

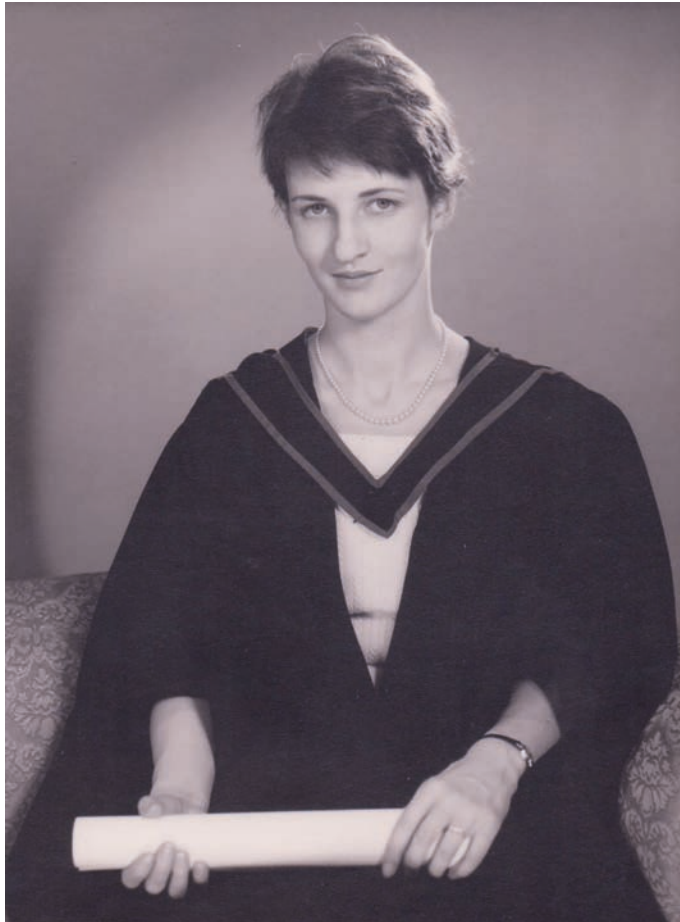
Obituary

Jenny Wormald

18 January 1942 – 9 December 2015

In the later 20th and early 21st centuries, Jenny Wormald was the most original, and one of the pre-eminent, historians of late medieval and early modern Scotland. From the beginning of her academic career, she reshaped paradigms and broke boundaries, not

the least of which was being an authoritative female historian in an overwhelmingly male domain in the 1960s and 1970s. As Dauvit Broun wrote of her in *The Herald*, she ‘was an inspiration not only in her intellectual vision for Scottish history, but her passion for



Jenny’s graduation photograph from June 1963. She achieved a First in History at the University of Glasgow

challenging the unthinking acceptance of the *status quo*'.¹

In Jenny's witty and forceful outputs, our understanding of Scottish society and politics in the 15th to 17th centuries was rewritten: Scotland was transformed from a backward and violent society, with an ineffective government and overmighty magnates, into Renaissance Scotland, a realm governed by usually effective Stewart kings, where socio-political systems could achieve a fine balance of crown-magnate co-operation, and social stability. Yes, feud continued to exist, but its arbitration and resolution were examples of the uniquely Scottish mechanisms evolved to foster compliance with crown policy and the law. For Keith M Brown, one of her many successful students, Jenny's works (in particular those of the 1980s) 'represent an extraordinary achievement that collectively caused a paradigm shift in Scottish History and created waves outside the field'.²

Jenny's stellar trajectory as a writer, teacher and mother began in Glasgow, in 1942, where she was adopted and brought up by a GP, Dr Thomas Tannahill, and his wife Margaret. She attended Glasgow High School for Girls, and then Glasgow University as an undergraduate from 1959 to 1963. This she followed with a doctorate on the Scottish nobility which gave her an inexhaustible fund of stories, in which she delighted, as she toured the great houses of Scotland during her research. The stimulating, challenging but always encouraging teaching, for which she became much renowned, started at Glasgow in 1966 and she continued to teach whilst researching her doctorate, which was completed in 1974. Two years earlier, in 1972, she had begun her prolific, substantive and compelling writing career, a bibliography of which extends to five pages in the *festschrift* dedicated to Jenny, published to celebrate her 70th birthday.

