Obituary

John Dunbar

1 March 1930 - 6 May 2018

The reserved demeanour of the late John Greenwell Dunbar, OBE, MA, FSA, Honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, belied the fact that he was a towering figure in the transformation of Scottish architectural scholarship in the second half of the 20th century, co-founder and doyen of the modern discipline in Scotland. In depth and breadth of content, couched in a characteristically crisp writing style, his research led – and in the area of Early Classicism in Scotland still leads – by example, while his polite but firm

conduct and management style marked him out as an archetypal gentleman-scholar, ever a model of thoughtful empathy, integrity and clarity in his dealings with friends, colleagues and the academic world at large. He was my immediate boss at the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) for 21 years, and he remained a kind and friendly mentor after his retirement in 1990 when, as Head of Architecture, I had the impossible task of assuming part of his mantle. Elected in November 1953, at his death John had been a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of



John G Dunbar, Secretary RCAHMS, 1978–90, taken December 1989. © Crown Copyright: HES. SC 1128484

Scotland for over 64 years. He served twice as a Councillor (1964–6 and 1977–81), was Vice-President from 1982 until 1986, and, following his highly acclaimed Rhind Lectures in 1998, was made an Honorary Fellow in 2000–1.

John was born at a nursing home in Hampstead, London, into a family whose residence was in suburban Mill Hill, Middlesex. He was the second child of John and Marie (née Aston) Dunbar, his elder sister, Mary (1925–2011), who remained unmarried and settled in London, eventually rising to a senior post in The London Library. John's father was from Paisley, and of his background we know only that his mother, John's paternal grandmother, was a MacGregor. John's own mother came from Driffield in the East Riding of Yorkshire, and Greenwell was evidently a name of frequent occurrence and special significance in her family.

John's father was employed as a Marine Superintendent, responsible engineering operations, by the Anglo-Persian/ Iranian Oil Company, which, after 1954, became British Petroleum (BP). Based initially at the company's headquarters in London, John Senior was re-located to Scotland on the outbreak of war in 1939, first to Edinburgh and then to Glasgow. When the family moved to Clydeside, John Junior was sent back to London where he lived with friends and continued his education in Hampstead at University College School. During his schooldays, among other things, he developed rowing and teamwork skills on the River Thames, where, in his own words, he became 'intimately acquainted with the back of Roger Bannister's neck', as his place in the boat was just behind Roger Bannister (1929–2018), another recently deceased, distinguished 'Old Gower'.

After school, between July 1948 and September 1949, John did his National Service with the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) in Germany before going up to Balliol College, Oxford, to read Modern History. He remained strongly attached to Balliol ever after, and, with hindsight, it seems clear that two of his personal tutors there, Christopher Hill (1912–2003) and A A M (Archie) Duncan (1926–2017), nurtured and honed his nascent interests in, and mastery

of, English 17th-century and Scottish medieval history respectively. The Oxford friendships he forged with both Archie Duncan and Howard Colvin (1919–2007), Research Fellow at St John's College from 1948, blossomed and endured as lifelong and productive academic partnerships.

In 1952 he graduated BA, later converted to MA, and in 1953 he was appointed to the staff of RCAHMS in Edinburgh, following the retirement in 1952 of the architect G P H (Pat) Watson, who had been engaged in Commission survey work since 1911. For a junior investigator charged with the recording and researching of historic buildings this was the start of yet another perfect, lifelong match, a career ideally suited to a young Anglo-Scottish fieldworker who combined a strong sense of purpose, organisation and adventure with a keen eye for building details and an outstanding flair for historical research, analysis and the effective use of the written word. He was to serve RCAHMS for 37 years, the last 12, between 1978 and 1990, as Secretary (that is, Chief Executive) of a body which by then employed around 100 staff.

On first moving to Edinburgh, John took lodgings in the city, confiding to a university friend that 'my landlady keeps on telling me she is going to have to make sacrifices. I think I am the sacrifice she has in mind'. Regular fieldwork in the Border counties, especially Peeblesshire, increased his familiarity with, and attraction to, the scenic hinterland south of Edinburgh, and it was not long before he made his home there among the Pentland Hills. He first rented a cottage at Nine Mile Burn before manfully setting to work, in the early 1960s, on the restoration of the ruinous shell of Patie's Mill on the banks of the River North Esk at Carlops. Largely by his own efforts, he turned what had successively been, since 1800, a water-powered woollen manufactory, meal mill and poultry farm into what he himself later described as 'a much loved home and garden'. What had been the curtilage of the mill came to be surrounded by a fine beech hedge that he planted in 1964–5, and the mill was augmented by a stone garage, built by John himself, the keystone of its entrance arch bearing the inscription, 'JGD EMB 1974', a gift from his RCAHMS colleagues to mark his marriage to Elizabeth Mill Blyth and to crown his own considerable practical achievements.

