

**Roscoe Balch**

**Roscoe Balch**

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, NY

Transcribed by Wai Yen Oo

For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

**Roscoe Balch**

**Interviewee:** Roscoe Balch

**Interviewer:**

**Interview Date:** (?)

**Location:** Marist Archives and Special Collections

**Topic:** Marist College History

**Subject Headings:** Balch, Roscoe

Marist College History

Marist College (Poughkeepsie, New York)

Marist College Faculty

Marist College Social Aspects

**Summary:** Roscoe Balch discusses his time as the Professor of History at Marist College. His reflections on the history of Marist College in the 1960s and the 1970s. He discusses plans for his book and evaluates the changes happening in contemporary American society.

## Roscoe Balch

Roscoe Balch (00:05):

Very happy at a small college in the Midwest, but my wife was not happy and she was a girl from a large farm and she desperately wanted to get east. And so I had written an article in America that had gotten some attention. I sent out letters to all kinds of places, including Marist College. And at first I had no response from Marist College, although my wife was particularly interested because she liked the idea of Poughkeepsie. She had been through Poughkeepsie and it was, she knew, much more convenient than someplace in New Jersey. And so she talked to a friend of hers in Poughkeepsie who spoke to her husband who spoke to his officemate, Jack Gartland. And then I heard from Marist College and the Brother had just informed me that he was leaving. They didn't tell me that but that's when I found out. And so they were gonna need somebody and they were gonna need somebody with my credentials. So I [...] you know, I talked to people at the convention in New York, but I hadn't heard from Marist until afterwards so I arranged to come up and see Linus Foy and the day of the [...] I was supposed to come, we had an ice storm. And my in-laws suddenly became terribly afraid that we'd go on our way up and die on the way and leave the children on them. So I called, I called for him. We talked over the telephone and then we went back. And I liked the idea of Marist as a new college and I've been teaching with Brothers not Marist Brothers, but Christian Brothers. And I enjoyed that. So the idea of a new place appealed to me, then we got offers from two other colleges, one in New Jersey and one in outside Philadelphia. And we hadn't heard from Marist. I guess you could tell you, it'd be about the third offer I got. I had gone around at the convention and I knocked on the door and banged on the door. And finally it opened and a man sort of, hung his head out from ajar, told me to come in and pour myself a drink. So I went in and here was this table full of bottles and glasses and ice and stuff. So I poured myself a drink, and pretty soon the man came out and he saw me sitting there with the drink and I think he immediately thought he had sold me and I handed my drink, "Oh yeah, this is just fine, you're the right one."

Student (02:55):

That's good. That seems there was a lot of obstacles blocking your way to Marist.

Roscoe Balch (03:02):

Well, you know, as I sat there, I thought this guy wants a drinking partner and the last thing I wanna do is sit around and drink with him for the next 30 years. But anyhow, we called Marist and I said, you know, I had these two offers and I had to answer them. Well, at least you have an offer in the mail from Marist. So I waited and it was the best offer. And so we came here.

Student (03:29):

And that's great. That's a great story. It seemed like there was so many obstacles and finally it all caught up.

Roscoe Balch (03:34):

Yeah we all arrived.

Student (03:36):

Did the location of the College influence your decision to come here?

## **Roscoe Balch**

Roscoe Balch ([03:41](#)):

It did. It did because my wife's family were in Larchmont and Larchmont is less than two hours from here by car. And it's two hours, not through heavy traffic. And if I'd gone to St Peter's in Jersey City, we would've had to buck all of New York and Westchester traffic. And she didn't, she couldn't see, where would you live in New Jersey? (laughter) We didn't know at that point. And if we'd been, if we'd gone to Philadelphia, it would've been so far. So the location did...

Student ([04:14](#)):

And you probably would feel more comfortable as a History professor teaching in a historically rich area like the Hudson Valley.

Roscoe Balch ([04:21](#)):

Yeah well, I didn't know how rich the Hudson Valley was...

Student ([04:23](#)):

Which we'll get to. Did you know that they're offering a course now next semester?