In 1985, she went south as Fellow and Tutor in Modern History at St Hilda's College, Oxford, and, in 1987, she was also appointed Lecturer in History at Trinity College, Oxford. Typically aware of the wider contexts for Scottish and British history, and demonstrating her scholarly reach beyond these shores, she was involved

in projects that took her to Europe and beyond, including the 'Scottish Papers in the Vatican Archives' project in the 1960s and 1970s, and Visiting Fellowships at the Folger and the Huntington Libraries. She was also a Visiting Professor at Johns Hopkins in 1992 and then at the University of the South, Tennessee, in 1994. Through all of that she built up an extensive network of contacts and a reputation for her engaging teaching. She retired from Oxford in 2006, becoming an Honorary Fellow at the University of Edinburgh where she continued to write and to teach popular courses until overcome by illness. Latterly she was the chairman of the Scottish Medievalists Society.

Somehow in the midst of this, she produced three much-loved children, Andrew Brown, and Tom and Luke Wormald, in relationships with the medievalists A L Brown and subsequently Patrick Wormald. She also converted to Roman Catholicism, and her deep commitment to her faith was reflected in the moving funeral service at St John's, Portobello, with its carefully chosen hymns and the choir singing 16th-century choral arrangements. The congregation epitomised her life, a mixture of appreciative former students, many colleagues from diverse fields – some of whom she won't always have agreed with – and friends and family. It was a fitting ending to a particularly sparkling life, and, in Dauvit Broun's words, it 'is difficult to imagine that there will ever be a brighter light in Scottish history, shining with as much originality, passion and unstoppable intellectual and personal courage'.³

A number of overarching themes characterised her work over the decades. Most notable perhaps was her persistent critical challenge to accepted orthodoxies, an approach which guided her repeated assaults on both the traditional vision of an unruly, ungovernable Scotland, and on the bastions of Anglocentric versions of British history in the hallowed halls of Oxford. In typically trenchant style, Wormald even waged an assault on that much feted symbol of Scottish history, Mary, Queen of Scots, in *A Study in Failure*, a breath of fresh air in which she demanded rigorous assessment of Mary's

monarchical qualities and not an evaluation of her guilt or innocence in adultery or murder, nor her martyrdom or victimhood. Jenny was always able to think outside the box, drawing on her immense archival research, and willing to take on board the work of other disciplines, including literature and anthropology. As a result, nothing intellectual was sacred, even to the extent that she was to call the Scottish Catholic hierarchy to account for its controversial treatment of their archives, a campaign which she led on behalf of the Scottish Medievalists. As Steve Boardman and Julian Goodare were to write in 2014, through ‘a series of innovative and original monographs and articles she ... launched an often brutally witty iconoclastic assault on hoary misconceptions about the medieval and early modern kingdom and left a landscape littered with the battered remains of old prejudices and muddled thinking in her wake’.⁴ High praise indeed.

Such a fiercely independent approach was visible from the very beginnings of her published work. Wormald began her assault on the writing of Scottish history in 1972 with the characteristically provocative title, ‘Taming the Magnates?’, an article which has been reprinted at least twice since. In it she took apart the traditional assumption that the dominance of supposedly unmanageable overmighty magnates in Scottish society and government was to the detriment of a weak and ineffective Stewart monarchy. In so doing, she was able to establish that instead, the mighty nobles were generally far more co-operative with the crown than was previously thought; that the Stewart kings were able to exert their authority through these regional lords; and that in contrast to the instability and loss of authority suggested by the repeated royal minorities of the 15th and 16th centuries (as kings died prematurely in battle or rebellion), Stewart



Jenny attending the Thistle Investiture Ceremony at St Giles Cathedral in July 2014. © Luke Wormald

kings were able to recover their authority on reaching their majorities. Indeed, such minorities could be seen to be helpful in releasing tensions built up by any encroachment on the lords' power by the previous monarch. This presented a completely new way of looking at the exercise of power, kingship and lordship within Scotland – and was one that continued to provoke furious debate over the next few decades.

