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Necrology: Daniel Aaron (1912–2016)

STEPHEN WHITFIELD

Present at the creation of American Studies, Daniel Aaron belongs on the short list of the academy's most learned and admired custodians of the nation's culture, for which President Obama awarded him the National Humanities Medal in 2011. That would have been close to seven decades after the inauguration of Aaron's teaching career. A president of the American Studies Association (ASA), he held the rank of Victor S. Thomas Professor of English and American Literature at Harvard, where his service included chairing its Committee on American Civilization. The lengthy span of Aaron's life in the profession, punctuated by many other honors (including the ASA's Bode-Pearson Prize), has few, if any, counterparts in duration and distinction. Such was the arc of his career and concerns that, as this necrology is intended to suggest, the field of American Studies will not see his like again.

Daniel Aaron enjoyed a singular career in American Studies, having been present at the creation in the 1930s, and having contributed to the field with exemplary insightfulness and integrity. His life spanned a century of intellectual engagement. Aaron's scholarship tended to gravitate toward the intersection of literature and politics, whether during and after the Civil War or the Progressive Era, or under the impact of the Great Depression. In establishing and presiding over the Library of America, Aaron leaves a legacy far beyond his own books and essays, and long after memories of his classes and his gift for friendship will have faded.

Born in Chicago, raised in Los Angeles, educated in Ann Arbor and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Aaron taught primarily in that commonwealth, first at Smith College for a little more than three decades (1939–71), and then for two more decades at Harvard (1971–83). Thanks to frequent and extended stints abroad, especially in Poland, Finland and England, he came to know much of the world as well as his own native grounds. Soon after earning his doctorate in American civilization in 1943, Aaron was already formulating a case for the distinctive culture that the United States had forged. It represented for him more than a footnote to the Western heritage, more than a transatlantic outpost drawing upon the patrimony of Europe. The influence

Department of American Studies, Brandeis University. Email: Swhitfie@brandeis.edu.

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of a superpower, he quickly came to believe, was certainly inescapable; the United States also needed to be appreciated as a cohesive cultural unit. By 1949, the third year of the Salzburg Seminars in American Studies, Aaron was already participating in that famous international project, which was dedicated to realizing the interdisciplinary vision of the graduate program in American Civilization at Harvard, which he had entered thirteen years earlier.[1]

He became the first person within it to take his general or doctoral examinations. The field itself is commonly understood to have been created *ex nihilo* with A. Whitney Griswold's doctoral dissertation at Yale in 1933 on the American dream of success. But Yale had no program at the time specifically devised for the study of American culture, and instead Harvard invented the field by blending history (in the person of Perry Miller) and literature (in the person of F. O. Matthiessen). They joined Howard Mumford Jones, whose polyglot erudition had earned him an honorary degree from Harvard as early as 1936, the very year that President James B. Conant green-lighted the founding of the graduate program in American Civilization.

It bore the imprint of sons of the Middle Border. Miller, the authority on Puritanism, had been born in Illinois, and covered the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Matthiessen, the author of *American Renaissance* (1941) as well as works on T. S. Eliot and on Theodore Dreiser, had been raised in Illinois, and covered the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Harvard historians like Frederick Jackson Turner, from Wisconsin, and Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., from Ohio, had earlier established the pattern. (Even the *Journal of American History* had once been named the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*.) Fitting right in, the Chicagoan Daniel Aaron studied American literature primarily with Jones, who had been born in Michigan. To him Aaron dedicated his own second book, *Writers on the Left* (1961).[2] And when the *Kenyon Review* gave him an opportunity to review *American Renaissance* the year after its appearance, Aaron judged the book a vindication of the American Civilization program itself, because Matthiessen had demonstrated how "a sympathetic awareness of the American experience is indispensable for the elucidation of our literary culture."[3]

Aaron had not been the first graduate student to earn a doctorate in Harvard's program, however. That distinction belongs to Henry Nash Smith, six years his senior, in 1940. With *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), Smith would exemplify the injection of critical sophistication in exploring the sorts of text (like dime novels) that had

[1] Daniel Aaron, *The Americanist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 92, 117.
[2] Susanne Klingenstein, *Enlarging America: The Cultural Work of Jewish Literary Scholars, 1930–1990* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 97–98; Aaron, 46–47, 60.
[3] Quoted in Klingenstein, 104; Daniel Aaron, *American Notes: Selected Essays* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), xvi.

