

7-1-1983

Norah Davis 1861-1936

Eleanor Newman Hutchens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review>



Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hutchens, Eleanor Newman (1983) "Norah Davis 1861-1936," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 13: No. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol13/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Huntsville Historical Review by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

NORAH DAVIS 1861-1936

By Eleanor Newman Hutchens

Norah Davis was born in Huntsville in the first year of the Civil War and died here in the middle of the Great Depression, her life span reaching from the first year of Abraham Lincoln's presidency to the summer when Franklin Roosevelt was running for his second term. Her family was one of the most prominent in both Madison and Limestone counties. Nicholas Davis, her grandfather, had been a delegate to the first Alabama constitutional convention in 1819 and a Whig leader in the state until the mid-century. Three of his sons held public office. Nicholas Davis, Jr. was a delegate to the secession convention in 1861 and worked hard to keep the state from seceding. Zebulon Pike Davis, Norah Davis's father, served five terms as a Whig mayor of Huntsville before the war and three terms as a Republican mayor after Reconstruction. The Davises, with their roots in Virginia, were loyal Southerners and served the Confederacy, but they were strong and intelligent Americans, and if their counsels had been followed the South might not have been ruined nor the Union blighted by the greatest blunder America has ever made, with the exception of permitting slavery in the first place.

In the years around the turn of the century before her first novel was published, Norah Davis led an unusually varied and enterprising life for a woman of her time and her social station. She was a woman-suffragist and declared herself a Progressive Republican. As a schoolteacher in five different states she must have learned the feelings of the outsider, the newcomer to town, who at home has been among the well-established and important insiders. Leading characters in three of her four novels are newcomers groping for the keys and codes of a Southern community. As an old Huntsvillian she knew the keys and codes, but her years of working elsewhere, though always in Southern places, must have taught her the chill sensations of the outsider. She also wrote for newspapers. Although I have not seen any examples of her journalism, I im-

agine that her politically active family must have given her a grasp of public affairs that was useful here as it was in her fiction. She knew shorthand and worked for several years as deputy clerk of a Federal district court. Her acquaintance with the law, and her interest in it, are evident in her books.

In 1905, when she was forty-four years old, her novel *The Northerner* was published by The Century Company, an important firm whose acceptance of the book was an achievement in itself for a new author. It is a bold and competently-written work, but I do not understand how Norah Davis was able to go on living in Huntsville after her fellow townsmen read it. It is set in an Alabama town that any Huntsvillian would recognize as Huntsville. Adairville, as she calls it, is in the Tennessee Valley; it is near a mountain where the old families keep summer places; and its social leader is easily identified, even at this distance in time, as Virginia Clay-Clopton, widow of Senator Clement Claiborne Clay and still eminent in Huntsville life when the book was published. The town is presented as bigoted, snobbish, greedy, dishonest, and actually murderous. Its only innocent native repudiates it and leaves it to marry a Yankee and live in England. Its only salvation lies in the capture of its business affairs by a British investment company. It is a place of great natural and architectural beauty inhabited by rotten people. Had Huntsville really been such a town, Norah Davis could not have lived out her later life in safety, as she did, on the eastern slope of McClung Hill, unmolested except on Hallowe'en, when her front fence was routinely torn down by masked children. This vandalism had nothing to do with the book; but I now wonder if each Hallowe'en she reflected that we were confirming the view of the town she had set down a quarter of a century before.

Wounding though it must have been to Huntsville people in 1905, *The Northerner* was not written to spite the town, with the exception of Virginia Clay-Clopton and perhaps some other victims I don't recognize. I take it to be an honest effort to portray the New South, which Norah Davis was in a good position to observe, with survivors of the Old South either hanging raggedly on the New like Spanish moss or flapping darkly over it like buzzards. The author was writing for a wider audience while using her particular experience, as many an author has done before and since, to the indignation and often the chagrin of persons who are locally identifiable.

The main story of *The Northerner* is simple. An honorable, successful Northern man of business is lured to Adairville by another Northerner who has lived in it for some years; is persuaded to invest all his capital in its failing electric power and streetcar company; and then, when he has put the company on its feet, is tricked out of it through a conspiracy between the dishonest Northerner and a concealed network of equally dishonest local businessmen and politicians.