Roscoe Balch ([04:31](#)):

I'm glad to here it. Who's offering it?

Student ([04:33](#)):

I'm not sure, but I noticed that you weren't.

Roscoe Balch ([04:35](#)):

No, I'm not. No, I'm not. It might be Billy Burke. And if so, she'll do a good job.

Student ([04:44](#)):

How do you feel about that? I mean, it is a rich area of History.

Roscoe Balch ([04:47](#)):

Oh, it is. It is. Yeah. And I think we should, we should do it. And I think we- I think Billy Burke, who is just an adjunct with us now about who really pioneered a history program here some years ago. And it's just possible that one of her students may replace me at Marist. He's one of the candidates that we're looking at, you know, and having a little connection here, you know, gives him some but we haven't been through any interviews yet so I don't know whether that would happen or not. But Billy went through Marist and she got into this thing and then she did a good job too.

Student ([05:27](#)):

It's really worthwhile for the students to know about the culture of their area too, about the history of their area.

Roscoe Balch ([05:32](#)):

## **Roscoe Balch**

I think the history of this area is very interesting and very rich and I'm very glad that Tom Casey has done as much with it as he has done, and Bill.

Student ([05:42](#)):

Have you done anything yourself?

Roscoe Balch ([05:45](#)):

Well, what have I done? When I first came here, I said, we have to do two things. We have to connect with the Roosevelt Library and we got somebody to do that. And we have to connect with the local community. And because [...] this place was behind a wall and it was mostly student Brothers and you know, they knew we existed, but that was about all.

Student ([06:10](#)):

[...] Isolated from the community.

Roscoe Balch ([06:12](#)):

So yeah, so I joined the first thing, the most obvious thing was the Historical Society. And I was welcomed with open arms. And one of the people who welcomed me was the retired president of Vassar, Henry Noble MacCracken. And but at any rate I had the first thing I knew I was on their Board of Trustees. And that was a great experience because you're sitting there with all these people who have nothing to do but sort of meditate about it. (laughter)

Student ([06:42](#)):

It's a very relaxing environment.

Roscoe Balch ([06:43](#)):

Oh a very relaxing environment. You could go to sleep easily. But every so often we would get a letter to the effect that they wanted others to write a letter to the Department of Transportation to save a house. And there'd be a little conversation about it. So I'd say, "Well, there's not much left in that house. That was never an important house." But we'd write the letter and I realized two things. I realized first we had no criteria. We didn't know what we were doing. And second, it didn't matter because we weren't gonna do anything about it anyhow. The Department of Transportation or somebody would get the letter and they'd say, "Here's the letter from Dutchess County Historical Society." They'd say "File under Dutchess County Historical Society."

Student ([07:24](#)):

So it's a round file.

Roscoe Balch ([07:28](#)):

And so yeah, it appeared. So I approached the college and the president of the Historical Society and said, "Why don't we hold a conference at Marist on historical preservation in the Hudson Valley, find out something about it." And so that was okay. And I wound up as the person in charge. And we had just been through at Marist, a Catholic-Jewish conference organized by (?). And I, they had really taught me how to run a conference. And so I [...] by using that as a model.

## Roscoe Balch

We sent letters out to everybody that I could think of who would either have an interest in preservation, in historic preservation or county planning for the area, because it was full of talk about planning at the time. And so we wound up holding the conference in Marist and I had found, I had run across quite a few, very capable people, architects and planners and, and the people just [...] I think the man who had done the the film that persuaded the government to make Bryce Canyon in Utah a national park. And he was now in this area and interested in those things.

Student (08:51):

Did your influence in the Preservation Society help? We tape historical status to the two buildings on Marist.

Roscoe Balch (08:58):

Yeah. They come, they come out. They're kind of at the end of it. When we started out, those two buildings were considered nothing, you know? And everything within the new modern buildings now, we've trashed the new modern buildings and replaced them with other buildings. But now we like [...] the three historic building treatment. And, but you know, those things go around.