'Taming the Magnates?' was to be followed by several articles in the 1970s, and books in the 1980s, that deepened and finessed her articulation of the social and quasi-judicial processes and mechanisms that structured Scottish society and enabled the exercise of power by king and lord alike. For Keith Brown, these articles indicated 'a radical departure from long-established orthodoxies', noting in 2014 that 'they are also still worth reading today'. As editor of the volume *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, published in 1977, Wormald held forth on 'the exercise of power', demonstrating how lordship drew on the idea of a mutually beneficial relationship between lord and follower, binding the subordinate in the service of that lord. This work was consolidated in her next two books, the enduringly useful textbook *Court, Kirk and Community: Scotland, 1470–1625* of 1981, and the 'stunningly authoritative' (Keith Brown) *Lords and Men in Scotland: Bonds of Manrent, 1442–1603* of 1985.⁵

The latter, an analysis of more than 800 bonds of manrent, made usually by a subordinate to his chief and promising his service in return for his maintenance and protection by that lord, demonstrated how this uniquely Scottish form of agreement underwrote and exemplified the ways in which lordship was exerted. It had wider political implications too, in terms of how that lord could use these bonds to effect crown policy, but also to formalise and supply manpower to political alliances with other nobles. Much had been previously made of noble factions as destabilising influences on Scottish politics and kingship; such alliances could come together to secure aid and compliance for a king. Work such as this emphasised constancy and continuity, stability and longevity, in political and social processes over the longer period, roughly 1470

to 1600, which blurred the distinction made by others between the late medieval and early modern periods. For Wormald, this was instead the age of 'Renaissance Scotland'.

An offshoot of this work, in 1980, was the explosive and truly groundbreaking article, 'Bloodfeud, kindred and government in early modern Scotland', published in the world-class journal *Past and Present*, an article that remains as relevant and revelatory today as it was then. Several of the chapters in the 2014 *festschrift* drew on the tenets of this original work. Violence, Wormald argued, was not endemic within Scottish society. In contrast, strikingly, the structure within which the notorious bloodfeud was perpetuated provided mechanisms that codified the conduct of the feud, including the processes by which the violence could be halted, through arbitration, resolution and compensation. Wormald coined the term 'peace within the feud' to describe the more beneficial aspects of what had previously been seen as semi-anarchic violence. For Wormald, this system lent a quasi-judicial authority to privately exercised justice, the justice here usually lying in the hands of the nobles and greater lairds, and provided a means for dispute resolution as much as it had shaped the original violence. All this, in combination with her reworking of crown-magnate relations, argued for a more peaceful understanding of Scottish society. It was an idea not without its vocal opponents, and one subject to qualification by them over subsequent years.

But perhaps the theme on which she was at her most vociferous was in her demands for the due recognition of a distinctive Scottish history in its British and European contexts that was not to be reduced to a poorly serviced subset of British history, or a lesser relation of English history. That she was able to conduct this campaign face-to-face with English historians at Oxford only made the effect of her arguments more tangible. The signs of this were there from the start: by showing how Scottish kings could use Scottish lords to exert power, Wormald was able to argue that just because Scottish government did not mimic the more institutionally evolved English government in the 16th century, it did not mean that the governmental and socio-political systems

Scotland did have could not be as effective. Scotland was not primitive or backward in comparison to England; it was just different.

It was through her work in particular on James VI and I, the king himself, and also his Union of the Crowns, that Wormald could expound on the distinct nature of Scottish kingship, culture and society and the part this played in the wider British landscape. Tellingly, it was Wormald, and not an English historian, who was chosen to write the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography's* entry for James. And this she did with admirable verve and at considerable length. To some extent, it makes up for the fact that Wormald's own monograph on James' life and kingship was never to appear.