Given the burgeoning of Scottish architectural history over the past few decades, it is hard for us now to appreciate the state of the subject, hardly then a profession, as it was in 1953, and to understand the magnitude of the transformation that scholars like John Dunbar quietly but effectively wrought over the next quarter century. From the outset, however, circumstances could hardly have been more propitious for a young architectural scholar in post-war heritage service. In 1948, a new Royal Warrant had given the Commission discretion to include in its county Inventories structures of a date later than 1707. Understandably pragmatic about the impact a completely openended commitment would have on resources, the Commission decided to extend its remit only to 1850 on a selective basis, but even that limited expansion represented a massive increase in cultural scope and interest. Additionally, while greater emphasis was being placed on graphic and photographic illustration and on historical research as aids to interpretation, from the publication of the Inventory of Selkirkshire (1957) onwards, detailed accounts of monuments were being grouped thematically by types, not topographically by parishes, allowing a more discursive, analytical approach to come through the introductory essays. These new approaches were rewardingly applied to the revisions then being made to the pre-war accounts of the Border counties, most notably Peeblesshire (published in two volumes in 1967), to the architecturally rich and exciting county of Stirlingshire, freshly selected in the early 1950s (and published, also in two volumes, in 1963), and, from 1959, to the relatively unknown delights of Argyll and the western seaboard, all fertile territory for a young architectural investigator.

A by-product of this busy phase of activity carried over into his own spare time was John's first book, *The Historic Architecture of Scotland*, published by Batsford in 1966. Unsurprisingly, its general arrangement strongly echoed the

analytical approach of his day job with the Commission, sub-divided thematically into broad categories which were closely akin to those of the *Inventories*, namely castellated, domestic. ecclesiastical, urban, industrial and rural. Commissioned as a popular, unreferenced guide to Scotland's buildings, the book was immediately recognised as a landmark publication. Slightly abridged, re-titled as The Architecture of Scotland, and with three of the later chapters re-arranged into stylistic periods - Early Classicism, Georgian and Victorian it occasioned no surprise when it went into a second edition in 1978, the year John took over from Kenneth Steer as Secretary of RCAHMS.

Although the coverage and interpretations of some areas and themes have been outdated by later research, both volumes retain a freshness, lucidity and appeal that have not dimmed over the decades. Much of this is attributable to the timeless style and quality of the writing itself, a classic blend of well-turned summaries and judgements, conveyed with precision, pace and balance; the literary embodiment of physical and mental skills developed as a young oarsman perhaps? As a writer and researcher, John Dunbar was, quite simply, a master craftsman. It is no coincidence that both of these books, along with the second volume of the Inventory of Stirlingshire, are among the most dishevelled and tattered in this writer's own collection, a proud mark of decades of intensive reference and scholarly abuse in the pre-digital age!

Framed by a broad knowledge of British and Irish architectural history, John's considerable academic reputation rests solidly on two main areas of study: Scottish medieval castles and palaces; and Scottish domestic architecture – and architects and craftsmen – of the early modern era. Although they have tended to be separately compartmented, these subject areas were in fact parts of a single intellectual spectrum, seamlessly interconnected by John's close familiarity with the documentary source materials of the centuries between about 1450 and 1750. His mastery of these sources, especially of raw archival materials of the 17th century, is fully attested by his joint editions of the *Masters of Works Accounts*

of 1616–49 and a series of late 17th-century building contracts, while his elucidation of what all the paperwork tells us of the organisation and practicalities of building operations is laid out in the final chapter of *Scottish Royal Palaces* (1999) in a manner that is likely to stand for a very long time.

Following holiday explorations of castles and churches in the Balkans and the Middle East in the 1950s (including 1956, the year of the Suez crisis) and shortly after embarking on Commission survey work in the castle-rich county of Argyll in 1959, John and his friend, W W M (Billy) Boal, architect with the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Public Building and Works and, coincidentally, a resident of West Linton, formally mounted an expedition to record and survey a group of castles in the Cilicia region of Turkey. Sponsored by the Carnegie Trust and the University of Edinburgh, and supported by the British Institute at Ankara, they headed an intrepid team consisting of Clare Dymond, Audrey Henshall, Donald Scott, Susan Sinclair and Priscilla Telford, while an influential figure in the background to the project is likely to have been Michael Gough, Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh from 1951 until 1961, when he became Director of the British Institute at Ankara.

In August and September 1960, the team carried out a reconnaissance of castles at Gökvelioğlu, Ilan, Kozan and Namrun, and conducted a detailed survey of Feke, anciently known as Vahga. Across three weeks in the same period in 1962 they returned to Vahga to prepare the survey for publication, made the small castle of Erzil (Azgit), near Andırın, the focus of another detailed survey, and reconnoitred the castles at Kürtüllü (Ak Kale), Savuran, Hamde, Yılan, Bodrum, Anavarza and Silifke. A summary account of Azgit appeared much later, in 1978, among a series of essays on Cilician Armenia edited by the then late T S R Boase, but its place in a corpus of Armenian works was questioned by other commentators and reviewers such as Steven Runciman. They preferred to believe that the castle, which evidently cannot be identified with any fortress in Armenian sources, was a surviving relic of earlier Byzantine occupation.

