

**David J. Herlihy**  
**President**  
**American Historical**  
**Association**  
**1990**



## David J. Herlihy

David J. Herlihy hides a keen intellect, consuming devotion to his work and an astonishingly prolific career behind an unassuming manner and a twinkling Irish eye.

Dave was born in San Francisco in 1930, the youngest of four children. In retrospect, there was something rather adventurous about the Herlihy household from the start: Dave's father Maurice, a native of County Kerry, had eloped with his American-born sweetheart Irene O'Connor and married her in Los Gatos, California.

Dave, always highly motivated in academic matters and eager to compete over matters cerebral, joined his high-school debating team and, while a sophomore, went to a nearby girls' school for a match. His opponent, Patricia McGahey bested him on that occasion, though he would always maintain that she won only because the debate had been held in *her* school. Either way, the loss could not have hurt too deeply: Pat would eventually invite Dave to her senior prom, and he would eventually ask her to marry him.

Dave already showed great promise during his undergraduate days, completing his college degree at the University of San Francisco with straight A's in only 3 years, an achievement remarkable enough to be written up in the local press by the well-known San

Francisco columnist, Herb Caen. While at San Francisco, Dave came under the influence of a remarkable teacher, the Jesuit Father John B. McGroin. It was because of the inspiration of this historian that Dave, though still an undergraduate, wrote his first article, a study of Father Peter Yorke and the American Protective Association which appeared in the Proceedings of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia.

Dave took his Master's degree at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. in 1953, working with Msgr. Martin J. Higgins in Byzantine history, but a fellowship lured him to Yale. There, Dave came under the influence of the English administrative historian, William Dunham, and especially of the enthusiastic and witty Robert S. Lopez, who convinced the young Californian that there were documentary "gold mines" awaiting the historian of the Italian Middle Ages. Dave abandoned his plans to study Russian history and the "rest has been (Italian) history." A Fullbright in 1954-55 allowed Dave and Pat (and their first son Maurice) to spend a year in Pisa, and Dave received his doctorate in 1956 for a thesis which would eventually become his first book: *Pisa in the Early Renaissance* (Yale University Press, 1958; Italian editions, 1973 and 1990).

Dave progressed steadily through the teaching ranks, first at Bryn Mawr (1955 to 1964), and then at Wisconsin (1964-72) where he eventually held the William H. Allen Professorship. Meanwhile he

received a number of impressive research awards. There were two years in Florence, one on a Guggenheim (1961-62) and one on an ACLS (1966-67).\* Dave's study of *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia. A Social History of an Italian Town* appeared in 1967 (Italian: 1972). And these were also the years when the Herlihy family reached full size: there were sons Christopher, David, Felix and Gregory, and finally daughter Irene Florence (a memento of the year's leave in badly flooded Florence). The Wisconsin period was capped in 1972-73 by a stay at the Stanford Institute for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences.

The next stage of Dave's career was at Harvard where he served as professor, and then as Henry Charles Lea Professor, from 1973 through 1986. Dave's lecture courses on medieval economic history were always heavily attended. He had a way of making difficult material clear and fresh. Equally important, his delivery was strikingly different from that of many of his colleagues: he would laugh a little at his own jokes almost mocking himself, and students knew that he would always be available for questions and receptive to divergent opinions. Dave's personal warmth and genuine kindness came to the fore

\* In 1961-62 Patricia Herlihy also held a Fulbright grant and completed her research for a study of the Russian-Italian grain trade in the archives of Florence and Livorno, a study which later evolved into Pat's *Odessa: A History 1794-1914* which appeared through the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.

especially in his role of co-Master (together with his wife, Pat) of Mather House, one of the residential houses at Harvard, from 1976 to 1986. During their years there, the Herlihs left an indelible mark on undergraduate life at Harvard and at Mather House in particular, guiding the students through difficult years of racial integration and changing values, and turning a cement fortress reminiscent of a medieval fortress into a living community. Typical was their purchase of an enormous set of banners of all the Renaissance quarters of Siena by which they transformed an unusually forbidding House dining hall into an inviting eating space.

It was during the Harvard years that Dave's book, coauthored with Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, on *Les Toscans et leurs familles* appeared (1978; English edition, 1985; Italian, 1989). This monumental study, begun in 1966 and funded by a series of French and American grants, involved bringing the skills of a complete team of scholars from a number of disciplines to bear upon the Florentine *catasto* (cadastral survey) of 1427-30. The study went beyond mere analysis of large amounts of quantitative data (though that effort, and the computerized methods the researchers employed were important enough developments for medieval historians). The study aimed at opening up the entirety of the Tuscan social fabric and thus providing a context and background for the many brilliant portraits of specific individuals,

families and classes which had accumulated over the years.

While the detailed analysis of the Florentine *catasto* proceeded, Dave also published a number of other important studies and these were collected in two volumes: *The Social History of Italy and Western Europe* (1978) and *Cities and Societies in Medieval Italy* (1980). At the same time, he began a broad study of the medieval family, in part to determine how characteristic the Tuscany family picture really was. This effort culminated in *Medieval Households* (1985), a book which surveyed an enormous variety of sources to examine concepts, roles and structures within the family from Roman times to the late medieval period.

In 1986, Dave and Pat left Harvard for Brown where Dave was honored with the Barnaby and Mary Critchfield Keeney Professorship, a post he still holds today. He has continued to publish actively. His analysis of *Opera muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* appeared in 1990, and he is currently at work on his study of the imagery of the Seven Ages of Man for a book tentatively entitled *Seven Ages. Portraits of Medieval Living*. His major project for the 90s is an analysis of the Florentine Ruling Class from 1328 through 1530.

In summarizing his own career to date, Dave sees his work as flowing naturally from Robert Lopez's interest in collective behavior and economic history.

But Dave has injected a very important emphasis of his own into the study of the masses. His aim, he says, was simply "to recover the ordinary people" of the past. His motive was more than intellectual curiosity; Dave perceived it as a quintessentially humane endeavor to investigate how people lived, and what were their life experiences. There are many of us who are grateful to Dave for allowing us access to his particular vision of the past.

Dave's many students bear further witness to his influence as a historian. Mention might be made in particular of Daniel Callahan, Sam Cline Cohen, Jr., Stephen Epstein, Frank Hartigan, Maureen Mazzaoui, Bernard Reilly, and Steven Weinberger.

In 1990, Dave was honored with the Galileo Galilei award, one of the most prestigious prizes that Italy has to offer, for his distinguished contribution to Italian culture through his studies of economic history. The award gave him and Pat the chance to revisit Pisa and to see once more the people who had warmly welcomed the two young American researchers some 35 years before. It was a fitting tribute to a lifetime of scholarship, and it is fitting that David Herlihy has been honored by his American colleagues by being elected to the presidency of the American Historical Association.

Respectfully submitted,  
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University of Maryland College Park



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