teach courses in American cultural and intellectual history. These were boom years at the University, and Bob later recalled the free-wheeling social life of young assistant professors in the humanities—many of them “exiles” from the Northeast struggling to adapt to Austin’s “laid-back” atmosphere. For many years he anchored the undergraduate American studies
major with a two-semester survey course, “Main Currents of American Culture,” which was famous for wry sarcasm, pithy anecdotes, unprecedented note-taking challenges, and a refusal to consider public university students any less capable than those of elite private colleges. Eventually he adapted these lectures for publication as *A Brief History of American Culture* (1990), which appeared in several editions in English and was translated into Arabic, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish. In addition to the introductory survey, he taught undergraduate seminars on the Progressive era and on religious, political, intellectual, and art history—with perhaps his most popular course, sometimes offered as a Plan II seminar, being “The Artist in American Society,” an interdisciplinary examination of painting, sculpture, music, and literature considered through the biographical approach he had developed in his scholarship.

Students in graduate seminars found Bob Crunden a demanding instructor. He regularly taught a required first-semester American studies seminar in which students learned to deconstruct recent works in cultural, social, and intellectual history long before the concept of deconstruction became commonplace. Over the years he also offered seminars in the American conservative tradition, the artist in American life, Southern history through literature, and modernism as a cultural paradigm. He gave good hard advice to everyone, never minced words when judging student work, offered his own intellectual life as a model, and considered his courses a form of initiation. Many graduate students thrived under this rigorous discipline. Some of them recognized that his formidable exterior concealed a shy man who was often warm, helpful, even sentimental. Their appreciation for his many talents appears in the fact that he supervised more than 20 PhD dissertations and 30 MA theses in American studies and history. He also served on scores of additional graduate committees in those two departments and in such disciplines as English, government, and art history.

Bob Crunden was also known for Herculean dedication to departmental and University-wide administration and governance. He served as graduate adviser in American studies from 1969 to 1976 and as director of the American studies program from 1985 to 1990. Always forthright in stating his views, he won both praise and criticism for his policies and built the program into a department in all but name (official recognition came in 1998). From 1990 until his death, he continued to influence American studies by serving as chair of the graduate studies committee and overseeing the graduate admissions process. In the Department of History, he served on many committees, especially those involved with hiring and promotion. Bob’s comments were often sharp, but they were almost always on the mark. The reputations of both departments, American studies and history, owe much to Bob Crunden’s unrelenting devotion to hard work and high professional standards. As a history colleague observed at his memorial service, “Bob always kept us honest.”

Colleagues often marveled at his ability to maintain an energetic research and writing agenda while tirelessly mentoring students and continually taking the pulse of undergraduate and graduate curricula. They were impressed by the apparently omnivorous quality of his reading, by the depth of his knowledge in diverse areas ranging from the music of Charles Ives to the literatures of the British Commonwealth countries. Even so, his published work remained squarely in the cultural and intellectual history of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As noted above, his scholarly method focused on shared climates of creativity revealed through group biographies of individuals active in diverse intellectual and cultural practices at a particular historical moment. He first experimented with this approach, which was influenced by the psychohistorical writings of Erik Erikson, in *From Self to Society, 1919-1941* (1972). That work traced changing interpretations of the relationship between the individual and society from the Progressives’ feelings of common identity, through the alienation of the 1920s, to the communitarianism of the 1930s. He expanded the scope of this biographical method in *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives’ Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (1982) and employed it in two subsequent books, *American Salons: Encounters with European Modernism, 1885-1917* (1993) and *Body and Soul: The Making of American Modernism* (2000).

Conceived as a trilogy exploring ambivalent American responses to the condition of modernity, all three of these works displayed a talent for broad synthesis of a dazzling array of disciplines and figures. In *Ministers of Reform*, Crunden traced the transformation of traditional Protestant morality into the Progressive activism of such varied figures as Jane Addams and Woodrow Wilson and explored the formally innovative but ideologically conservative expressions of such artists as Charles Ives and Frank Lloyd Wright. The second volume, *American Salons*, explored early expressions of American modernism by iconoclasts such as James
Whistler and Henry James, who rejected the jingoism and boosterism of the Progressives and tended to look to Europe for inspiration. Underlying the book was an assumption that urban life, as opposed to the rural and small-town backdrop of Progressivism, was essential to the rise of modernism. The final volume in the trilogy, the posthumously published *Body and Soul*, is a sweeping cultural history of the rise of a truly American modernism in the 1920s. Rooted in jazz and inspired by American urban life rather than that of Europe, this second-generation modernism encompassed the music of Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, and George Gershwin; the art of Georgia O’Keefe and Paul Strand; and the writings of Gertrude Stein, Langston Hughes, and John Dos Passos. Taken together, these three volumes inscribe an arc that would have been followed, had Crunden lived to write it, by a fourth volume on the collective mind of the 1930s.


