

John Brown Mason  
1904 - 1992  
PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, EMERITUS

A. B., Butler University; A.M., Ph.D., Political Science, History, University of  
Wisconsin, May, 1929  
California State University, Fullerton From September 1, 1960 To August 30,  
1974  
Birth: July 13, 1904; Death: December 6, 1992

I was Professor Mason's student, Chairman Mason's colleague, and John's friend.

John Brown Mason was born to American parents in Germany in 1904 and raised there until he was 19, when he traveled to the United States. In 1929 he earned his Ph.D. in political science at the University of Wisconsin and began teaching there. He had developed his fluency in German and immersed himself in the study of German affairs. He was named a Carnegie Fellow in international law, and combined this expertise with his background in Germany to become a noted scholar in the field. When World War II began, he accepted an offer to teach military officers at the Civil Affairs Training School at Stanford University.

In 1936 John Mason published *Hitler's First Foes*, and in 1946, *The Danzig Dilemma*, along with many articles on the Nazi Legal system. He was responsible for the first guide to social science reference works, two volumes entitled *Research Resources*, which were considered to be a landmark contribution to social science scholarship. He joined the State Department in the 40's and held important positions into the 50's. In 1945, following Hitler's defeat, he was selected to serve on the Patterson Historical Commission as the only political scientist participating in the interrogation of captured Nazi leaders.

He and four historian colleagues, using assumed names for security reasons, traveled to an American prisoner-of-war camp in Luxembourg. There they interviewed key figures such as Goering, Hitler's top aide, and naval commander Grand Admiral Doenitz. A record of the important information developed by the commission resides in the War Department's historical archives. Later, as a professor, his stories of the World War II Nazis he interrogated enthralled students. He was our living link to the war!

When his work on the commission was completed he served on President Herbert Hoover's Food Mission. His fact-finding efforts took him to as many as 13 countries in a single month in 1946. During that period his duties resulted in meetings with the Pope, and afternoon cocktails with Hoover and his aides were the norm. John Mason then joined the Hoover War Library, which was based at Stanford, although he worked in Austria and Germany to help the Library of Congress establish relations with German publishers. He assisted in the effort to re-educate the populace in post-war

Germany, and became chief of the civil activities division of the State Department's High Commission for Germany. He eventually was transferred to Thailand to serve there as the first U. S. Cultural Attaché.

Over the years he held teaching appointments at several universities, including Oberlin College and Georgetown University, where it was my good fortune to be a graduate student under his tutelage. Professor Mason was clearly a German professor--not a professor of German--a German Professor. Attention to detail--the smallest detail, and every one of them--was his hallmark. He read every paper and every footnote with the greatest care, and in sheer volume his corrections could be described as falling somewhere between comprehensive and exhaustive. As students we lived in dread that we had committed an error in interpreting Turabian's style manual an error that lurked in our prose, hidden from us but waiting to be discovered by Professor Mason. To this day I hate Turabian and footnotes.

Professor Mason was amazingly well-read--in English and German. He knew all the "greats" personally and maintained a voluminous correspondence with them. He also was well-published in a variety of media to an extent that we students found awe-inspiring. He demanded much from his students and he gave as much in return. He was thorough, well-prepared, and knowledgeable, and he expected the same from his students. His teaching style was a bit unorthodox. My brother, Paul, was also Professor Mason's student. Although he participated in class discussion, he otherwise did "C" work. Professor Mason forbade him from speaking in class until he got a "B". It worked! So much for modern pedagogy.

Following his career in the foreign service and after considerable teaching experience, he was asked by William B. Langsdorf--the founding president of what was then known as Orange County State College--to become a charter member of the faculty. When Professor Mason joined the faculty in 1960 to establish a Department of Political Science, he was the first political scientist to be hired. A year later, Chairman Mason invited me to join the embryonic Department of Political Science (Social Science Division) at Orange County State College; that's the way it was done in those days. But just because the system required no particular search process didn't mean he didn't have his own. Still and ever the German professor, he amassed a file of personnel information on me several inches thick--just in case it might turn out his initial judgment of me was wrong. Finally, after interminable hand-corrected correspondence, with marginal notes, I was appointed an instructor. I found upon my arrival that I was the only instructor on campus. I also found Chairman Mason's philosophy was simple: no Ph.D., no Assistant Professorship.

Chairman Mason was a good department chair. He was simultaneously Professor Mason and he worked and worked hard. It wasn't exactly a democracy, but it was benevolent. He built an outstanding department which provided hundreds of students an excellent education and gave this University outstanding faculty scholars and leaders--a department of which he was justly proud.

Professor Mason loved students and international relations, but he loved the *New York Times* even more. He read every page and clipped out dozens of articles on a daily basis and filed them--or somebody filed them. He was always behind, usually by several weeks or more. But a month of old *New York Times* was far better for Professor Mason than a current *Santa Ana Register* or even an *L. A. Times*.

Chairman Mason was legendary for his absent-mindedness. He often forgot where he left his car or if Nan had brought him to campus that day. We all would hunt for the car, the keys, or the files, or we called Nan. Files were everywhere; on his desk, on the floor, in the car trunk, on the floor or seats of the car, or in the kitchen at home.

Home was where Nan, Susan, and Robert provided balance, calm, and perspective for John, where we spent many hours as friends, and where he provided advice and support to my wife Helga and me. While John and I were close, he was the same age as my parents and may have been even closer to them. The Mason home was also where Helga and I started to learn a few things about children. We baby-sat Susan and Robert for a whole summer--and somehow, when it was over, the sitters and the children were still alive, and Helga and I *still* decided to have children.

At one point in my young teaching career, Chairman Mason actually fired me. He sent me a letter of non-retention because I had not finished my dissertation. This was a message that got my attention. I retreated somewhat from the course and curriculum development I was involved in, pulled back from local political activity, and finished my dissertation. I later found out that Chairman Mason had made provisions for me to work as a lecturer, in the event I did not complete my dissertation.

As with his career in government, he distinguished himself in education. He was the founding chair of the political science department, and was named the University's Outstanding Professor in 1969. He retired, emeritus, in 1974. In 1983, in honor of his achievements, a John Brown Mason Professorship was established to recognize the scholarship of the political science department's faculty. He is listed in *Who's Who in America*, and *Men of Science*.

John was a thoroughly respected political scientist of the first rank; a reporter and interpreter of one of the most painful, significant events in modern history; a meticulous, true scholar; a teacher devoted to his calling; a tireless mentor; a rock-solid family man; and the leader of an excellent academic department.

These many accomplishments and contributions were possible because of his character, intelligence, and talent, and because of Nan's, Susan's and Robert's understanding and support. One may never know an individual's true appraisal of his own life. But in John Brown Mason's case, all measures we have at hand indicate, until his death on December 6, 1992, we were privileged to share our lives with an exceptional human being.

Submitted by  
Lee R. Kerschner  
Professor of Political Science and Acting President, CSU, Stanislaus  
June 23, 1993

(I wish to acknowledge the Public Affairs Office at Fullerton, which provided considerable historical material for this tribute.)