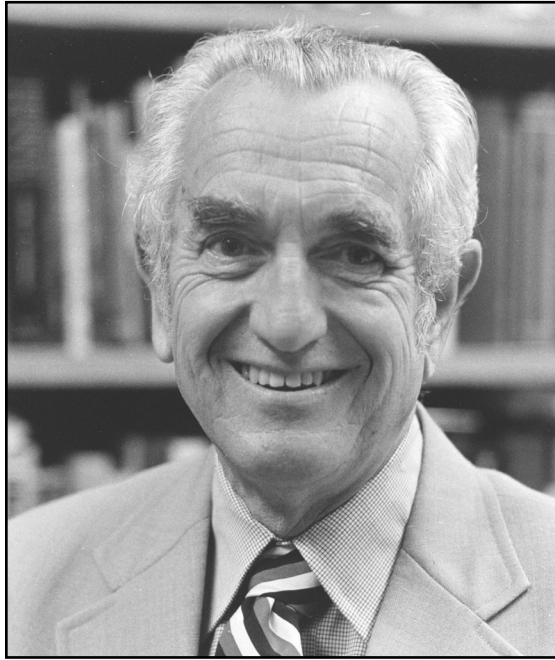

CARL N. DEGLER



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CARL NEUMANN DEGLER, the Margaret Byrne Professor of American History Emeritus at Stanford, died at his home on the university campus on 27 December 2014. A true generalist in his approach to the American past, Degler followed his interests and curiosity wherever they carried him. He possessed a restless intellect and an abiding eagerness to move on to the next topic on his scholarly agenda. Halfway through writing a book, he once told me, he was already looking forward to starting his next project. Degler had a deep belief that historians should aim for relevance—that they should naturally respond to the shifting interests and concerns that events and the passage of time inevitably produced in the larger culture. More than that, he helped to shape a new view of the American historical profession that would itself be reflective of the society it studied. Among the many achievements in which he took personal pride—including the presidency of three major scholarly associations, membership in the American Philosophical Society, and the receipt of the Pulitzer Prize in History in 1971—one of the most important was his delight in being one of the two male founding members of the National Organization of Women.

Degler was born in Newark, New Jersey, on 6 February 1921. His father was a fireman, and Degler was honest about recalling the prejudices of his youth. As he observed with striking directness in the opening passage of his 1991 book *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Life*, “I came into a world that soon made me a racist and a sexist.” But as an undergraduate at Upsala College, he acquired the keen interest in historical study that enabled him to think critically about the origin of his youthful attitudes. That interest was sharpened by his wartime experience. Following his graduation from Upsala in 1942, Degler served as a meteorologist in the United States Army Air Force in India. His wartime observations of Indian society encouraged him to begin considering the status of women more generally, while laying a rough foundation for the interest in comparative studies that he would later develop as a scholar.

After his discharge from the army, Degler began his graduate studies in American history at Columbia University. His nominal mentor there was Richard B. Morris, the colonial-era historian, and his initial interest lay in the study of working class political behavior before the Civil War. But his relationship with Morris was not close, and his original research topic did not really capture his historical imagination. Degler became the rare historian who ignored the conventional professional wisdom of publishing one’s dissertation first. After holding

down an array of teaching jobs in New York City, Degler earned his doctorate in 1952 and landed a position at Vassar College.

The decade and a half that Degler spent at Vassar had a profound impact on his development. Drawing on his undergraduate teaching, both there and during his adjunct experience in New York City, Degler completed his first book, *Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America* (1959). Far from being the analytical monograph that one normally expects of a beginning scholar, *Out of Our Past* presented a highly interpretive survey of American social and political history. It was a text grounded in Degler's critical and problem-driven reading of the American past and, more specifically, in his experience as a Vassar instructor.

In its own way, *Out of Our Past* may have reflected the broad interpretive ambitions of Richard Hofstadter, the most influential younger member of the Columbia history department in the postwar years. Hofstadter aimed his works at scholars, students, and the educated public alike, and that ambition also appealed to Degler. History, in his view, was something to be argued about, openly and directly. Like Hofstadter, Degler never set out to become a historian's historian in terms of the depth of his archival research or the production of learned monographs. Nor did he ever attempt to write a master narrative. Degler liked to address analytical and historiographical questions right in the middle of his writing.