Roscoe Balch (09:24):

Yeah. On the second question, the focus of our project is the social history of Marist. What social changes have you noticed that happened at Marist have had (that you believe had) like the most significant impact?

Student (09:40):

I think the most significant impact is the coming of lay students. And when I first came here, we (the lay students) were already here but [...] the majority were still Christians, the Brothers. And the Brothers were very nice community. They were very bright. They were tremendous students. They had great morale. They were building the place. And they you know were really teaching very top flight group of students. And there was also an extraordinary sense of community. I mean, we still keep the word community and we still keep the idea at Marist. But [...] when we first came here, you know, everybody knew everybody. Everything happened to Donelley Hall. [...] There was this very close kind of community. Indeed when the Middle States (Commission of Higher Education) came, they said, "This is impossible. Lovely, but it can't last." They were right. Of course. (laughter) But [...] that was the first major change I would say.

Student (10:49):

Would the coeducation co-ed would be the [...],

Roscoe Balch (10:53):

That would be major change. Yeah, that's right. I'm not, you know [...] I think [...] it's been delightful having the girls here and I'm not sure that it's made as big a change as the change from That early community. Right. It's been a significant change and a good change and all those things. But I think we are probably coming into some changes now with the changing geographic location of the freshmen or foreign students and that kind of thing.

## **Roscoe Balch**

Student ([11:25](#)):

Do you think that benefits Marist? That we're getting geographically wider?

Roscoe Balch ([11:30](#)):

Yeah, I think, I think it's a good thing for me. I think we always felt Marist was in danger of being too much, "one-thing kind of place." I would say, however, that as important, probably as the coming of lay students or the coming of women students was the impact of the Sixties. And then almost equally important, the disappearance of the Sixties.

Student ([11:57](#)):

And how did the students react to the Vietnam War?

Roscoe Balch ([12:01](#)):

They were concerned they were concerned. But at Marist, we held a teach-in that is widely regarded as very unusual in the sense that it included. It took all day long. And we had speakers on both sides of the Vietnamese War question. So we had [...] Dan Berrigan was here and a young fellow named Staughton Lynd who was the New Left [...] electoral leader in the country.

Roscoe Balch ([12:34](#)):

Okay. And we had the local Congressman Joe Y. Resnick who defended the war. And we had a brother of Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., a former governor of Connecticut, an ambassador to Spain or someplace was here. A Chinese general (Gen. Bernard Yoh) and, you know.

Student ([12:50](#)):

Pretty stellar panel.

Roscoe Balch ([12:52](#)):

It was a lot of people. And they took the main entry of the campus center. So they put these guys up just in front of the stairs and then people went down one way back the other way. And we had television set-up in various other rooms. So people can watch it and it went on all day. And I think in the sense, this summarized that the students came generally. I mean we had a three hour student strike when Nixon went into Cambodia. But the thing about Marist was, I don't think we ever lost courtesy, friendship. There was a great deal of argument and discussion, but it was always [...] Friendly or connected.

Student ([13:38](#)):

It's positive. Yeah.

Roscoe Balch ([13:39](#)):

Yeah. It's a very positive and Marist was the enormously positive all through the Sixties.

Student ([13:44](#)):

That's great. It wasn't affected by the real resentment feeling like maybe other campuses.

## Roscoe Balch

Roscoe Balch (13:50):

No, it really wasn't. It really wasn't. Part of this was Linus Foy. Anybody could see Foy at anytime. We had a student who walked into Foy and he demanded and said, "I wanna know the Board of Trustees!" And Foy handed him sheet of paper. "I wanna know the business affiliation!" Foy handed them another sheet of paper. [...] "I wanna know the college's investments." Foy handed him a very small sheet. They didn't know what to do. He walked out. He said, "Well but they struck it for at Columbia." (laughter) Any idea what he did with this information. [...] But he had it. But we were able to do this. We also, I think we were lucky. We got in history. We hired, I wouldn't say we went looking for a radical teacher-professor. But when we got a chance to hire one that we took Marist professor named Joe Norton. And I remember Foy spent an hour talking with him and George and I took him out to dinner and we argued evening away. But we found out that he heard what was said to him. He replied to it directly. He was an honest man. He was an informed man. And [...] he just happened to take a very strong view on the war and other questions on the left agenda. And Joe became a very important thing in the lives of students. And he was kind of the focal point of of the Vietnamese war criticism and so on. But because Joe was a very responsible guy, right.

