Natalie Zemon Davis: A Remembrance

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Journal of Women's History, Volume 36, Number 1, Spring 2024, pp. 10-13 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2024.a920126

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The origins of Natalie Zemon Davis's life as a pioneer of women's and gender history—as in historical scholarship *tout court*—sit like a legend in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was then that a multi-paged mimeographed bibliography of books and other sources on the history of European women circulated among those wanting to study and research that field. The problem with pursuing this topic, we had been told, was that there were no primary sources, no scholarship, and no histories of such women. It was barren terrain, and scholars repeated age-old warnings of the futility of such inquiries to women who wanted to study or do scholarship themselves. Jill Ker Conway and Natalie Zemon Davis, then at the University of Toronto, gave the lie to this assertion when they produced this bibliography.

The warnings and the aspirations came during America's "little wars" in Vietnam and elsewhere, along with an upswing in civil rights and feminist activism. During the 1960s, scholarship on US women began to take flight, yielding works by Gerda Lerner and Ann Firor Scott who asked, for example, how the biographer of the celebrated men in the Otis family could have entirely omitted Mercy Otis Warren. Almost miraculously, the Conway-Davis bibliography—the fruit of intense labor—offered inspiration to would-be scholars of European women. The bibliography was to many of us—not to exaggerate, as I was there, but to repeat—magical.

Davis described her own trajectory between her graduate work in the 1950s and the several intellectual apotheoses shaping her intellectual life over the decades. In graduate school, she had to read Christine de Pisan's *Book of the City of Ladies*, a Renaissance defense of womankind. This experience, she claimed, was "a delight" as she had never read anything by a woman either in her undergraduate or graduate courses until then. She had also been assigned the work of the medieval Muslim philosopher and traveler Ibn Khaldun—another first. Taking up the enthusiasm for social history and Marxist scholarship at the time, she turned to studying women printers in Lyon—not women of the court—in the early modern period. However, her twin forays into the works of Christine and Khaldun, along with the rise of subaltern studies and attention to enslaved peoples, sparked—perhaps ignited is more accurate—her determination not to be a Europeanist but to study the world's peoples.

However, by that time, Davis had become renowned for her attention to the details of everyday life and close-up comparisons of individuals. Global history, in contrast, studied "big" and world-shaking phenomena. Davis's strategy became bringing individuals, often from different cultures and circumstances, onto the world

Journal of Women's History, Vol. 36 No. 1, 10–13.

stage. From there, she charted the intermingling of languages, lifeways, skills, beliefs, values, and know-how across cultures. From the same stage, she would bring together and interrogate a new historical "intimacy"—global, but up-close, individual, social, and gendered. Virtually the entire corpus of Davis's scholarship took shape around these categories.

For all that this might sound sociological, readers of Davis's work know that it is lively, full of odd, sober, self-fashioned, wily, erudite, and altogether unique characters. In Davis's telling, these figures—humble, seemingly ordinary, or grand—emerge full of historical import and rich in life experiences from which we can profitably draw images of the past. Can one put down a Davis book from boredom? Davis's work was transformative on many levels, including her determination to focus on characters interacting with one another and having conversations, thus her simultaneous emphasis on the flow of languages among disparate peoples and the creation of multilingual dictionaries in many histories structured around cross-cultural actors.

Davis developed her own intimate style of relating to those in the academic world and even outside it. In her presentations, she spoke relevantly to any audience, including local historical figures. Davis seemed to craft a new essay for every occasion, many of which remain pivotal. Refusing to resort to her specialty or older writings, on receiving an honorary degree from the University of Rochester in 1986, her talk concerned not early modern history but the determined effort of Susan B. Anthony to allow women's admission to the university (Anthony surrendered all her savings because the trustees demanded that she fund the expense of making the university co-ed). All of it was a new topic for her. On receiving the Holberg prize in the Humanities from Norway, she reflected on how she came to extend her focus on individuals to those on the global stage. She would study what they thought about, their capacities, desires, and views of the world—that would constitute her "decentering" of the narrative despite the individual focus. Alongside a cast of transnational diviners, this included bringing in local Norwegian luminaries from the past. She reprised the performance in 2014, introducing individuals from entirely different slave ships and local Surinamese people as they traded words and goods with Norwegian settlers in the Dutch colony of Suriname.