The latter two collections derived from symposia Crunden organized at the American Studies Research Centre in Hyderabad, India, where he served as director for two academic years, from 1982 to 1984. This Fulbright position exemplified his dedication to the international American studies movement. While in residence in Hyderabad, he supervised the Centre’s operations, taught courses, organized conferences, expanded the library, edited the *Indian Journal of American Studies*, lectured extensively at other universities, offered advice on curricular development, and inspired a generation of Americanists.

The shape of his activities in India owed much to prior experience as the inaugural holder of the Bicentennial Chair in American Studies at the University of Helsinki, Finland, in 1976-1977. As perhaps the first person appointed to a Fulbright chair anywhere, Crunden defined the multifarious duties now routinely expected of such appointees. He succeeded so well that he was invited to return to Helsinki in the same capacity in 1991-1992. Among many professional honors, he was especially proud of his election to the Finnish Academy (Suomen Tiedeakatemia) in 1997. He was also pleased that his general text, *A Brief History of American Culture*, which he had prepared as an introduction for foreign students, was first published in Finland. Dedicated to the importance of internationalizing the field of American studies, Bob relished any opportunity to teach outside the U.S. and enjoyed welcoming foreign scholars to Austin—inviting them to stay with him, helping them navigate the University’s libraries, and encouraging their research. He also served as a visiting professor in American studies at the University of Würzburg, Germany, in 1979 and again in 1982, and as a senior Fulbright lecturer at La Trobe University in Australia in 1978.

Despite Professor Crunden’s well-deserved reputation for acerbity, his closest academic relationships were with graduate students and junior faculty. Bob was a consummate listener and editor. He was gifted with the ability to recognize and clarify the key points of an uncertain or disorganized argument. Numerous scholars, both at the University and elsewhere, owe some of the success of their publications and possibly their tenure to Bob’s willingness to pore over their prose and help transform it into clear English. Because of this talent, he was also in constant demand as a book reviewer and outside manuscript reader (though authors also awaited with considerable trepidation his frank, sometimes sarcastic, notices). Bob liked few things better than to champion an unknown but well-conceived and well-written manuscript, especially one at political or ideological odds with his own opinions. One of the few things he did enjoy more was to talk with a group of graduate students and colleagues over a pitcher of beer. Whether he was probing the Progressives’ contributions to American civilization or the dynamics of modernist salons in London and Paris, or the roots of jazz or the movies, or the failures of American foreign policy, or the ideas that animated a social movement or an aesthetic milieu, Bob made brilliant and broad syntheses. As a colleague observed, “he was a one-man climate of creativity, bringing out the best in everyone who let him touch their minds.”

Throughout Bob’s life, the family home in Nova Scotia offered a refuge from Austin summers and from the demands of teaching and advising. Reading and writing alternated in a simple rhythm with chopping wood,
boating, and making repairs. Physically active throughout the year, Bob was known for his daily swim at Barton Springs and for walking to and from the University in any weather. He threw himself into everything he did—swimming, writing, teaching, parenting, mentoring, attending chamber concerts and movies, debating students and colleagues, holding forth on just about anything. He refused to own a television and acquired hundreds of phonograph albums, mostly classical and jazz, including a collection of Scandinavian composers so unique that the Fine Arts Library was pleased to accept its donation after his death.

Bob had no tolerance for obfuscatory prose but infinite patience for reading children’s books to his young daughters. He had strong opinions on just about everything, including the value of integrity, scholarship, and friendship. He was one of those elemental individuals about whom everyone had a strong opinion one way or the other. By his example, Bob Crunden challenged and provoked everyone around him—an experience for which the vast majority remain grateful. His survivors include his mother Marjorie Morse Crunden and sister Joan Crunden Lewis, both of Boulder, Colorado; and daughters Wendy Eberle-Sinatra of Toronto, Canada, and Evelyn Ann and Rebecca Joan Crunden of Austin, Texas.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Jeffrey L. Meikle (chair), Shelley Fisher Fishkin, and Neil Foley.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on November 3, 2000. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.
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