Student (15:35):

He knew how [...]

Roscoe Balch (15:36):

Yeah, that's right. He kept that. He kept that in a perspective.

Student (15:41):

In perspective.

Roscoe Balch (15:42):

Yeah. And so Marist was I think it was a [...] march in Poughkeepsie and all other colleges were gonna go and somebody from one of the other college got up and they wanted some violence on the end of it. Joe got up and he made a speech and stopped that. We pull out. They didn't pull out, but and Marist made a great name for itself. Cause people did all kinds of positive things about the community at Marist at that time.

Student (16:12):

That's great. Yeah. Do you think that the students today are more or less aware of the political events? Like are we [...] less today?

Roscoe Balch (16:22):

Yeah. Less right. Less aware.

Student (16:24):

Were people more active back then?

Roscoe Balch (16:26):



## **Roscoe Balch**

Oh yeah. Much, much more. But that people, they are less aware than they were in the Fifties. Okay. When [...] we had an active Republican and an active Democratic club on the campus. And, you know, they were involved in the issues and they held debates and they did various kinds of things. And I would say that somewhere in the Seventies, we got a group of student who just turned off. People nationwide. Vandalism went up. You couldn't get students who would sit on faculty committees. Everything that the 60's students had won.

Student ([17:05](#)):

These students took away.

Roscoe Balch ([17:07](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Wouldn't touch. And [...] They were a problem in the dorms, beating people up. This kind of thing.

Student ([17:15](#)):

Was Joe still around or no?

Roscoe Balch ([17:17](#)):

No Joe left alas. Oh, well, Joe stayed for a while. And he fought it and then he decided to leave. You know, he walked out on it.

Student ([17:24](#)):

What do you think brought that about? The change?

Roscoe Balch ([17:28](#)):

I've heard it suggested that these kids were the younger brothers and sisters of the Sixties students. And they sat home and listened to their parents complaining. But they felt that they would get into all kinds of trouble if they spoke up in any way. So you never find out what they thought. Their motto was "Tell me what to do and I'll do it." And it was a ?.

Student ([17:53](#)):

And you really noticed that on campus.

Roscoe Balch ([17:54](#)):

Oh yeah. It was just a bad, bad show. Now they gradually, gradually figured out, you know. But I remember we had a student body president who was picked up for shoplifting. Of course, that was one thing that ran through the nation for a brief time. Everybody had a shop.

Student ([18:11](#)):

So the community started to deteriorate a little bit.

Roscoe Balch ([18:14](#)):

Yeah, it did. It did. And then I think it's rebuilt so much, you know, but it did. It did deteriorate.

## **Roscoe Balch**

Student ([18:20](#)):

And then did you notice another difference of a transitional phase into the eighties?

Roscoe Balch ([18:25](#)):

Yeah, but, but it was much more gradual, more moved into the eighties and into the present moment. I think there's probably I can't, we went through in the late eighties, a kind of period of party culture where, you know, that was the only thing. And that's, to my mind, that's dull. I mean, parties are alright. If you know, if you worked together, you play, and did that work, you'd done stuff together. Then you got together and you have, you know, all, you play with your friends, but if parties are the whole thing myself.

Student ([19:00](#)):

It was a big party school.

Roscoe Balch ([19:02](#)):

It was for a while, for a while. It was a big party school. And that I think, detracted from everything else. Yeah. But I think they were pulling out of that I'm not that sure. But that sounds, yeah.

Student ([19:20](#)):

Your, your role here. Do you, as a [...] one of the senior faculty and what do you perceive your role as being like? Is your perception of your role here changed from the first time you came here?