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circulated beneath the interest of figures like Miller and Matthiessen. Aaron himself tended to operate on high terrain as well; his first published essay (1935) was devoted to Melville, for instance. But the struggle to reckon with the status of American literature was still so recent that, when Aaron joined the faculty at Smith College, he discovered that one of his colleagues had taught, in the final decade of the nineteenth century, among the very first courses ever offered on American literature – when Melville himself might still have been alive. (In 1891, when he died in obscurity, the three-sentence obituary in the *New York Times* identified him as the author of *Mobie Dick*.)[4]

While teaching at Smith, Aaron's professional promise was quickly recognized; by 1947 he had already won a Guggenheim fellowship. Endowed with an open curiosity and a keen intelligence, he showed a flair for elucidating texts – not only literary but also political – within their historical contexts, and thus enhanced the academic effort to fathom the national experience. He wanted attention to be paid to writers who have testified to the quandaries of American identity and who elevated the standards of artistic excellence in the republic of letters. Upon reaching the age of 100, Aaron recalled with exhilaration what American Studies brandished at its birth. "Everything was your province," which meant that provinciality was proscribed. "Everything was germane."[5]

His first book explored the reform tradition. But *Men of Good Hope* (1951) was written in the afterglow of progressivism, and was published in a decade when the once-born faith in reason and uplift was being subjected to withering, if friendly, fire from Columbia University professors like Lionel Trilling and Richard Hofstadter and from former socialists like Walter Lippmann and Reinhold Niebuhr. *Men of Good Hope* profiled seven figures who were – almost inevitably – white men. Such homogeneity would now raise eyebrows; and far more recent studies of progressivism at the turn of the century, like Jonathan Hansen's *The Lost Promise of Patriotism* (2003), include figures who are now regarded as seminal, like Jane Addams and W. E. B. Du Bois. Oddly enough two of Aaron's progressives don't quite merit the label, because Thorstein Veblen and Brooks Adams showed little aptitude for optimism when they meditated on our species and our social arrangements. But Veblen and Adams joined the *Men of Good Hope*, the author explained, because of their hostility to the triumph of the plutocracy.[6]

He himself came to political maturity in the 1930s, when the totalitarian regimes of left and right made the choices excruciatingly difficult. When

[4] Klingenstein, 102; "Obituary," *New York Times*, 29 Sept. 1891.
[5] Quoted in Matt Schudel, "Daniel Aaron, Scholar Who Helped Develop Academic Field of American Studies, Dies at 103," *Washington Post*, 2 May 2016.
[6] Aaron, *The Americanist*, 122, 191.

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Madrid fell to the Falange, the vestigial good hopes of the dawn of the century were conclusively dashed. No defeat had ever appeared so dispiriting from afar. Aaron's memoir, *The Americanist* (2007), reports that no political predicament affected him more deeply than the travail of the Spanish Civil War, when evil (Guernica, for instance) so dauntingly imperiled goodness, even as the defense of the republic was contaminated by the lethal Stalinist drive to crush the Trotskyists, the anarchists and the Catalan separatists. *Writers on the Left* recounts the fate of the sour marriage between the socially conscious literati of the 1930s and Communism – which by 1961 was already relegated, as a political or cultural force, to the scrapheap of American history. Aaron managed to detach himself from the passions that made the 1930s so contentious. His book is free of any impulse to settle scores. Nor does he rely unduly on interviewees whose need to perpetuate the correctness of their own politics might have distorted his own interpretation. (The key source for *Writers on the Left* was Joseph Freeman, the onetime editor of *New Masses*. His 1936 memoir, *An American Testament*, remains one of the best accounts of how the lassitude of the 1920s shifted into the embattled social vision of the following decade.) Conscientious research made Aaron into an aficionado of the peculiar invective of the comrades against their class enemies, as well as against the Party's own renegades and heretics. His own favorite esoteric insult, he once told me, was "neo-Kantian banditism [*sic*]" – whatever that means.

The vocation of the politically committed writer left Aaron uneasy, because something "insidious" was bound to linger around "the compulsion to subordinate the problems of … craft and deeply felt intellectual concerns to political policy."[7] That tension he revealed through a prodigious examination of private correspondence, personal interviews, memoirs, polemical pamphlets, newsletters and magazines and works of fiction.[8] Immensely readable, *Writers on the Left* places Communists and fellow travelers within an indigenous radical tradition that the author traces back to the moment when the men of good hope pitted commonwealth against wealth. Of course he was bound to make mistakes that the oscillations of taste would later correct. For example, Richard Wright is mentioned only twice, in passing; and his work is left unexamined – such as *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), written when he was a Communist. Henry Roth was also a Communist when *Call It Sleep* (1934) appeared, but that novel is ignored entirely. Having neglected a genre like drama, Aaron could not have anticipated how much research

[7] Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 392–93.