In the course of telling this story, the author works out her real purpose: to dramatize the forces at work in the South at the end of the 19th century. The best of the old Southern aristocracy is personified in Judge Adair, whose Federal bench holds him aloof from the machinations of the town. His daughter Joan, the heroine of the book, is more natural and more clearheaded than the typical Southern girl because she has grown up listening to the lawyer-talk of her father and her cousin-by-marriage Hugh Watson. Hugh, who becomes the Northerner's attorney and good friend, has a dread secret: in his youth he had an affair with a mulatto woman, and their daughter has recently reappeared in the town as the maid of his fiancée, an Adairville girl who would never marry him if she knew. But Hallett, the dishonest Northerner, finds out, and with a corrupt old Confederate general tries to blackmail Hugh into joining the conspiracy against his friend and client Gregory Falls, the Northerner of the title. In the meantime Falls has unintentionally offended the town by replacing a drunken white streetcar motor-man with a black one, who becomes consequently the target of white spite and is very nearly lynched along with a black murderer who is burned at the stake on the Courthouse Square. He has outraged also those politicians and civic clubs who before his coming had received their electricity and their streetcar passage free; he as a matter of course sends them bills. The dread Mrs. Eldridge-Jones goes to his office to order him to mark the club bills paid in full; he casually redirects her to the office where the bills are to be paid; she drives away enraged, and plans a campaign for his ostracism as a believer in negro equality—which, by the way, he is not.

Now, Mrs. Eldridge-Jones is the Virginia Clay-Clopton character, hyphen and all. In actuality the Confederate Veterans' organization here was named for a soldier named Egbert Jones, and Virginia Clay-Clopton was local president of the United

Daughters of the Confederacy. Her memoirs, *A Belle of the Fifties*, had been published the year before *The Northerner* came out. A month after the novel came out, if the date printed on the back of its title page is correct, Mrs. Clay-Clopton was chosen Queen of Love and Beauty for the festivities surrounding the dedication of the Confederate monument in the Courthouse yard. She unveiled the monument on November 21, 1905, and made one of the principal speeches. One of the relics placed in its cornerstone was an 1863 copy of the Richmond *Enquirer* in which was a glowing account of Mrs. Clay of Alabama as she had appeared in the Confederate capital during the war. She was undoubtedly a woman of great charm and presence, full of high spirits and a gay wit that sometimes hit a sensitive target. She had been a leader in the social life of Washington before the war, when her husband was a United States senator, and after the war she had successfully laid siege to the White House for his release from prison, personally calling on President Andrew Johnson and haranguing him day after day until Senator Clay was freed. Father Ryan, a famous public figure of the time, is quoted as saying that he had heard all the greatest orators of the century, and that Mrs. Clay of Alabama was the greatest of them all. Of her charm there can be no doubt; and there can be small doubt of her general benevolence and good humor. I myself grew up among older people who had known her well, and they had found her radiantly attractive to the end of her long life. It was this luminous personage whom Norah Davis chose to represent the malign, cunning, arrogant Old South that would never change. Here is one of her accounts of Mrs. Eldridge-Jones:

Mrs. Eldridge-Jones stood first in the line of ladies, well forward, a distinguished figure clad in heavy, cream-colored satin, her white hair turned back in a full roll from her bold, angular face. The cold gleam of diamonds was everywhere about her, and the colder gleam of a satisfied malice shone in her insolent old eyes as she perceived Watson and his companion advancing upon the line of ladies. She turned to make a quick gesture of warning to the other women in the line; she was too clever a tactician to show in a position of individual responsibility. Her pose was the impregnable one of an exponent of public opinion; in the insult which she meant to level at Falls by a public refusal to recognize him socially, she was firmly resolved to have the support of every other woman in the line.

But Hugh's shrewd diagnosis of human mind and motive was a

generic one, including women as well as men; he read the woman's tactics at a glance, and bent his keen, compelling glance upon her. She met it with as bold a one.

"Mrs. Jones," he said, with formal courtesy, as different as possible from Watson's usual genial ease, his menacing glance riveting his meaning upon her mind, "you have met my friend, Mr. Falls?"