Roscoe Balch ([19:33](#)):

Yes. Yes when I first came here, I served on most of the major committees and I was very active in the politics and this kind of thing. And today, I am primarily a teacher. I go to meetings. I offer opinions, you know. But primarily, I've been more and more just a teacher. Right. I do a little bit more scholarship than I did early on when I was so busy. But it's maybe not exactly the way one expected the role to change. A lot of people's roles have changed then. Action tends to be in the 40 year olds. [...]

Student ([20:20](#)):

So this is your final year at Marist. What are your plans?

Roscoe Balch ([20:25](#)):

Well, I have two, two concrete plans and the first is, it's a book that I've got about four chapters, at least a rough draft done. And it's a book that would deal with the way people come of age in this country at this time. And it would be a book that looks at it from a point of view that I think is a little unusual. That is how time is handled. It seems that for example, my grandmother gave up a promising career in one-room schoolteacher when she graduated from it. And she went out to the Idaho frontier and took on five small children. And with those children and four of her own, she raised, they all grew up. They, you know, all married. All had families. All paid their taxes. All stayed outta jail. And but she was in short right in the middle of life and challenge of

## **Roscoe Balch**

18. And I think we are preventing people from doing this and we're pushing it further and further and further back so that my son and his bride married at, in the latter half of the thirties, you know, just had the first child. I think that's become a very common practice.

Student (21:50):

Waiting.

Roscoe Balch (21:51):

Yeah. People are waiting, waiting, and it's more a matter that there's no real place to start taking these responsibilities on until you say, "Oh my gosh, if I don't do it now, you can't do it."

Student (22:02):

I think a sense maybe of stability is important to people nowadays. Do you feel that with that [...] career [...] Getting settled in your career?

Roscoe Balch (22:10):

Yeah, I think, I think the career has become central. And I [...] think this is a disaster from the point of view of the nation and others. Here, I think it means we do things like sacrifice. This poor question of when do you have a private life [...] to where do you get on in your career? And I think by and large this doesn't mean that [...] I don't think we do any better in the careers. I think it's just a matter that, you know, this is where it's at and then maybe the recreation world goes with it, you know? And it takes people away from all kinds of other responsibilities but I think they don't go up that way. I think it's a way of retarding maturity. That may seem like a lot of radical notions, but will I have some radical notions in it? And so I am doing a lot of about the way we conceive of age. For example, we use the word teenager. Well, that, that means that we take the word 10. That mathematical concept. And we impose it on people [...] I think that the person of 18 and the person of 13 are not the same concept. [...] You know, I think there's tremendous difference there. And I think we push the 13 year old ahead too fast and we hold 18 year old back. (laughter).

Student (23:39):

Labels really affect.

Roscoe Balch (23:41):

I think they do affect. Yeah, I think they do. And I think this one has had a very unfortunate effect(?).

Student (23:49):

Did [...] Could you use like Marist and the campus and everything you've experienced in and out here as like a laboratory for seeing this?

Roscoe Balch (23:56):

Yeah. You can say this, you can say this. If we go back to the Fifties, they seem interested in things like politics. You go through this Sixties and they are interested in the community, they're

## **Roscoe Balch**

interested in everything under the sun, how the college has run that. You know. I mean they found the football team as a club activity. It was great. I mean, no sport we have here now has the kind of impact on the student body that football team had. Because everybody got together and they made it, they created it. And it was important. But it wasn't the only thing they were doing. We didn't become a football school. Right. They were founding the children's theater and they were putting out a great circle (?) in a superb annual.

Student ([24:41](#)):

It's very evident that Marist holds academics for athletics.

Roscoe Balch ([24:46](#)):

Well, I hope so. (laughter) [...].

Student ([24:47](#)):

Which [...] some schools do stray from that now. It's a problem with that.

Roscoe Balch ([24:52](#)):

I was done. Did you see about this kid at Ohio State? He came down to the athletic department and he has his registration. The coach takes and tears it up and hands him when he's in recreational manage (?)

