

NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS
PRESIDENT

AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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HISTORIAN OF HOPE

Natalie Zemon Davis, president of the American Historical Association, has had a stunning career in a wide variety of professional and scholarly areas. Born in Detroit, Michigan in 1928 Davis received her BA from Smith College in 1949, her MA from Radcliffe College in 1950 and her PhD in history from the University of Michigan in 1959. Her doctoral dissertation, Strikes and Salvation in Lyon: A Study in the Problem of Religion and Social Class in the Reformation marks the beginning of her abiding interests in religion, the organization of society, and conflict. She began her teaching career at Brown University, has taught at the University of Toronto and the University of California, Berkeley, and is presently the Henry Charles Lea Professor of History at Princeton University.

Professor Davis has received many honorary degrees as well as special awards and honors, including the University of California, Berkeley Teaching Award in 1974, the Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Academiques in 1976, and the Princeton University Howard B. Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities in 1983. Her fellowships have included a humanities resident fellowship at the University of California, Berkeley in 1974-75, an NEH fellowship in 1981-82, and a Guggenheim fellowship in 1985-86. She was

was also elected as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1979. She has served her profession quite fully in many capacities, including her tenure as president of the Society for French Historical Studies in 1976-77, as an AHA Council member from 1972-75, and as the founder and then co-editor of the journal Renaissance and Reformation from 1964-68.

Natalie Zemon Davis' scholarship has been pathbreaking. Her work on the social and cultural history of early modern France has inspired a whole generation of scholars to look beyond the confines of their particular speciality and discipline in order to give "voice" to those of the "lower orders" of society. In her collection of essays Society and Culture in Early Modern France (1975) Davis writes about "peasants and even more about artisans and the menu peuple of the cities. The very rich, the powerful, the learned, and the priestly are described primarily in relation to the lives of the 'modest'--as they reacted to them, conflicted with them, or shared their activities and beliefs." Social experience, festive organization in relation to the socialization of youth, the meaning of sex-role reversal in rite and festivity, the interaction between literate and oral culture are all featured in this important work.

Her later studies, including The Return of Martin Guerre (1983), employ innovative strategies to unearth the historical and narrative contexts of identity and meaning in early modern France. Indeed, The Return of Martin Guerre is unforgettable. One feels one has lived through this amazing story of false identity and dramatic reunion.

This work was an extension and elaboration of the historical consulting work she did for the film based upon the story of Martin Guerre. Thus, Davis' talents allow her to work in various media as well as within many disciplines.

Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France is Davis' newest contribution to her ongoing cross-disciplinary explorations of social experience and state-building. It is a literary analysis of narrative strategies and strategies for verisimilitude in a centrally important set of archival documents concerning the stories people told to the king to get pardoned. She relates these tales to how the state enhances its sovereignty via the mechanism of pardoning.

Her forthcoming work on gifts and reciprocity in sixteenth-century France explores a process that has been much considered by anthropologists. This work will suggest how gifts and markets interact and how quarrels about gifts are central issues in state-building.

The question of gender also informs much of her work of the last two decades. In this area, Davis has contributed to the ever-increasing importance of the study of sex roles as a means of promoting a "rethinking of some of the central issues faced by historians--power, social structure, property, symbols, and periodization." Her "City Women and Religious Change" helped to bring to the forefront of historical scholarship new ways of thinking about women's past, ways which made women active rather than passive

figures on the historical stage. Davis demonstrates how women had choices within the structures of society and compared the "transformational" potential of their choices. In her article "Women on Top," Davis explores the transformational potential of female symbols of disorder for women as well as men. Her emphasis on choices and alternatives emphasizes her desire to be a "historian of hope" as she phrases it.

As her 1974 Teaching Award suggests, Natalie Davis is an outstanding teacher who has always been able to have great rapport with her students. She takes a personal interest in her students as apprentice scholars and as human beings. In her lectures she makes the past come alive in ways one never thought possible. Her seminars are often exciting--a tribute to the way she is able to inspire and challenge her students by posing compelling historical questions and making use of various methodologies from the discipline of history as well as from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism.

As a fellow scholar Davis exhibits the same generosity and sense of optimism that she shows with her students--sharing ideas, giving her support to professors in rural areas of the country, answering queries, and networking. Davis also has lectured and worked throughout the United States, Western Europe, and in parts of Eastern Europe and India.

It is impossible to detail all of Professor Davis' contributions to her students, her colleagues, and the field of history. To

encompass them more fully one might turn to the four issues which she felt as president of the American Historical Association were important to consider: "quality history for the grand public through journals, film and TV; encouraging new methods in research and scholarly writing; increasing participation of women, minorities, part-time teachers and nonacademics in our community; cooperation with historians of other countries and support for their professional liberties." These issues indicate Davis' devotion and commitment to the quality of life as well as to the quality of historical scholarship.

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