

Carl N. Degler, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of marginalized groups, dies at 93

By [Emily Langer](#) January 9, 2015

Carl N. Degler, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian who sought to illuminate the experiences of African Americans, women and other groups whose past had long been overlooked or misunderstood, died Dec. 27 at his home on the Stanford University campus. He was 93.

The university, where he taught from 1968 until his retirement in 1990, [announced](#) his death. He had respiratory and other ailments, said his wife, Therese Baker-Degler.

Dr. Degler produced a wide-ranging body of work and was particularly known for his studies of marginalized populations.

In contrast with scholars who devoted years of archival research to a single moment in the past, he bounded from one topic to another. He “always had an eye for the big picture,” said Jack N. Rakove, another Pulitzer-winning historian at Stanford.

“I have always written about those historical subjects or problems that have seemed important to me, and which I thought, if properly expressed, would prove useful for nonacademic people to know about,” Dr. Degler once told the publication *Contemporary Authors*.

He received the 1972 Pulitzer Prize in history for his book “Neither Black Nor White,” a comparative history of slavery and race relations in the United States and Brazil. He selected Brazil for the study, he wrote, because it was the only New World nation that resembled the United States in size and in terms of the significance of slavery in its development.

Previous theories held that Brazilian religious and legal traditions had allowed the country to avoid the intensity of racial segregation and hostility that existed in the United States after slavery. Dr. Degler cast doubt on that explanation, attributing Brazil’s particular course to more subtle economic and cultural influences.

Michael Kazin, a scholar of U.S. history at Georgetown University, said in an interview that the book was notable for its very quality of being comparative. It was a forerunner, he said, to later works challenging American exceptionalism.

The work was representative of Dr. Degler’s questioning approach to history. Earlier in his career, he belonged to the group of male historians in the 1960s who turned their attention to the history of women. He was a founding member of the National Organization for Women in 1966.

His best-known book on women's history, "At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present" (1980), examined in a historical context the tensions between family life and women's pursuit of autonomy.

He drew wide notice for his book "In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought" (1991). Reviewing the volume in the New York Times, Richard A. Shweder, a professor at the University of Chicago, described it as a "masterly intellectual history of the reverberation of Darwinian ideas in popular social thought and in the thoughts of social scientists."

He encountered some resistance from social scientists who regarded Darwinian ideas as irrelevant in the study of humankind, which they regarded as fundamentally different from the animal world.

"There has generally been a sigh of regret that Carl Degler, who has been working all this time writing against racism and sexism, has been converted to the other side," the author told Shweder. "But I don't think that is true." He said that studying Darwin had helped him understand the commonalities between living things, human or otherwise.

"I wouldn't call myself an animal rightist by any stretch of the imagination," he remarked, "but I think I have some understanding of where they are coming from."

Carl Neumann Degler was born Feb. 6, 1921, in Newark, his wife said. He was a 1942 history graduate of the old Upsala College in New Jersey and served during World War II with the Army Air Forces in India.

He received a master's degree in 1947 and a doctorate in 1952, both in history from Columbia University. He taught at Vassar College before joining the Stanford faculty.

Dr. Degler's first published book was not a monograph, the type of work typical of new historians, but rather the historical survey "Out of Our Past: The Forces that Shaped Modern History" (1959).

He also wrote several books about the American South. In his university classes, Rakove said, Dr. Degler sometimes showed students his collection of soil from different parts of the region to demonstrate the concept of geographic determinism.

Dr. Degler was a past president of the American Historical Association, and he contributed commentaries and books reviews to publications including the New York Times.

His first wife, the former Catherine Grady, died in 1998 after nearly five decades of marriage. Survivors include his wife of 14 years, Therese Baker-Degler, who lives on the Stanford campus; two children from his first marriage, Paul Degler of Bethesda, and

Suzanne Degler of Palo Alto, Calif; two stepsons, Julian Baker and Felix Baker, both of New York City; and 10 grandchildren.

“The collective memory of human beings,” Dr. Degler observed, “is as essential as memory itself.” He also regarded history as a continuous work in progress.

"Surely," he once [said](#), "the American people are more than a collection of diverse nationalities, classes and genders living between Canada and Mexico. We are right to have tossed aside the Wasp-centered idea of history, but we haven't created yet a new, equally holistic conception of history to replace it."