[8] Alan M. Wald, "Introduction to the Morningside Books Edition," in Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), xiii–xxxi, xxiii, xxvi.

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would be required to verify or challenge the anti-Fascist claims of Lillian Hellman. Mostly skipping another genre like reportage, *Writers on the Left* needs to be complemented with the persuasive case that William Stott makes in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973) that the devastation of the Great Depression compelled writers and photographers to satisfy the unprecedented hunger for facts.

Writers on the Left is undoubtedly the volume of Aaron's that has most often nicked subsequent scholarship. The book helped inspire dissertations (though not Tom Wolfe's, on the League of American Writers, completed in the American Studies Program at Yale in 1957). In 1992, when Columbia University Press reprinted *Writers on the Left* (exactly eight decades after its author's birth), Alan M. Wald provided a very generous introduction, hailing the 460-page book as "*the* pivotal text establishing U. S. 'literary radicalism' as a distinctive field in academic as well as popular scholarship." Wald could not identify "another book seriously rivaling Aaron's achievement in overall scope, accuracy and insight into the phenomenon of writers in the United States drawn to the far left – first to left-wing socialism, then to the Communist movement – during the first five decades of this century." The departmental homes of both scholars have been in English rather than in History. But Wald, a Marxist, is not exactly an epigone. Given his remarkable knowledge of the leftist literature of the 1930s, however, no one's judgment is more authoritative in claiming that *Writers on the Left* is "foundational."[9]

But Aaron's best book was still to come. W. H. Auden was once asked how a minor poet might be recognized. His answer was apodictic: "If you take two poems by one man and read them, and you can't tell which was written first, that is a minor poet."[10] In other words, ripeness is all – and that is one way of assessing *The Unwritten War* (1973). Its title derives from Walt Whitman's prediction: "The real war will never get in the books." A finalist for the National Book Award, *The Unwritten War* blends exquisite literary sensitivity with a grim understanding of the gravest political and moral crisis in the history of the republic, and Aaron himself considered it his best book.[11]

The risk that he took in writing it was formidable, because comparisons were certain to be drawn with *Patriotic Gore* (1962), the last great book of Edmund Wilson's. Aaron, it seems needless to say, deeply admired Wilson, whom he hailed for taking "seriously the obligation to do something for American culture, to improve it and bring credit to it."[12] Yet Aaron

[9] Wald, xiii–xiv, xv.

[10] Quoted in "People," *Time*, 28 Dec. 1970, 22.

[11] Quoted in Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), xiv; Mark Feeney e-mail to author, 23 April 2009 (hard copy in possession of author).

[12] Aaron, *American Notes*, 190.

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nevertheless dared to go *mano a mano* against the magisterial volume that might be presumed to have exhausted synoptic scholarly attention to the literature of the Civil War.

The key difference between *Patriotic Gore* and *The Unwritten War* lies in the thesis that Aaron expounded, which was the pertinence of black slavery to the ordeal of the Union. Wilson's introduction saw the Civil War as barely distinguishable from the ravages that mark the animal kingdom, and therefore ignored the idealism that motivated many of those who fought for the North. Such soldiers proclaimed, in effect, that just as He died to make men holy, they might die to make men free. Perhaps the historical difference between 1962 and 1973 is sufficient to explain why Aaron came to view the shadow of white racism as inescapable, as inextricably tied to the horrific carnage of sectional conflict. Fortunately, Wilson's references to sea slugs do not determine the subsequent critical commentary in *Patriotic Gore*. Yet it deals with only one black writer, Charlotte Forten; nor does the name of Frederick Douglass even appear in the text, though a five-volume edition of his writings had recently appeared.[13]

Yet for Aaron, race could hardly be peripheral, even when absent from the books; and *The Unwritten War* marked the upward trajectory of his career, in which each full-scale work proved to be richer than the previous one, illuminating even more problematic facets of the nation's culture than did his earlier books. His own liberalism tended to be steady as well as seamless, with no eccentricities or peculiarities; nor were his textual interpretations marred by political stances that were too obviously pronounced. On the contrary, Aaron declared, "it is likely that reading American literature and history most affected my social vision, as I gathered facts and figures on the origins of the great American fortunes, on racial bigotry, on labor struggles and political corruption, and on the wasteful exploitation of national resources." His attitude toward the experiment in self-government was moderate rather than radical. Yet he once proposed that, so long as Americans celebrate "a day of national thanksgiving," they should also commemorate "a day of national humiliation, in which we review those events in our history that we're not so proud of and that should be part of the education of our students, to cut that kind of complacency or chauvinism, tribalism, that is present all over the world today."[14]

[13] David Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 165–67.