Degler's scholarly interests were also evolving during his Vassar years. Coming upon Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1899 book, *Women and Economics*, in the college library prompted Degler to write a provocative and deeply sympathetic essay for *American Quarterly* examining Gilman's acute analysis of women's place in modern society. Similarly, at the moment when Americans were coming to grips with the integrationist implications of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Degler wrote a seminal essay for the new journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History* on the question of "Slavery and the Genesis of American Race Prejudice." In this essay, Degler rejected the position earlier advanced by Oscar Handlin, who argued that a racial animus against African Americans arose only after they were gradually reduced to the condition of chattel slaves. Degler cited a number of legal cases and statutes that indicated instead that distinct notions of racial difference were present in the North American colonies from the outset.

These dual concerns with racial attitudes and women's status marked the leading edge of Degler's thinking in the 1960s and 1970s. But there were other developing interests as well. The history of the South was

one, the idea of doing comparative history another. In 1968, Degler moved from Vassar to Stanford, where he joined David Potter and Don Fehrenbacher in forming a remarkable triumvirate with shared interests in the history of race relations, the South, and the Civil War. After Potter's early death in 1971, Degler became the dominant figure in the American history group at Stanford, joining the distinguished European historians Gordon Craig and Gordon Wright in elevating the Stanford history department into the top tier of historical scholarship. Potter's discussion of the concept of national character in his influential book *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (1954) enhanced Degler's interest in comparative history (for how could anyone possibly discuss such a topic if they did not have some analytical framework for comparison?).

The first fruit of this interest was the book Degler completed shortly after joining the Stanford faculty, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (1971). Here Degler challenged the belief that differences in racial attitudes best explained the ways in which African slaves and their free descendants were treated in the two societies. Writing as an outsider, Degler rejected the self-serving myths of racial harmony that had long dominated Brazilian scholarship and culture. Lines of racial identity were drawn far more sharply in North America than Brazil, he agreed, but that difference owed much more to the essential functions that mixed-race offspring ("the mulatto escape-hatch") played in the Brazilian economy than the prior constraints of racial attitudes. *Neither White nor Black* amply illustrated the problem-driven approach to thinking historically that always characterized Degler's thinking.

Neither White nor Black was the winner of three major prizes: the Bancroft, the Beveridge, and most noteworthy, the Pulitzer Prize in American history. Degler's prominence within the profession was similarly established by his election to the presidencies of three major societies: the Organization of American Historians (1979–1980), and the American Historical Association and the Southern Historical Association (both in 1986). This trifecta of scholarly presidencies was an apt reflection of the array of his interests.

After *Neither White nor Black*, Degler published two works on Southern history—*The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century* (1974) and *Place over Time: The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness* (1977). But the project he was most anxious to pursue was his broad survey of the place of women in American society. It was a revealing mark of this commitment that his inaugural lecture as

the Harmsworth Professor of American History at Oxford in 1973 asked “Is There a History of Women?” Degler’s decided answer to this question was yes, and the evidence for this conviction informed his influential 1980 book, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*. Here Degler combined a perceptive attention to the affective character of family life, including evidence of women’s attitudes toward sexuality, with a persisting awareness of the structural factors that shaped and often impeded their desire for personal autonomy. A similar concern with the multiple and complex factors shaping human behavior informed his next project, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (1991), which analyzed the relevance of sociobiological arguments to historical explanation. Degler was equally intrigued by the recession of racial categories from American thinking and its potential revival, in certain respects, with the emergence of sociobiology.

Throughout his life, Degler was a true enthusiast for asking new questions about the past. It was the rare conversation with Degler that did not involve an update on the most interesting article or book he had just been reading, or a corresponding query about one’s own field. When I last saw him a few weeks before his death, he was bubbling over with excitement about a recent essay in the *Journal of American History* discussing Native American maritime piracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

As a teacher and colleague, he was also an inspiration to his students and fellow scholars. Thinking of his own success with *Out of Our Past*, he often advised his colleagues to “write what you teach.” When a Vassar student who had failed to secure a date one weekend bumped into him on a deserted campus, he told her not to be discouraged; she had come to Vassar to study with him, he told her, and they could take advantage of that opportunity right then. She became a lifetime friend. Notwithstanding his prominence within the historical profession, he happily avoided the burdens of serving as department chair. Yet his good sense and judgment, as well as his insistence in appointment and promotion meetings on subjecting every work to serious critical analysis, set the standard for its deliberations. He was particularly supportive of female colleagues and graduate students and was a model of sensible advice to all who sought and wisely took his counsel.

Carl Degler’s personal life was blessed by two wonderful marriages, first to Catherine Grady Degler, who became a popular and esteemed English teacher at Castilleja School in Palo Alto, and then to his widow,

Therese Baker Degler. He is also survived by his and Catherine's two children, Paul and Suzanne, and their families.

Elected 1985

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