Student ([25:07](#)):

And when they graduate, [...]

Roscoe Balch ([25:08](#)):

I mean, nothing, that's nothing. [...] That's nothing. But this kid quit [...] He quit.

Student ([25:14](#)):

He realized. That's good though.

Roscoe Balch ([25:16](#)):

He quit the team and, and you know [...] but they didn't investigate. The university didn't fire the head coach. They didn't fire the coach who was in charge of academics. They didn't fire the athletic director. They didn't fire the president.

Student ([25:32](#)):

Well [...] It's probably undetected. A lot of the majority of the time [...].

Roscoe Balch ([25:37](#)):

[...] undetected. This kid had the guts to stand up and do it. I think he should be Heisman (?) but [...].

Student ([25:44](#)):

## Roscoe Balch

Come to Marist (laughter). Since you're leaving us now, [...] where would you like to see Marist go in the future? What do you think? [...].

Roscoe Balch ([25:54](#)):

I would like to see Marist [...] is that a firm cap on numbers and move back into [...] reinforce its liberal direction more strongly. I don't think that's what's gonna happen. But that's what I would like to see happen.

Student ([26:12](#)):

What do you think the cap should be? The ceiling should be for students? The enrollment? [...] Should it remain a small [...].

Roscoe Balch ([26:20](#)):

Yeah, I think we should remain small. [...] I think we should develop the facilities to handle the students we have. And now you know, that means finding money. But I think that the college, if it chose this direction, there's money that it could get. I think that in a sense, we followed another chain of money, which I have no objection being in computers or I mean [...] I do object to the existence of, with all due respect to this thing [...] the existence anywhere in this country on any campus of an undergraduate school of communications. My theory is that this is something that you can be exposed to only after somebody has a degree in something [...] The communications are just too darn important. They turned over to people who have not had an education. You know, and I find an awful lot of the reporting that [...] comes out in the papers indicates this. The reporter is reporting something. He doesn't have any idea what's going. What this thing's all about. So he looks for a spectacular statement, somebody attacking somebody.

Student ([27:32](#)):

Sensational story. [...]

Roscoe Balch ([27:34](#)):

Yeah. And [...]

Student ([27:34](#)):

And wild though.

Roscoe Balch ([27:35](#)):

And you don't get any serious consideration. And you don't get honest reporting or intelligent reporting.

Student ([27:41](#)):

Sure. Do you think that the core covers enough background for the student communications?

Roscoe Balch ([27:47](#)):

No.

## **Roscoe Balch**

Student ([27:47](#)):

It doesn't?

Roscoe Balch ([27:48](#)):

No [...] I think the core [...] I think the core is valuable. You know, I think core is valuable for everybody. But for communications, I think that's a field [inaudible] It's too important to to be treated like Business Administration.

Student ([28:06](#)):

Two trite questions for you. We'll wrap it up pretty soon. What is the most positive aspect that you've experienced at Marist?

Roscoe Balch ([28:17](#)):

I would have to say much but I would have [...] because that's been there always. That's been there always. The early days that Marist grad a place were fantastically exciting. The [...] of the college [...].

Roscoe Balch ([28:31](#)):

The build up. Yeah.

Roscoe Balch ([28:32](#)):

The build-up there. And the Sixties. The Sixties were extraordinary. Because we had all kinds of exciting things on here with the students. And [...]

Roscoe Balch ([28:44](#)):

What was the most negative experience? In the seventies? With the community? [...]

Roscoe Balch ([28:47](#)):

Yeah, I would say so. Yeah. I would say so. [...] I found it. I found it every so often, it seems to me that there's been a strong move against the liberal arts. And that is always a negative experience in my view. But then we are [...] we have to fight for this [...] we have to fight for ourselves.

Student ([29:05](#)):

Anyhow. It's well, okay. You have any more questions? No? Thank you very much.

Roscoe Balch ([29:11](#)):

(Thank you) very much.

Roscoe Balch ([29:15](#)):

And we'll show you the tape when.