[14] Aaron, *Americanist*, 195; Peter Costa, "A Conversation with Daniel Aaron," *Harvard Gazette*, 21 Feb. 1992, 5–7, 6.

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Resistance to a simplistic patriotism did not detract from the desire to promote the nation's literary patrimony. When Edmund Wilson realized that he could not find works long out of print that might satisfy his omnivorous reading habits, and that not even secondhand bookstores could help, he proposed what came to be the Library of America. Its model was France's *Editions de la Pléaide* – elegantly printed works that are moderately priced, in uniform volumes.[15] In 1979, seven years after Wilson's death, Aaron succeeded in realizing his friend's ambitious vision, and became the founder and president of the Library of America. The canonical author whose work inaugurated the Library of America had inspired Aaron's first article: Melville. In making accessible "books that have entered into the American imagination," Aaron became pivotal to a project that now numbers close to 280 volumes. The sheer magnitude of this enterprise ensured that the highest standards of belles-lettres could not be the sole criterion for inclusion. For example, Yale's John Hollander edited a two-volume anthology of poets who lived in the nineteenth century, when the genre was cherished and commonplace, and when it exerted an impact upon ordinary readers that cannot be replicated. That sort of ubiquity made Hollander's 1993 work what Aaron called "a sort of social document." True to the spirit of American Studies, the Library of America has been capacious enough to embrace Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, as well as journalism and reportage.[16] Had Aaron done nothing else besides the Library of America, his place in the evolution of American Studies would be secure.

Of course it helped to have known Wilson well – but it also helped to have been extremely well connected in any case. Aaron attracted talent. With Hofstadter he coauthored a successful textbook on American history, and with Alfred Kazin he coedited a selection of Emerson's writings. *The Unwritten War* came at the invitation of Allan Nevins, who had planned an entire series of books to address the ways that the Civil War affected American culture and society. Sacvan Bercovitch, Aaron's Harvard colleague, called him "the wisest person I know, and the most humane." Bercovitch, who predeceased him by two years, did not exaggerate in claiming in 1993 that no "living scholar [did more] for the dissemination of American literature, both here and abroad, from his work at the Library of America … to his extraordinary service, personal and professional, across half a century, on behalf of American Studies throughout the world."[17]

[15] Costa, 5; Aaron, *The Americanist*, 136.

[16] Schudel, "Daniel Aaron"; Sam Roberts, "Daniel Aaron, Critic and Historian Who Pioneered American Studies, Dies at 103," *New York Times*, 4 May 2016, A19; Costa, 5.

[17] Aaron, *The Americanist*, 192; Sacvan Bercovitch, "1993 Bode-Pearson Prize Awarded to Daniel Aaron," *American Studies Association Newsletter*, 17 (June 1994), 6.

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Aaron also proved to be a splendid essayist, as revealed in a collection of biographically inflected pieces of critical appreciation, *American Notes* (1994). It demonstrates a special sensitivity to those writers and artists whom a bourgeois and commercial civilization had marginalized. They sometimes occupied the port side of the political spectrum; and though Aaron wrote with authority and insight about Randolph Bourne and Langston Hughes, for instance, such figures lacked the mordant subtlety that elicited his most probing criticism. That is reserved for the Adams brothers, who detested the eclipse of their own class at the hands of the financiers, and for last Puritans like Richard Henry Dana and Francis Parkman, who sought on the high seas or in primeval forests an imaginative alternative to the banking houses of Boston's State Street. Aaron also admired George Santayana for the austere disinterest with which he contemplated human folly and meanness. The outsiders and "isolatos," the rebels and dissenters from the mainstream and the marketplace invoked Aaron's deepest powers of empathic elucidation. His taste and temperament, rather than any particular method or school, drew him to profile such figures.

It should be noted, however, that he avoided any serious encounter with the popular arts, which have become a staple of American Studies, abroad as well as at home. Aaron did not object to such interests; he simply did not tap into them, or reflect much upon the meaning of such global influence. (During a recent visit to Paris, I noticed a local teenager wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the following slogan: Liberté, Egalité, Beyoncé.) Nor did Aaron deal with the technical philosophy that became dominant in the academy. Instead his flair for making virtually everything the province of American Studies took an odd turn, when he edited the diary of Arthur Crew Inman (1895–63). A southern-born recluse who lived in Boston, Inman recorded for forty-five years his thoughts and impressions, consisting of somewhere between 15 million and 17 million words, before committing suicide. Aaron spent more than six years paring down Inman's diary into two volumes and 1,600 pages. Published in 1985, that condensation sliced and diced more than nine-tenths of the original diary.[18] A one-volume abridgment appeared in 1996.

