

Linda Kay Davidson (1946-2017)

The death of Linda Kay Davidson on October 24, 2017 marked the end of a vigorous first phase for pilgrimage studies in the United States. With her early research mentor – and later husband and stellar co-author, David Gitlitz – they pioneered a nascent field as much on the ground as dogged travelers as in the archives. Davidson and Gitlitz went on to produce or help incubate a generation of critical studies on the Camino de Santiago and then on world pilgrimage. The growing cadre of North American scholars in this field is still building on the shrewd and generous start this team inaugurated.

David Gitlitz, a fresh PhD from Harvard in 1968, began his career as an intrepid young professor of Spanish Golden Age literature. He boldly, almost rashly by today's protective standards, invited some of his American college students, including Linda Davidson, on a 1974 summer exploratory trek in Spain. Their goal



Linda Kay Davidson in azalea garden, 2008.

was to retrace the ancient French Route of St. James starting in the Pyrenees and ending in Santiago de Compostela. They were an unlikely band of innocents.

Tall and bearded David was flanked by graduate student Linda and six more undergraduate women with varying degrees of fluency in Spanish. Members of the troupe took turns driving ahead in a modest van with camping gear and their mobile reference library, to each night's target village to cast about for accommodations and make provisions to feed the hungry hikers. When a village had no restaurant, supplies were purchased for a local housewife who agreed to set a dinner table for eight on a less than a day's notice. Backpacks as student accessories were newly in fashion, ill designed for long cross-country hauls. Footwear was idiosyncratic. Canteens were army surplus. In a period before yellow arrows or established shelters, the walkers sometimes slept on wooden church pews or in hay barns.



The first American study abroad group on the Camino in 1974, led by Prof. David Gitlitz (in hat) and graduate student Linda Davidson (full figure standing in front of him). All photos courtesy of David Gitlitz.

Gitlitz had written ahead to the priests and school principals, and deftly obtained provincial topographic maps prepared by the Spanish armed forces. He plotted his group's daily march by coordinating them with the waystations and shrine sites named in the "Pilgrim's Guide" of the Latin *Codex Calixtinus* and later vernacular works of medieval Castilian literature. When these first-generation modern pilgrims arrived in Santiago and presented themselves at the cathedral, they overcame the canons' understandable skepticism by displaying 500 miles worth of random travel souvenirs and still fresh blisters. The era of Padre Elías Valiña, reliable Camino signage, groomed trails and the Plan Xacobeo still lay far in the future.¹

Four more walking study trips on the Camino de Santiago, in 1979, 1987, 1993 and 1996, followed over the ensuing

1 David Gitlitz notes that "in 1974 the organist at Roncesvalles, Padre Javier, thought we'd get lost in the woods between Roncesvalles and Pamplona, so he went with us, and we painted trail marks along the whole route, in green, which I suspect are the first modern trail marks [for a walkable Camino de Santiago], and the precursors of the yellow arrows." He recalls also sleeping on "convent floors and private homes: the Cirauquí family in Torres del Río took us in because local legend was that ... their ancestors used to take in pilgrims". On arrival at the Hostal de los Reyes Católicos in Santiago, "the hotel doorman was astounded when our sweaty group appeared at the door and, as pilgrims, demanded three days' food and lodging. He demurred. I said, 'check your charter'. He disappeared, reappeared a half hour later, and met the demand." (Private communication).

years. David and Linda always supplied the intellectual leadership and tireless high spirits. Although she earned her PhD with a dissertation on the *Libro de buen amor*, Linda veered into pilgrimage studies and together with David created a critical template for “travel for transformation” that eventually spanned shrine sites around the globe.

Linda was a natural collaborator, drawing energy and supplying insight and droll detachment that she contributed to the work of close friend (and 1979 fellow pilgrim) Maryjane Dunn. While David Gitlitz enjoyed prestigious academic and administrative appointments – as professor, dean of arts and sciences, and provost – in a series of American universities, Linda and Maryjane sustained their creative studies despite heavy schedules largely limited to teaching Spanish language.

For fifteen years, Maryjane Dunn and Linda Davidson curated a popular bulletin for *Friends of the Road to Santiago* (July 25, 1989 – Fall, 2004), the first such newsletter in this country. They included samples of their own and others’ original research until the emergence of a robust national association, American Pilgrims on the Camino.² Davidson opted from that point to focus on fresh explorations of modern avatars of pilgrimage, especially the Camino de Santiago and sacred journeys played out on a planetary stage. With husband David, her sights were set on the integration of history, literature and social practice in many societies.

In the mid-1990s Linda and Maryjane Dunn issued a series of large scale professional tools on the Camino de Santiago, always with an eye toward its wider context in European Middle Ages and world culture. *Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages: a research guide* (1993) embraced a wide swath of Christian pilgrimage including the better-known treks to the Holy Land and Rome. They examined issues of terminology, universality, non-Christian practices and taxonomies of Christian travel into the 20th century. The over 1000 entries are each assessed with a fair critical judgment that holds up after a quarter century.