Watson's tone was the assured tone of the man whose world recognizes him as a power; his glance, as arrogant as her own, was full of the freemasonry of caste which assumes as impossible the slightest divergence from its recognized laws.

The traditions of a lifetime, reinforced by the instincts of fifty years of social diplomacy, the ritual of conventionality,—to women of her class more binding than Holy Writ,—warned her to avert the scene which would follow her refusal to recognize Watson's friend, presented by himself, in a house where he was practically host; that, and a chastening vision of Henderson Jones's plebeian wrath when the inevitable explanation should ensue.

With consummate cleverness, she changed her course. She allowed herself to seem to waver—to be convinced, to generously yield the point, and handed her sword to Watson with the grace and dignity of one who, yielding only when she must, yet yields so tactfully as to convert defeat into a semblance of victory. She swept Falls a courtesy [sic], gracious, if cold, murmuring a sentence of greeting.

Here again she is shown in defeat. I harbor a doubt that a Gregory Falls or a Hugh Watson would have been too much for Virginia Clay-Clopton, but in this novel the Southern traditionalist is the chief villain, and Norah Davis had had a chance to study a supreme example in her of those Southerners who would forever romanticize and mourn the Lost Cause; she must be shown as conquerable by those the novel exalts—the vigorous men who can build a new and stronger South.

The World's Warrant, Norah Davis's second novel, was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1907. That she is identified on the title page as author of *The Northerner* suggests that her first had won some recognition. *The World's Warrant* is again set in the Tennessee Valley of Alabama, but in a very different town—a new one, a colony of Easterners who have come to exploit the natural resources of the region for profit. In this book it is they who are the wrongdoers, not in the gross way of the Southerners in Adairville but because of the insensitivity that alloys their Eastern polish. "Tis an awkward thing to play with souls," the epigraph of

Chapter One announces, and the book proceeds to show that it is indeed. The chief victim is a Southern girl, descendant of plantation owners but poor and illiterate, living in a corner of the ruins to which the Yankee army long ago reduced her grandfather's mansion. She has an illegitimate child, fathered, though the Easterners do not know it, but one of their own group who has gone away. With callous kindness, they undertake to arrange a marriage for her with a well-to-do Westerner who has advertised for a wife. One of them, a cultivated young woman, writes letters to him for her under a fictitious name. The Westerner, who replies also under an alias, feels attracted to the author of the letters, comes to the town under his own name to find her, and falls in love with her in person before he discovers that she wrote the letters but is not the girl who is offering herself in marriage. The resulting complications would make conventional farce, but they are worked out seriously so as to test the integrity of everyone involved. The Westerner stands up best under the author's scrutiny, but the illiterate Southern girl, who is almost a tragic figure like Hardy's Tess, is more than his equal in sensitivity and, except for one or two sneaky stratagems in her own defense, and one act of vengeance, she comes out well on the score of integrity. While this novel might be taken as a tract against Easterners who try to play God in the helpless South, it seems to me that the regional issues are secondary and that the primary interest is psychological and moral, as it undoubtedly is in the novels to follow. It partakes of the tradition not only of Hardy but of Henry James—though "tradition" may be the wrong word, since their novels appeared in Norah Davis's lifetime and most of them in her maturity.

Wallace Rhodes, which Harper and Brothers published in 1909, presents another freakish situation: a widower who dotes on his only son marries the son's fiancée to save him from her. The setting is the Mississippi Delta, the characters rich plantation-owning men and poverty-stricken women of the same social class. Again the victim is a young Southern woman, but her tormentors are also Southerners. She is subtly developed and is in some ways a foreshadowing of Tennessee Williams's Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*—a woman who sees what is being done to her but cannot stand up for herself. Veronica Bowdre, the Norah Davis creation, is more fully explored and more complex than

Blanche. It is entertaining to note that there is a family named Faulkner in this novel written when William Faulkner was a child. The similarities between the materials of *The Northerner* and William Faulkner's materials are strong, stronger than I have been able to show in this short survey. *Wallace Rhodes*, a very different book, makes me think of George Meredith, especially of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*; but it also reaches back to Jane Austen in its study of social torture, and there is an Edith Whartonish touch in its impoverished women scheming to keep up appearances and to capture financial security by hook or crook.

