
H-France Review Vol. 11 (February 2011), No. 35

Natalie Zemon Davis, *A Passion for History: Conversations with Denis Crouzet*. Edited by Michael Wolfe. Translated by Michael Wolfe and Natalie Zemon Davis. Kirksville, Miss.: Truman State University Press, 2010. xiii + 218 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-931112-97-0.

Review by Sara Beam, University of Victoria.

Natalie Zemon Davis has profoundly influenced early modern French history and the discipline of history as a whole. Marked last year by her selection for the Norwegian **Holberg International Memorial Prize** celebrating outstanding scholarly work in the humanities, Davis's continuing influence is attested to by the many conferences and special volumes organized in her honor during the last two decades. These have celebrated her remarkable book on Martin Guerre, her seminal article on the rites of violence during the French Wars of Religion, and her work on the history of women to name just a few. [1] These multiple engagements testify to the impact that Davis's work has had on the methodology, the subject matter and the social engagement of our profession.

The volume under review turns the tables and reveals the influences that drove Davis to adopt history as a vocation and continues to inspire her to delve into its possibilities for scholarly and political engagement. *A Passion for History* is based on a series of 2003 conversations between Davis and fellow historian Denis Crouzet, first published in France the following year. It has now been published in a slightly amplified form in English as an elegant paperback that deserves to grace the shelves of both researchers and undergraduates interested in the practice of history. Although Davis has told some of these stories before, the comprehensive self-reflection and the wide-ranging, dynamic exchange between Davis and Crouzet set this volume apart. Together they discuss the difficult moments when theory and the messy reality of history do not converge, whether we can ever truly understand the violence of the 1572 Saint Bartholomew's Day massacres, why women's history seems to have gone in different directions in France and in North America, and the elusive brilliance of Michel de Montaigne among other topics.

Denis Crouzet, a preeminent French historian best known for his exploration of religious cultures during the Wars of Religion, is a probing interlocutor. Infinitely curious, Crouzet draws Davis out when he sees an important link between her life and work, but is also provocative and challenging. On several occasions, Crouzet pushes Davis to defend her more recent decisions to focus on the history/biography of exceptional individuals and wonders aloud whether she projects her own optimism, resilience and zest for life onto the historical personalities that she studies. Davis seems to enjoy this probing, setting aside in most cases Crouzet's psychoanalytical and poststructural interpretations to explore the political and methodological issues that continue to give forward momentum to her research. Throughout, Davis is remarkably candid, happy to explore the links between the life choices she made as a Jewish woman scholar in mid-twentieth century America and the diverse historical subjects, from sixteenth-century French journeymen printers to a Muslim captive in Renaissance Italy, that call to her.

Throughout her career, Davis has exhibited a passion for social justice. Her work has focused on lives less known, stories left untold because they seemed marginal to history's traditional focus on grand political narratives. In *A Passion for History*, Davis describes how this commitment to writing history

about people who cannot speak for themselves developed from her secular Jewish identity. Raised in the American Midwest during the Second World War, Davis was profoundly affected by the horrors of the Holocaust as well as by her simultaneous place of privilege and marginality as an American girl in a relatively affluent community in which Jews were a minority. The silence at home that surrounded dangerous topics, such as the fate of relatives in Europe and communism, awakened a curiosity that Davis explored once she left home for university. Left-leaning politics would sharpen Davis's commitment to writing history that expands our awareness of the agency of historical actors without obvious access to power. Yet, simultaneously, her desire to understand how and why the horrors of the past took place has encouraged her to write with compassion about religious violence and about rhetorical justifications for homicide.

In her conversations with Crouzet, Davis reveals much about her methodological influences and perspectives, from her engagement with anthropology to her conviction that the historian must always be "open...to the voices of the past" (p. 22). Unlike Crouzet who celebrates history as a discursive practice that reveals the play of intellectual inquiry, Davis is resolutely committed to the possibility of identifying a relatively stable and reliable historical methodology. She rejects the notion that proof is infinitely malleable while openly acknowledging that imagination and creativity have an important role in historical writing. Her fascination with the discoveries found in the archives and the pleasure that she takes in historical documents, which she considers "gifts from people of the past" (p. 175), awaken the wonder of historical research rather than its discursive limitations. Davis defends her commitment to creating a dialogue not only with the subjects of her research but also with her readers by offering her own interpretations in language that allows for engagement and evaluation. It is, she explains, her preferred method for confronting the incomplete and constructed nature of historical writing. She is equally emphatic in arguing for the contingent nature of her historical subjects' lives, refusing to deny them the potential for dignity and personal choice. This commitment to the open-ended nature of the past, of history as "a source of both hope and despair" (p. 67), fuels her criticism of the rigid conceptions of historical episteme articulated by scholars as varied as Lucian Febvre, Michel Foucault and Thomas Kuehn because they do not readily integrate the possibility of cultural fissures and resistance from within.

Davis has also been a pioneer, a wife and a mother who pursued her research against the odds in an era when there were no role models. Here she speaks openly about the commitment to an equal marriage that she shares with her husband Chandler, the relatively late start to her own teaching/publishing career and the challenges she faced breaking into the academic establishment of the 1960s. She describes fighting for university daycare for students with young children and, once achieving a faculty position first at Toronto, then at Berkeley and finally at Princeton, taking this lived experience into the classroom by helping to initiate some of the first North American history courses on sex and gender. Her sensitivity to the complex intersection between women's public and private lives guided her biographical studies of early modern women and informs an ongoing research project on slavery. Overall, Davis's contributions to the historical profession have helped to transform it into an increasingly diverse scholarly pursuit, both in terms of the people who do the research and the subjects they explore.

Throughout these interviews, Davis's eagerness for new knowledge, generosity of spirit and optimism shine through. We see a seasoned scholar who speaks with admiration about the work of recently-minted historians and is still struck by the tactile stimulation of working with documents in the archives. Her current project on the lives of slave families in eighteenth-century Suriname is a source of genuine exploration for her, and she links it in the book's epilogue with Obama's election as the first black American president of the United States. This capacity to react to events in today's world and to channel that energy, passion and sense of justice into her research brings to all of her writings a vibrancy and a wide relevance. This book is alive with Davis's joy and her sense of privilege at being a

part of a community of historians who, together, as she sees it, can bring to light the hidden lives of the past and captivate our audiences with their “possibilities” (p. 67).

NOTES

[1] June 2010 “Doing De-centered History: The Global in the Local,” Ludwig Holberg Memorial Fund, Bergen, Norway; November 2008 “A Gift of History: A Symposium in Honor of Natalie Zemon Davis’s 80th Birthday,” Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. For video clips of all the presentations, see <http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=earlymod&pageid=icb.page195382>, cited November 23, 2010; June 2008 “Religion and Violence in Early Modern France: The Work of Natalie Zemon Davis,” Warwick University, Stratford-upon-Avon, United Kingdom; March 2005 “Symposium in Honor of Natalie Zemon Davis,” Central European University, Budapest, Hungary; November 1990 “Dialogues with the Past: A Cultural History. Symposium in Honor of Natalie Zemon Davis,” Boston University, Boston, Mass. Publications developed from these events include Barbara B. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse, eds., *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); “Martin Guerre, retour sur une histoire célèbre,” *Annales du Midi* no. 264 (2008); Special Supplement of *Past and Present: Ritual and Violence: Natalie Zemon Davis and Early Modern France*, ed. Graeme Murdock, Penny Roberts, and Andrew Spicer (Oxford, forthcoming).

Sara Beam
University of Victoria
sbeam@uvic.ca

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172