In 1994 the same authors produced *The Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography* with almost 3000 entries on the Camino de Santiago alone, again with judicious evaluations of each. It is arguably still the most valuable guide to international research up to that date and gives special attention to Spanish publications even in ephemeral series and magazines ignored outside of Iberia.

Dunn and Davidson invited other scholars to bring their own best work up to date in *The Pilgrimage to Compostela in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays* (1996, paper-

2 Maryjane Dunn inaugurated the “Friends of the Road to Santiago” newsletter in July 1989 with financial support of the Program for Cultural Cooperation Between Spain’s Ministry of Culture and United States’ Universities. Its goal was to bring together scholars from all fields with interest in the Camino by publicizing research and upcoming conferences. It also channeled news from the Archicofradía Universal del Apóstol Santiago and European associations, most notably the Confraternity of Saint James in Great Britain. Dunn edited the newsletter alone from 1989-1993 when Davidson joined her and eventually assumed full editorship in 1998. The Friends association also provided American pilgrims with credentials starting in 1995.

back edition in 2000). Some of the entries are still landmark contributions, like those of Alberto Ferreiro (“The Cult of Saints and Divine Patronage in *Gallaecia* before Santiago”), Colin Smith (“The Geography and History of Iberia in the *Liber Sancti Jacobi*”), and Connie L Scarborough (“The Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*”).

With Thomas F. Coffey as contributing Latinist and medieval historian, Davidson and Dunn published *The miracles of Saint James: translations from the “Liber sancti Jacobi”* and launched the first of their meticulously annotated translations from the *Codex Calixtinus*. The arc of these translation projects has extended past Davidson’s death into *The Miracles and Translatio of Saint James. Books Two and Three of the “Liber Sancti Jacobi”* (2019). Dunn and Coffey translated the miracles anew collating the Santiago and Salamanca manuscripts, expanded the project to the *translatio* account (how the body of St. James came to rest in Galicia) in Book Three of the *Codex Calixtinus*, and dedicated the new volume to Linda’s memory.

Four ambitious monographs from the Davidson and Gitlitz team appeared in rapid succession. The most novel was *A Drizzle of Honey. The Lives and Recipes of Spain’s Secret Jews*. A bold combination of documentation culled from Inquisition archives, a broad appreciation of the cultural history of Spanish Jews, and a serviceable cookbook with recovered recipes, the authors showed how accusations against “New Christians” of backsliding into former Jewish customs were often linked to home cooking. Preferences for honey, eggplant and chickpeas – and strict avoidance of non-kosher meats and all pork products – were taken as betraying hallmarks of crypto-Judaism. Recreating recipes only alluded to in the Inquisition trial records, the authors studiously reconstituted those dishes in their modern kitchen and composed do-able versions for scholars and heritage chefs alike. This became the first book to ever win both the “National Jewish Book Award for Ashkenazi and Sephardic Culture” and “The International Association of Culinary Professionals’ Jane Grigson Award for Distinguished Scholarship”.

An even greater triumph appeared as *Pilgrimage: from the Ganges to Graceland: an Encyclopedia*. This weighty two-volume set examined the fully global landscape of pilgrimage and gave witness to the assiduous foreign travel the authors undertook to accomplish their survey. Most of the entries examined traditional religious sites like Jerusalem, Mecca and Rome, and shrines sacred to Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and others. There are also novel and perceptive articles on more popular places of veneration and memory, like the Gallipoli battlefield from World War I, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, and Auschwitz. They embraced the now iconic value of Stonewall Inn in New York, the site of the historic 1969 “gay riots”, the first vehement uprising to push back against arbitrary police arrests and intimidation. Gitlitz and Davidson added keenly written short essays on a variety of intriguing topics, such as “Activities in Preparation for Pilgrimage”, “Blessings” and “Sacred Space”. Their commentaries on “Crusades as Pilgrimage” and the “*Divine Comedy*” are excellent introductions to the basics.

Returning to the history and modern experience of the ancient route to the shrine of St. James in Compostela, Gitlitz and Davidson scoured northern Spain, this time by car. The happy result was the superb *Pilgrimage Road to Santiago: The Complete Cultural Handbook*. For Americans and many other English speakers, this became the “bible” consulted before leaving home and even carried in their backpacks while trekking on the Camino Aragonés and Camino Francés. Ingeniously designed and organized, the *Handbook* is full of guidance on extant monuments, ancient military exploits, church affairs and Spanish cultural history. The authors laced in notes on Roman road construction, traditional farming techniques, legends and epics, building styles for homes, castles and monasteries, river and forest ecology, the age of Muslim domination, the dismal Franco dictatorship, and substantial entries on art history. There are also insightful reminiscences of their own walks along the Camino in years past. More than personal reflections, these annotations preserve something of the newly resurgent and still pristine Camino from 50 years ago and before the *masificación* of the twenty-first century. One reviewer praised the book because the authors “have successfully avoided both the conventions of the romantic traveler and the narcissism of the modern adventurer” (Kent 218) and as “one of the few books on the road to Santiago written over the past 500 years that would be as credible and interesting to the Renaissance pilgrim as to today’s traveler” (Kent 217).

