



The Tomb of the Tomboy

by Jocelyn Simms

If you wander into the cemetery of the village of St Clémentin you may come across a simple slab of granite which bears the legend: 'Sois heureux en passant'. This is the tomb of Marie Madeleine Davy, born in Paris in 1903 and interred on the 7th November 1998. Her association with the village came about through her grandfather, Louis Davy, a notary in the neighbouring town of Les Aubiers. Up until the age of sixteen Marie Madeleine spent holidays at La Roche aux Moines, the manoir he had built on the outskirts of the village. The house passed to his son Octave Davy, a flamboyant socialist from Paris, who had the distinctive red star attached to the gable end of the property.

Always a tomboy, Marie Madeleine revelled in the overgrown riverside garden at La Roche aux Moines where she climbed trees, ate wild flowers and fruits, sometimes shinning down a rope ladder in the dead of night affirming that La Nature was her true parent. Trees, birds and the natural world were to figure as metaphors and symbols in her subsequent writing. With her dirty clothes and deep husky voice she was a disappointment to her mother who described her younger daughter as ugly, referring to her only by masculine adjectives. Marie Madeleine said her mother's words sullied her. Although distant from her mother, she loved and admired her older sister Renée, whose death at the age of twenty left her even more isolated.



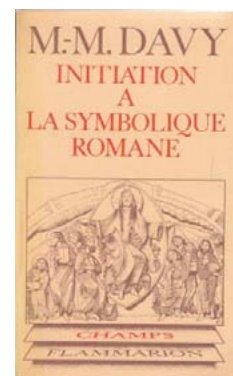
No doubt the physicality and freedom she enjoyed in the countryside and her love of solitude equipped Marie Madeleine for future trials. At her first Holy Communion she refused to obey the catechism, asserting that she did not believe in the existence of Hell. After this declaration she was struck down with a mystery ailment. This illness was a pivotal moment, igniting the process of turning inwards to pursue a spiritual life.

In 1940 she was hiding escaped prisoners of war in her Paris apartment under cover of holding 'cultural conferences.' She was also active in a 'réseau' at Chateau de la Fortrelle, Rozay-en-Brie, where British and American airmen and Jews were secreted and subsequently helped to find safe passage. After the war the chateau became a refuge for female collaborators hounded after the fall of the Vichy regime. Charles de Gaulle himself presented Marie Madeleine with La Croix de Guerre for her work in the Resistance.

Even though she had to fund her prolonged studies, as her family disapproved of her educational aspirations, Marie Madeleine Davy became a professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne, obtaining her



doctorate in 1946. In 1949 she was appointed to the CNRS (Centre Nationale de Recherches Scientifiques). She travelled widely, visiting Germany, Holland, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, USA and Asia. She spent several years teaching in England at Manchester University and Bedford College, London. Hundreds of her papers, essays and books have been published and she frequently contributed introductions and commentaries to publications from other authors and colleagues. She knew and corresponded with many respected academics and philosophers such as Simone Weil, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Nicolas Berdiaev, a notable Russian writer opposed to the Tsarist regime. She was an acknowledged expert on Christian mysticism and Roman symbolism. On a recent visit to the world heritage site of the Abbey of Saint-Savin in the Vienne we were delighted to see her book 'Initiation À La Symbolique Romane' (1977) in the museum bookshop.



On inheriting La Roche aux Moines from her uncle Octave, Marie Madeleine spent time once more in the village of St Clémentin, to which she eventually retired. She was especially concerned to improve life for young people by organising classes in cookery, sewing, judo and yoga and promoting the formation of a football team. She encouraged schoolchildren to learn skills such as lithography, leatherwork and woodwork. Some fine examples of their efforts exist today, including a plaster statue of St Clémentin, bishop and martyr. In order to widen the world view of the villagers Madame Davy provided a house, Maison Simone Weil, with twenty-two bedrooms to accommodate students from all over the world, who

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were invited to partake in free cultural exchanges with their French counterparts.

In 1959 Marie Madeleine Davy was elected as a conseillère municipale and that is when she began to fully realise her projects. In the 1960s festivals were put on, attracting lots of attention and large audiences. 'St Clémentin hardly seems big enough to house the 1,000 plus spectators gathered to watch the young Ukrainians in their colourful folk costumes performing their traditional songs and dances' reports Le Courrier de l'Ouest. It was described as a marvellous and moving spectacle, delighting the onlookers.

A newspaper headline of these years dubs St Clémentin a 'village européen' where young people of diverse nationalities regularly put on a variety of 'spectacles', including theatre.

One such, 'Le Dialogue des Carmélites' (by Simone Weil and Bernanos) brought together students from Denmark, Norway, Holland and Spain to perform a play about recognising and fostering the spirit within us. It was put on in the main square and afterwards the audience enjoyed 'les qualités gastronomiques des restaurants renommés de St Clémentin.'

Aurélia Stapert, a Dutch artist and historian, was Marie Madeleine's secretary and fellow teacher at Maison Simone Weil. André Airaud recalls in a letter his recollection of life in St Clémentin during this period. "It was wonderful to meet and talk to young people from Germany, Holland and Sweden at the Maison Simone Weil and then to swim together in the river." He believes he would never have pursued his dream of becoming a doctor but for the encouragement he received from Madame Davy. He remembers, "when she appeared in the village, always wearing trousers and smoking, she bought sweets for all the children who gathered in the square." She wrote a poem for André Airaud, addressing him as Mon Frère and counselling him to follow his heart's desire.

In 2012 when the first bilingual LitFest was put on in St Clémentin, by a team composed of several nationalities, the past seemed to have re-emerged. We were astonished to hear the story of Marie Madeleine Davy from the mayor. We were impressed with Madame Davy's foresight, her extraordinary achievements and generosity, but dismayed that so few in the area had heard of her, even in local schools and colleges.

At the second festival in 2014 we sought the services of Armelle Dutruc, Madame Davy's biographer. Armelle prepared a lecture and slide show about the life and works of this remarkable woman and her impact on the rural community from documents in the departmental archives in Niort. As a result of this, later the same year, a further tribute took place in Paris at Marie Madeleine's apartment.

In 1998 at the age of ninety-three Madame Davy suffered injuries received in a fall at home. Her neighbour found her, offering to take her to hospital, but she chose to remain where she was. She had already experienced two near death episodes and was fully prepared for the final journey: she had already written her funeral service. The neighbour made her as comfortable as possible but she died during the night.

Madame Davy believed the inner journey to be the most important undertaking one can make in this life. To achieve this she welcomed solitude as a companion on the journey to self-knowledge. Her

understanding of Eastern religions, philosophy and ancient wisdom informed her life's progress, and the spiritual practices of the East replaced the dogma of Western Catholicism in which she had been schooled. Interviews in which she talks about her personal beliefs can be heard on YouTube.

On the 10th October a commemorative plaque will be installed in a public garden near the square in St Clémentin. A sharing of memories of Marie Madeleine Davy by her remaining friends will take place, followed by an invitation to partake of a vin d'honneur at her former home by kind invitation of the present owners.

**‘ . . . walk as a free spirit so you become brother to all that exists: rocks, plants, animals, all mankind.’
Most importantly:
Be happy, pilgrim.**

References:

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- https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Madeleine_Davy

Note: I have followed the common practice of referring to Marie Magdeleine Davy as 'Madame' although she never married and I have used her preferred spelling of her middle name.

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CONTRIBUTIONS...

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