

At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on October 3, 2017, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Daniel Aaron was placed upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

DANIEL AARON

Born: August 4, 1912

Died: April 30, 2016

Serene, puckish, generous, and welcoming, Daniel Aaron, the Victor S. Thomas Professor of English and American Literature, *Emeritus*, but known as Dan to one and all, presided over, in the thirty-three years after his retirement, the longest running open-door seminar and Socratic conversation in his English Department office. Newer friends one third his age and long-term colleagues and companions from more than a dozen countries were met with intellectual curiosity, warm good-natured interest, and a lively sense of play and relish. For the forty previous years of his active professional life, Dan was a central figure and defining international presence in the post-war world of American Studies as he and the discipline he championed explained to a newly attentive world the richness, diversity, and deep historical problems of American experience as seen in its culture, public life, and thought.

Born in Chicago on August 4, 1912, Daniel Baruch Aaron was one of five siblings. Both parents, who were Russian-Jewish immigrants, would die before he reached the age of ten. The five orphaned children were sent to live with relatives in Los Angeles or Chicago, where Dan was supervised with a light guiding hand by his uncle, Charles Aaron, his father's law partner.

After high school in Chicago, Dan entered the University of Michigan at 17, thriving as a dreamer and writer of ambitious but fantastic epics. In 1933 he arrived at Harvard to begin work on his Ph.D. in English but soon switched to the newly founded program in the History of American Civilization, now known as American Studies. This broad, interdisciplinary program united history, economics, literary and popular writing, and the strong critique of American society that the years of the Depression produced. The blend of celebration and critique would shape the next eighty years of his active life. So close an identification did he feel with this discipline that his memoir, published when he was ninety-four, in 2007, bore the title *The Americanist*.

In 1939 Dan accepted a teaching position at Smith College where he would remain for more than thirty years until his return to Harvard to lead the Program in American Civilization in 1972. In the years at Northampton, Dan and his wife, the former Janet Summers, who died in 2003, raised their three sons while participating in local and state politics.

In these years at Smith Dan Aaron wrote three key books and established himself as

an international voice of the American Studies movement through his lectures and teaching in Europe, South America, and, somewhat later, Japan and China. In the first of his trilogy of American intellectual history, *Men of Good Hope* (1951), he defined what he later called “my civic religion.” In studies of eight visionaries, Emerson to Veblen, he drew out the ethical and utopian side of Progressive political thought in America to show how a “gradualist, pragmatic, [and] tolerant” line of thought could be “vital and deeply radical.”

A decade later he published what was to be his most acclaimed book, the work that became his passport to the international communities on both sides of the Cold War, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961). A retrospective book that appeared after both the steep decline of the American Communist Party and of the congressional forces that pursued it in the 1950s, *Writers on the Left* looked back at a generation of writers who had flirted with or submitted to communist polemics and, in some cases, party discipline. For Dan Aaron this had also been a bohemian and experimental band of writers whose polemics interested him less than the diverse fates and disillusioned aftermaths that he could explore in the late 1950s from “the other side” of this failed engagement with a utopian dream.

Twelve years later, in *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (1973), he looked with a far more critical eye at the failure of America’s leading writers to face, absorb, represent, and engage with the single most essential episode of American history, the war over slavery.

In these same years, between 1949 and 1975, Daniel Aaron became the public face of American Studies abroad, first as a teacher at the post-war Salzburg Seminar in American Studies in Austria, and later as a visiting professor in Finland, Poland, and England with additional speaking tours sponsored by the United States Information Agency.

A new phase of Dan’s career began in the 1970s with his participation in the visionary proposal of Edmund Wilson that led to the Library of America. As founding president (1979–1985), Dan, along with his collaborators, created one of the major non-profit publishing enterprises of his generation. The goal was to provide, in uniform, high-quality, modestly priced volumes for students, general readers, scholars, and libraries around the world, the national self-portrait of American experience in the writings of poets, novelists, humorists, journalists, and historians, as well as slave narrations, sermons, debates on the Constitution, and cultural writings on baseball and modern art. Dan’s energy, diplomacy, and democratic taste produced what is now a national treasure of three hundred volumes, with more than ten million copies in print.

In these same decades he published more than 200 essays, reviews, prefaces, and

introductions to new editions of major works. Some twenty of these essays were collected in 1994 in his modestly titled *American Notes: Selected Essays*.

Daniel Aaron was president of the American Studies Association (1971–1973) and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2011 he received a National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama.

In his final decades he came every morning to his office to work through the many volumes of his journals to produce a final publication, *Commonplace Book: 1934–2012* (2015).

Daniel Aaron died on April 30, 2016, at the age of 103, survived by his three sons, Jonathan, James, and Paul, and his granddaughter, Katherine.

Respectfully submitted,

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Noah Feldman
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