Castle studies the world over are full of such differences of interpretation and opinion, particularly regarding dating and cultural influences, and the scale and intensity of the differences are usually inversely proportional to the amount, or rather lack, of relevant historical source material. John was no stranger to such debates, and following his careful, scrupulous and skilful consideration of the physical and documentary evidence, he was never afraid to set down his carefully reasoned detailed assessments, often, with regard to the many tower-houses that came under his view, eschewing currently fashionable assertions and endorsing traditional analyses and dating. Always tolerant and open to suggestions, John was equally mindful of the responsibility and balance that government service and an official imprimatur required of him and his teams, so he tended towards caution and sound, rather than adventurous, conclusions, leaving the door open for re-interpretations by those academics who felt less fettered and freer to fly. Those who have experienced corporate government research will recognise immediately the good sense and wise leadership which such a public service ethos embodies.

From the earliest days of his career, Scottish royal works, especially at Stirling Castle, Edinburgh Castle and Holyrood Palace, aroused a deep and knowledgeable interest in him, and from his 1998 Rhind Lectures and 1999 book we can fully appreciate that, relatively undeveloped as residences since 1603, such establishments came with abundant documentation he could get his teeth into. Relatively undocumented castles of the western seaboard posed very different challenges, to which John, like the rest of us, could not always apply such skills to best effect. His review of Highland medieval architecture published in 1981, for example, will long remain essential reference largely because its coverage reflects his near-comprehensive experience of the region, but his reliance on castle typologies and period-types based on relatively modern taxonomies as tools of building analysis, displayed here and elsewhere, has not stood up equally well to the tests of time, as he himself came to recognise.

On the other hand, his studies of the royal palaces and, for very similar reasons, John's work on Early Classicism in Scotland, endures strongly and will endure. We will not now know for certain where he first encountered and engaged with the works of James Smith (c 1645–1731) – Stirling Castle, Traquair House, or possibly the remote Inversnaid Barracks – but it led to a lifelong interest in a group of hugely significant architects who shaped the domestic architecture of early modern Scotland and on whom John's research remains the ultimate authority. Illustrious members of this pantheon include Sir William Bruce (c1630–1710), Alexander Edward (1651–1708), Alexander McGill (d 1734), James Murray (d 1634), John Mylne (d 1621) and successors, James Smith himself, and William Wallace (d 1631).

His academic legacy aside, no personal portrait of John is fully rounded without reference to his wry sense of humour, 'a wit so dry that the Sahara might envy it' is how Rennie McElroy, editor of the Carlops Church Newsletter, has so aptly put it. In one issue of the Newsletter in September 2010, John, who at church coffee mornings tended to avoid chit-chat and busy himself with washing up in the kitchen, had been musing on possible candidates for a patron saint for Carlops. His choice ultimately landed on the Italian Franciscan theologian, St Bonaventure, who died in 1274: 'Although possessing outstanding intellectual gifts and holding high office in the church', John wrote, 'he set little store by these achievements and led a life of great simplicity. When he eventually received his cardinal's hat, he had to tell the bearer to hang it on a neighbouring tree because he was busy washing up and his hands were greasy. I'm sure St Bonaventure, patron saint of dish-washers, would feel at home in Carlops Church.'

His warm portrait of a former boss, Angus Graham (1892–1979), published in *PSAS* in 1981, contains many amusing anecdotes relating to Angus's eccentric behaviour and apparel, but these are matched by John's plain, tongue-incheek statement recording Angus's experience of accommodation in Edinburgh on his first arrival in the city in 1935: 'In one temporary lodging in Walker Street he [Angus] saw a ghost, but in

Nelson Street, where he finally settled, ghosts were not seen and only very occasionally heard.'

Finally, at the end of his preface to *Scottish Royal Palaces* (1999), he paid fulsome tribute to 'the tolerance and understanding shown over the years by my wife, Elizabeth, who, like an early reviewer of *1066 and All That*, "looks forward keenly to the appearance of the author's last work". Sadly, it was indeed to be his last book as a single author, but we all enjoyed sharing the gentle domestic joke.

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CONTRIBUTIONS TO CORPORATE AND COMPOSITE PUBLICATIONS

The above list of works attributable to John Dunbar as a named author should be supplemented by the many substantial contributions that he made anonymously in various capacities (author, sub-editor and project supervisor) to the corporate publications of RCAHMS between 1953 and 1990, most notably to the *Inventories of Monuments* of the Border counties, Stirlingshire and Argyll, all published by HMSO, Edinburgh: *Roxburghshire* (two volumes, 1956); *Selkirkshire* (1957); *Stirlingshire* (two volumes, 1963); *Peeblesshire* (two volumes, 1967); *Argyll* (seven volumes,

1971, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1988, 1992); and *Lanarkshire* (1978).

Likewise, he contributed generously to other general works of reference, which, although acknowledged, remain relatively hidden from view as products of his scholarship. Examples include entries on a number of significant 17th-century Scottish architects in the second and third editions of Howard Colvin, A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840 (New Haven and London, 1978 and 1995). There remains a case for suggesting that the same author's stimulating and thought-provoking 'A Scottish origin for English Palladianism', Architectural History, Vol 17 (1974), 5–13 and 41–52, should have appeared jointly under John Dunbar's name, but, typically, John himself would never have considered pursuing such a case.

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GEOFFREY STELL