Inman, a misanthrope, bore no resemblance to his diary's intrepid editor, who exhibited an exceptional gift for friendship, across generations. Aaron was a beloved teacher. At Harvard, for example, he supervised the senior thesis of Walter Isaacson, later the president of the Aspen Institute. "He wore his eminence very lightly," Isaacson said of "Professor Aaron … [who]

[18] Aaron, *Americanist*, 190.

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delighted in all things around him."[19] Even after retiring from Harvard in 1983, he continued to bike to and from his office virtually daily, to meet with students, colleagues and friends.

His kindness was legendary. For instance, in 1972 an Israeli friend of mine, Hayim Goldgraber, had been accepted into the graduate program at Smith College aimed at international students, a program Aaron had nurtured. But by the time Goldgraber arrived in Northampton, Aaron had moved on to Harvard. He could easily have informed the recent Hebrew University graduate that "life is unfair" – the motto of John F. Kennedy, who had studied American literature with Aaron. Instead Goldgraber was invited to attend the interdisciplinary seminar that Aaron was beginning to offer at Harvard. During the 1974–75 academic year, attorney Shael Herman served as a fellow in law and humanities at the Harvard Law School, and attended Aaron's classes on canonical American novels. Herman was struck by the absence of "bombast," by Aaron's accessibility. He was "just very thoughtful and always interested in having a conversation, not a monologue."[20] Serious about the life of the mind, Aaron did not take himself seriously; he was self-effacing. His autobiography mentions his wife and three sons only in passing, though previous books of his are dedicated to them. *The Americanist* was slow to appear, I have been informed, because of the modesty of the author. The personal narrative of a life so absent in egotism may simply have been too novel a concept for publishers to grasp.

The significance of Aaron's career partly lies in the ascent of Jews like himself to the most prestigious precincts of the academy. Earlier in the century their struggle to achieve recognition based on merit alone must have appeared Sisyphean. Take, as one example, the year that Aaron began the graduate program in American Civilization. In 1936 Yale University announced that it was accepting a particular bequest for scholarships on the condition that they be awarded only to the "sons of white Christian parents of Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian or Teutonic descent." To the eminent historian Samuel Eliot Morison, this ancestral stipulation made sense. Yale's decision to honor blood and not only brains, as he explained to his Harvard colleague, law professor Felix Frankfurter, represented a compensatory policy. "We Yankees whose fathers reclaimed this country from the wilderness," Morison asserted (without mentioning that indigenous people had lived in those forests too), "are being hustled and shoved from every side, politically, mainly by the

[19] Quoted in Mark Feeney, "Daniel Aaron, 103; was Harvard Professor," *Boston Globe*, 2 May 2016.

[20] Hayim Goldgraber, letter to author, 16 July 2016, and Shael Herman, letter to author, 15 Aug. 1996 (copies in possession of author).

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Irish; economically, by the Jews. Let us at least save *some* places at mother Yale for *our* boys!"[21] Eight years later, Harvard's most illustrious alumnus also yielded to resentful ethnocentrism. Franklin D. Roosevelt privately remarked that the United States "is a Protestant country, and the Catholics and the Jews are here under sufferance."[22]

Yet the President officially promoted a notion of citizenship marked by adherence to the nation's democratic ideals rather than by the narrowness of lineage. Roosevelt thus facilitated the success, over the course of the succeeding decades, of those Americans who were not sons of white Christian parents of Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian or Teutonic descent. Among them was Daniel Aaron, whose middle name, Baruch, means "blessed" in Hebrew. He was indeed blessed, as Bercovitch noted, with "a life full of years, good friends, grateful students, and honors richly deserved."[23] That adjective also applies to those who read him, who studied with him, who learned from him, and who knew him.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

The author holds the Max Richter Chair in American Cvilization at Brandeis University. His books include *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (1988), *The Culture of the Cold War* (1996) and *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (1999). He wishes to acknowledge, with much appreciation, the help of Donald Altschiller and Daniel Horowitz.

[21] Quoted in Leonard Baker, *Brandeis and Frankfurter: A Dual Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 348–49.

[22] Quoted in Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.

[23] Bercovitch, 6.

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