Without drawing much attention to this task, Natalie Zemon Davis worked in a variety of ways to challenge mainstream historians' questioning of women's legitimacy as historical actors. Virtually from the beginning, the query "where's the power?" rang out to delegitimize women's place in history books. The claim was that history was essentially about charting power and that women had never wielded power. Historians of women scrambled to contest that charge, locating women's power in, for example, unions, food protests, charitable activities, and the many forms of activism—abolitionism, civil rights, suffrage, socialism and communism, and reform politics. Women had been queens regnant, behind-the-scenes influencers, assassins, resisters, warriors, and on and on. Davis's early essay, "Women on Top," was thrilling as were her studies of women printers. Her more challenging interpretation of power resulted from

the microhistories in *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth Century Lives* (1995). Yes, some women seemed to wield power directly and were not simply marginal: they regularly carried out rule-based diplomatic negotiations among Southeast Asian states and among those of Africa to enact and compose the shared world. And she continued to provide a multicultural cast of individuals, none of whom she portrayed as more advanced than others in their interactions. However, the margins, she wrote, were where women fortified themselves, building capacities and skills, finding opportunities, and fashioning fluid identities. In their close interactions and often beyond systems of constraint, "power flowed through them" as their way of being in the world. In this microcosmic historical setting composed of individuals interacting, power operated differently from an obvious and less sophisticated profile.

Davis returned to her more restricted, sometimes exclusively European cast of characters rarely, but when she did, the result was moving. Her Presidential Address to the American Historical Association, "History's Two Bodies" (1988), considers several remarkable examples of scholarly dyads. She compares the reactions of David Hume and Catherine Macaulay to the publication of their respective histories of England in the eighteenth century. She found that although eager for success and acclaim in varying degrees, the two scholars articulated some mutual respect and calm, again to varying degrees, giving each other a wide berth. In the early twentieth century, British medievalist Eileen Power and French medievalist Marc Bloch also blazed new trails that, in their own ways, developed and deepened each other's work. Bitterness was in no measure their guiding star. In another essay, Davis underscored men's and women's collaboration in history when she described the mentoring done by senior male scholars in Europe for women entering or attempting to enter the profession from the late nineteenth century onward. It too used affirming conversation, letters, sponsorships, and collaborative scholarship. When Davis herself searched for an appropriate image to represent such parallel endeavors as those undertaken by Power and Bloch, she considered Paul Klee's Angelus Novus as an almost adequate visualization of the historical mindset, following Walter Benjamin's formative analysis of the image in "On the Concept of History" (1942). But she concluded, "the New Angel is not quite right; it is too unchanging, too sober." Further, she cited Marc Bloch's letter to his son that showed hesitation and uncertainty as a disciplinary constant: "I'm working especially on my book (Historian's Craft seems to me a better title than Apology for History. What do you think?). I have my usual doubts, it doesn't seem without interest. When will it ever be finished? When will it ever be able to appear?" ("History's Two Bodies," 27, 29). This brought Davis to her own sense of depicting historians:

> My image of History would have at least two bodies in it, at least two persons talking, arguing, always listening to the other as they gestured at their books; and it would be a film, not a still picture, so that you could see that sometimes they wept, sometimes they were astonished, sometimes they were knowing, and sometimes they laughed with delight. ("History's Two Bodies," 29)

Was Davis's vision of life always so sanguine, so free from stress and the historian's angst? Let's see. Her 2013 essay in the *New York Review of Books* described a difficult "turning point"—the topic assigned that year to National Humanities Medal recipients, of which she was one. The difficult moment came in 1952, soon after Davis had completed an exhilarating six months in French archives researching her dissertation. Because of the activism of her husband, Chandler Davis, then well into his career as a renowned mathematician, the FBI seized the couple's passports (eventually imprisoning Chandler). She could not travel, blocking further research on her dissertation. What to do? Davis turned to the course of history itself in the difficult, even lethal, Reformation years. The essay "How the FBI Turned Me on to Rare Books" describes the historical persona she developed for herself of necessity: "I have wanted to be a historian of hope." She found it in the fraught lives of her subjects whose resourcefulness led her to try out Rare Book rooms: "We can take heart from the fact that no matter how dire the situation, some will find means to resist, some will find means to cope, and some will remember and tell stories about what happened." That hope has infused Davis's unprecedented career of scholarship, storytelling, service, mentorship, courage, and friendship.

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