Of her many articles on James and union, two stand out: 'James VI and I: two kings or one?' (1983) reminded English historians that James was first and foremost a Scottish king. It was in Scotland that James formulated his ideas on kingship and he brought these with him to England in 1603. To understand James's kingship of England, one had to first understand his kingship of Scotland. These ideas continued in "'O brave new world"? The union of England and Scotland in 1603', published as part of the *Proceedings of the British Academy* (2005), an indication of how Wormald had directed her arrows at the heart of the 'British' establishment. Other articles demonstrated her enduring preoccupation with the workings of the 1603 union: 'The creation of Britain: multiple kingdoms or core and colonies?' published in the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1992) and 'James VI, James I and the identity of Britain' in Brendan Bradshaw's and John Morrill's seminal *The British Problem, c. 1534–1707: State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago* (1996).

All of this work was conducted with her customary wit and acute critique, in combative but good humoured debates with fellow academics and students, and written up in incisive and readable prose. She brought these merits to her teaching. Keith Brown has reminisced that tutorials with her in the 1970s were even better than her writing: 'it was like the difference between a studio recording and a live concert 1970s style, with the solo act

chain-smoking through the performance'. It was 'gripping, energising, inspiring researched teaching from a lecturer bursting with ideas and opinions at the very top of her game'.⁶ She carried on her teaching through her long spells at Glasgow, Oxford and Edinburgh, where students enjoyed the feisty exchanges, and the attractive combination of historical and literary sources that she typically used. Courses included the ever-popular "'The Blessed Union" (James VI and I): The Uniting Of The Kingdoms', and 'Literature and Politics in Medieval and Early Modern Scotland', both of which gleefully plundered the writings of Buchanan and Knox, James VI and I, and the union tracts of the early 1600s. I was lucky enough to teach these two courses when Jenny was ill, so I can attest to the enthusiasm with which they were received.

And finally, Jenny was a generous and loyal friend. Many a doctorate was born out of her work and encouraging supervision, and many a young postdoctoral student found employment thanks partly to the fulsome references that Jenny wrote. Once she had agreed to something she would do her damndest to fulfil her obligations, notoriously turning up to give a paper at St Andrews during her last illness, which in cruel fashion had quietened her singular voice; in the end it was read by her son Luke, but Jenny still managed to answer the questions. That voice had been heard in many a ferocious discussion, Felicity Heal recalling of her in *The Guardian* that she had 'honed a natural pleasure in argument into a passionate commitment to debating, usually carried from the lecture theatre into the bar, where late-night sessions often morphed from discussing history to denouncing the iniquities of Thatcherism'.⁷ Many of her friends will remember just what fun she was to be with.

She also had a rich life beyond academia, as the public face of Scottish history in newspapers and occasionally on television (latterly in the programme *Bloody Queens*), forever a source of tasty snippets on the 'lamentable' and 'tedious creature' Mary, Queen of Scots: in 1997, as three films loomed, she said 'I can't understand why anyone would want to make a film about such an overrated woman ... She didn't have much of

a head to begin with'.⁸ But as importantly, her life was enriched by her sons and grandchildren, her church and her music. She was a highly accomplished pianist with typically wide-ranging tastes, but with a strong love of 16th- and 17th-century choral works which made her funeral so much more poignant. Travel was a passion too; even in the last months of her life she was to go on holiday with her family to Bavaria. She is much missed, her vitality lingering on in our memories at conferences that seem just a little less zinging in her absence.