The Other Woman, published by The Century Company, in 1920, was, as far as I can discover, Norah Davis's fourth and last novel. It was probably her greatest money-maker, not for the reason suggested by the title but because a film was based on it. The title is misleading; I suspect that the author originally called it *The Other Man* and was persuaded to adopt the more titillating title by her publishers. Its topic is not a love triangle but a dual personality. This modern subject is treated in a modern way: not with the laboratory hocus-pocus of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but with daylight realism. A New Englander on a train journey slips from a respectable into a rascally personality with no recollection of his former life. After seven years he is recognized in a distant city by an old friend who soon thinks himself mistaken because of the radical difference in personality. The friend employs the new man, however, sending him to a South Carolina town where Eastern capitalists are forming a mining company. The amnesiac succeeds in the old Southern town and courts the friend's cousin there, but after the friend discovers his criminal record and orders him away, the shock revives his old personality, with no memory of the new, and he rushes back to his wife in New England whom the friend is courting. After a period of happy reunion with her and the noble friend, the rascal in him resurfaces, this time with a contemptuous awareness of his respectable self. Eventually the two sets of memory become continuous so that a unified personality is established under the control of the better self. Norah Davis was quoted as saying she had known the person on whose life this novel was based. Whatever her source, we see the same pattern in contemporary cases like the one documented in *Three Faces of Eve*. The abnormal psychology of it is too familiar now to interest us

much, but Norah Davis may have been the first fiction writer to present it realistically. As in her other books, she gives the tale distinct characters, some skillful dialogue (with some not so skillful), and a solid matrix of Southern scene and custom, authentic business detail, and structural moral implication.

Norah Davis the writer perhaps came into her own in Huntsville with the film of *The Other Woman*. It may have proved her success to townsmen who had not paid much attention to her books. She invited fifty friends to an Author's Premiere on the afternoon of May 3, 1921, at the Grand Theatre, and later in the month the general public could view the silent film with the unusual accompaniment of a five-piece orchestra playing music especially fitted to it. Tom Mix was also on the schedule that week, presumably accompanied just by the standard galloping piano notes.

Although Norah Davis's work suffered from some of the out-moded stylistic conventions of its time, no honest critic can regard it patronizingly. It is fearless in its choice of subject; for instance, miscegenation is not a topic one expects to find faced head-on in the fiction of 1905. It portrays the South with a mixture of passionate love and hatred that anticipates Faulkner. It is vigorously written and on the whole unsentimental except so far as contemporary demands forced it to be. While she was not a great artist, she was a gifted story-teller and a clear-sighted observer who could construct sound plots that still hold the reader to the end. Any Huntsvillian today who succeeded in having four novels published by the famous houses that accepted hers would be more than a local celebrity. She has not received the recognition she deserves from us.

Acknowledgments

to Dr. Frances Roberts for supplying historical material on the Davis family and their politics, much of which I do not understand and therefore have not used

to Miss Sophye Lowe Young, whose great-grandfather Nicholas Davis was Norah Davis's grandfather, and who has been very kind in answering my questions

to Mrs. James L. Jordan, who with her husband Dr. Jordan now owns and lives in what was Norah Davis's house on McClung Hill; who was born and grew up in Hill Crest, the present house of Dr. and Mrs. Parker Griffith, which I believe to have been the beautiful mansion Hillcrest that Norah Davis placed between Adairville and the mountain in *The Northerner* and in which, with an irony that the reading of that book underlines for us, Virginia Clay-Clopton spent her last days. Mrs. Jordan and I have pooled our childhood memories of Miss Norah, and she managed to find for me the one of the novels I have reviewed which I had been until then unable to lay hands on

to Pat Ryan, who generously sent me the clues to newspaper coverage of the motion picture based on Norah Davis's last novel

to my sister Margaret Henson, who has steadily supported me with the resources of the Heritage Room of the Huntsville Public Library

to Mr. William Sanford, who helped me in my research into old Huntsville newspapers in the Law Library

to the staff of the Madison County Probate Office, one of whom made a special and successful effort to find the voter registration card that showed Norah Davis's true birthdate.