The Pilgrimage Road to Santiago: The Complete Cultural Handbook is the most engagingly written, well informed, and comprehensive traveler’s guide to the Camino de Santiago that I know of in any language.

The final joint project for Gitlitz and Davidson stemmed from David Gitlitz’s Jewish heritage and knowledge of Semitic languages and culture. *Pilgrimage and the Jews* is an innovative study of Hebrew scripture and cultic practice from its biblical roots (Abraham’s sojourn into the desert to sacrifice Isaac, Israel’s wandering in the Sinai desert) through the Diaspora experience, and into modern practices like the veneration of the tombs of revered rabbis. In a similar way the State of Israel has crafted a modern identity as a pilgrimage destination for secular Jews living in the Diaspora. Possibly the most innovated chapters deal with “Roots Pilgrimage”, “Shrine Wars” and “The Shrines of the Holocaust” whose camps and memorials become magnets for pilgrimage, and “The process of deciding what meaning or meaning are to be conveyed ... is likely to be very contentious, as each participant brings to the table individual experiences and expectations, political agendas, and dreams.” (160-61) Visitors to Dachau, Auschwitz or Ravensbrück are invited into a scripted experience, choreographed for effect and to forestall mere gawking tourism. Linda and David wrote that

The 6,000,000 Jews who perished in the Shoah are gone. At best, each of the vanished Jews or all of them in the aggregate live in the minds of the people who remember them. Human beings yearn for perma-

nence, and memory, we believe, will hold back for a time the tide of oblivion. So we express our yearning through acts of memorialization: rites, ceremonies, venerating relics, erecting monuments, and going on pilgrimages of memory. The places of the Shoah are memory sites. They require visiting, touching. It is not enough to read about them, to study them. Their physical presence and our physical presence at them slash through the gauze of abstraction with which we tend to drape historical events. They are liminal sites, places where for a time we leave our ordinary lives behind and cross over to the land of our collective past. Duty, curiosity, shock, nostalgia, personal loss – these are the vehicles that carry us across the ford. (158)

Like all their writing, the style of *Pilgrimage and the Jews* is rich and fluid, touchingly expressive and still commonsensical.

After Linda's death, David movingly observed that, "On the whole, and Linda sometimes articulated this, she felt privileged to have led a life of curiosity and intellectual challenge, travel and friendship and creativity, and to have been able to disguise and justify all that as work, and even, sometimes, get paid for it."

A few years ago, Linda and David retired to a still studious retirement in Mexico where David now explores Spanish culture of the colonial period.³ Although she suffered from pulmonary hypertension and other genetic illnesses, Linda kept house, knitted, and received guests with generosity, all the while sustaining her professional interests and steady communications with fellow researchers.

During the week that framed Linda's death, the Autonomous Region of Galicia and the European Union threw stately gala celebrations in Compostela to mark the 30th Anniversary of the declaration of the Camino de Santiago as the first European Cultural Itinerary. With a common voice the authorities proclaimed that the Way of St. James was an inspired unifying choice.

In 1974 Linda and David never met another pilgrim on any trail, not surprising since they were eight of 108 pilgrims to arrive in Santiago that year. In 1979 they met one fellow walker, a retired French soldier who had made a vow to complete the trek if he survived World War II. There were fewer than 3000 pilgrims in the cathedral's official 1987 census when the Council of Europe conferred its inaugural

3 David M. Gitlitz on his own has produced an enviable list of studies on Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca, Francisco Quevedo as well as monographs on Sephardic Jews in Iberia. including the award-winning *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), new edition, with introduction by Ilan Stavans, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2002). Translated as *Secreto y engaño: la religión de los criptojudíos*. David M. Gitlitz, and María Luisa Balseiro (Salamanca: Junta de Castilla y León, Consejería de Educación y Cultura, 2002, and Valladolid, 2003). Gitlitz also wrote *The Lost Minyan* (2010) as a series of historical fiction vignettes about cases of forced Jewish conversion between 1391 and 1492 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010). A new book is now in press, *Living in Silverado: Crypto-Jews in the Mining Towns of Colonial Mexico*.

honor on the Camino. That was over thirteen years after Linda and David were counted among the first Americans to commit themselves to experiencing the ancient Jacobean trails on foot. In 2018 there were well over 320,000 who entered the city as their unwitting, emboldened successors. The sweeping rhetoric and lavish events that took place in Compostela in 2017 concurred, inevitably, with Linda and David's own sweeping internationalism. Our debt to them is great.

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