NOTES

- 1 Dauvit Broun, *The Herald*, 29 December 2015.
- 2 Keith M Brown 2014 'The Stewart Realm: Changing the Landscape', in Boardman, S & Goodare, J (eds) *Kings, Lords and Men in Scotland and Britain, 1300–1625: Essays in Honour of Jenny Wormald*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp 19–34, at p 21.
- 3 Dauvit Broun, *The Herald*, 29 December 2015.
- 4 Steve Boardman & Julian Goodare, 'Introduction: Kings, Lords and Jenny Wormald', in Boardman, S & Goodare, J (eds) *Kings, Lords and Men in Scotland and Britain, 1300–1625*, pp 1–18 at p 1.
- 5 Brown, 'The Stewart Realm: Changing the Landscape', pp 20, 21.
- 6 Brown, 'The Stewart Realm: Changing the Landscape', p 32.
- 7 Felicity Heal, *The Guardian*, 4 February 2016.
- 8 Joan McAlpine, 'Contrary Mary', *The Sunday Times*, 21 December 1997.

SIGNIFICANT PUBLICATIONS

(Writing as Jennifer Brown until 1982 when she wrote as Jenny Wormald.)

- 1972 Jennifer M Brown 'Taming the magnates?', most recently reprinted in Menzies, G (ed.) *Who are the Scots? and The Scottish Nation*, 147–60. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2002).
- 1973 Jennifer M Brown 'Scottish politics, 1567–1625', in Smith, A G R (ed.) *The Reign of James VI and I*, 22–39. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 1977 Jennifer M Brown 'Introduction', in Brown, J M (ed.) *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, 1–9. London: Edward Arnold.
- 1977 Jennifer M Brown 'The exercise of power', in Brown, J M (ed.) *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, 33–65. London: Edward Arnold.
- 1980 'Bloodfeud, kindred and government in early modern Scotland', *Past and Present* 87 (May 1980): 54–97.
- 1981 *Court, Kirk and Community: Scotland, 1470–1625*. London: Edward Arnold. Reprinted 1991 Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- 1983 'James VI and I: two kings or one?', *History* 68: 187–209.
- 1985 *Lords and Men in Scotland: Bonds of Manrent, 1442–1603*. Edinburgh: John Donald.
- 1988 *Mary Queen of Scots: A Study in Failure*. London: George Philip. Reissued 2017 Edinburgh: Birlinn with 'Foreword', 'Afterword' and updated 'Bibliography' by Anna Groundwater.
- 1991 'James VI and I, Basilikon Doron and The Trew Law of Free Monarchies: the Scottish context and the English translation', in Peck, L L (ed.) *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, 36–54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1992 'The creation of Britain: multiple kingdoms or core and colonies?', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series 2: 175–94.
- 1994 'The union of 1603', in Mason, R A (ed.) *Scots and Britons: Scottish Political Thought and the Union of 1603*, 17–40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1996 'James VI, James I and the identity of Britain', in Bradshaw, B & Morrill, J (eds) *The British Problem, c. 1534–1707: State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago*, 148–71. London: Macmillan.
- 2000 "'Tis true I am a cradle king": the view from the throne', in Goodare, J & Lynch, M (eds) *The Reign of James VI*, 241–56. East Linton: Tuckwell.

- 2004 'James VI and I (1566–1625)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol 29, 628–57. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2005 'Introduction', in Wormald, J (ed.) *Scotland: A History*, xv–xxi. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2005 'Confidence and perplexity: the seventeenth century', in Wormald, J (ed.) *Scotland: A History*, 143–76. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2005 "'O brave new world"?: The union of England and Scotland in 1603', in Smout, T C (ed.) *Anglo-Scottish Relations from 1603 to 1900*, 13–35. Oxford: Proceedings of the British Academy 127.
- 2008 (ed.) *The Seventeenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Short Oxford History of the British Isles).
- 2012 (ed. with Devine, T M) *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Scottish History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

See also:

For a fuller appreciation of her seminal works, Steve Boardman and Julian Goodare, 'Introduction: Kings, Lords and Jenny Wormald', in Boardman and Goodare (eds) *Kings, Lords and Men in Scotland and Britain, 1300–1625: Essays in Honour of Jenny Wormald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp 1–18; and of her career and influence, Keith M Brown, 'The Stewart Realm: Changing the Landscape', pp 19–34, in the same volume.

ANNA GROUNDWATER