

Obituary

Professor Edward J Cowan, FRSE HonFSAScot

15 February 1944 – 2 January 2022

Professor Ted Cowan was the epitome of the all-embracing dedication to the Scottish past that the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland represents. No period, place or source was outside his interest, and all who shared even a small part of his passion were taken seriously, regardless of their academic standing. A pioneer in the study of ‘people’s history’, he had a passionate commitment to communicating Scotland’s history to its people today, and to the world, and stood as a towering presence in Scottish studies for half a century. There was no corner of Scotland’s history that was beyond the reach of his originality, no part of the diaspora untouched by his research, and no place he would not go, from the Arctic to

the Antipodes, to share his insights and knowledge. He not only gave keynote lectures to academic audiences across the world, as a leading scholar might do, but spoke to local societies and community groups in every county in Scotland and to Scottish societies across the diaspora. He worked regularly with Adventure Canada for more than 20 years, giving lectures on cruises around Scotland and Ireland, the North Atlantic, Norway, Iceland, the Faroes, Greenland and the Canadian Arctic.

As well as being an inspired researcher and dazzling lecturer, he was also a natural collaborator and leader. He ran academic departments, programmes and centres, organising conferences and



Ted Cowan during Scottish Society for Northern Studies Annual Day Conference, November 2015. (© Christian Cooijmans)

workshops (typically there were two each year in Canada from 1983 to 1993), chairing societies or contributing to initiatives such as the Edinburgh Folk Festival and Tartan Day, and advising museums in Scotland and Canada. He was president of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies, the Scottish Studies Foundation, and the Scottish History Society, Honorary President of the Bruce Trust, Patron of the Scottish Studies Society of Sydney, Australia, Convenor of the *Scottish Historical Review* Trust, and Chair of the Board of the European Ethnological Research Centre. After his retirement in 2009, he was particularly involved with the Saltire Society, the Wigtown Book Festival, Glenkens Community Arts Trust, and Galloway National Park Association, as well as helping to found The Glenkens Story, a local history group where he lived latterly. He was especially passionate about the south-west of Scotland, where he was raised and to which he returned at the end of his career as Director of the University of Glasgow's Crichton Campus in Dumfries, which he successfully campaigned to save from closure in 2007.

These activities were grounded in his unparalleled range of research across the fields of Scottish history, literature and folk culture. He published, co-wrote or edited 16 books and nearly a hundred articles or book chapters, including crucial contributions to our understanding of the Viking impact on Scotland, the Wars of Independence, Scottish political thought, the Highlands in the 16th and 17th centuries, the witch-hunts, Scottish popular culture and folk belief, the Covenanting revolution and later Covenanters, antiquarian studies in the 18th and 19th centuries on the subjects of ballads, sagas and folklore, the Scottish diaspora especially in North America and Australasia, and Scottish explorers in the Arctic. His literary studies included Icelandic sagas, Burns, John Galt, Robert Louis Stevenson, Robert Service and poets of the First World War, as well as the popular literature of chapbooks and ballads. The seams of his work which intersected most closely with the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland were probably his articles on agricultural improvement in Dumfries and Galloway (published in 1978) and on early

medieval sources (most notably his study of the Scottish Chronicle in the Poppelton MS, a fundamental text for the late 9th and 10th centuries, published in 1981), as well as numerous publications on Norse aspects of Scottish history. He also had a particular talent for bringing diverse scholars together to publish on a particular theme that he himself was working on, a notable example being *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland 1000 to 1600*, edited with Lizanne Henderson, published by Edinburgh University Press in 2011. He maintained this astonishing range of interests right to the end. Two books are due to be published this year, *Northern Lights: The Arctic Scots* and the edited proceedings of a conference on *Galloway: The Lost Province of Gaelic Scotland*.

His academic career began exceptionally early, when he was appointed to a lectureship in Scottish History at the University of Edinburgh only a few months after graduating with an MA in Scottish Historical Studies at the same university in 1967. His specialism was Scandinavian Scotland, and Icelandic sagas in particular, but his first major work was a history of James Graham, 1st Marquis of Montrose (1612–50), published as *Montrose: For Covenant and King* in 1977 (republished in 1995). He continued to work on medieval Scotland, extending his reach into late-medieval histories in Latin as well as early chronicles. *Montrose: For Covenant and King*, however, heralded two major interests that he worked on for the rest of his life: Covenanters and Gaelic Scotland. In the 1970s his passion for popular culture in the past and its historical legacy in the present saw him leading a pioneering collaboration between historians, musicologists and folk singers in a conference as part of the Edinburgh Folk Festival. He edited the proceedings in *The People's Past: Scottish Folk, Scottish History*, published in 1980 (republished in 1993). This was a daring undertaking, not least because its academic heartland was history rather than folklore studies. It was, nevertheless, embraced by the leading Scottish folklorist at the time, David Buchan, for its 'fecund unpredictability'. It was the beginning of a new approach to academic work that engaged fully and equally

with talented and committed people beyond university cloisters in developing new perspectives.

This commitment to relating to the wider public became a hallmark of his work when he left Edinburgh in 1979 to become Associate Professor of History at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada. In 1983 he was promoted to full professor and became director of the Centre for Scottish Studies, leading a programme of teaching and research that saw as many as 300 students take his third-year course in a year, and dozens of PhD students work under his supervision. Every year he would come to Scotland to increase Guelph University Library's stock of rare books of Scottish interest. He worked tirelessly to build relationships with local communities, bring leading scholars to Guelph and hold conferences, and promote the study of Canada's Scottish past. In 1987 he established the Scottish Studies Foundation, which by 2003 had raised 3 million Canadian dollars, enough to endow a chair of Scottish Studies at Guelph for the foreseeable future – the first of its kind in North America.

In 1994 he returned to Scotland as the fifth holder of the chair of Scottish History and Literature at the University of Glasgow. Despite its title, it had since its inception been held by historians steeped in the study of documents. Ted was the first with a track record in Scottish literature as well as history: it is ironic, therefore, that he established the convention of referring to it as a chair of Scottish History out of respect for the chair of Scottish Literature founded in 1995. He established a close working relationship with the first holder of that chair, Douglas Gifford (1940–2020), founding the Centre for Scottish Studies (now the Centre for Scottish and Celtic Studies) and jointly editing *The Polar Twins: Scottish History and Scottish Literature* (published in 1999).

Professor Cowan's Glasgow years were exceptionally productive. Between 2000 and 2007 he published eight books as author, co-author or editor, ranging from *For Freedom Alone: The Declaration of Arbroath* (2003, republished three times) and *The Wallace Book* (2007), to *The Ballad in Scottish History* (2000), *Folk in*

Print: Scotland's Chapbook Heritage (2007), *Alba: Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era* (2000, reprinted 2003) and *Scottish History: The Power of the Past* (2002). Two books highlight two salient features of this period. *Scotland Since 1688: Struggle for a Nation* (with Richard Finlay, in 2000) was written for the general reader, and can be seen as part of a range of activity to make Scottish history accessible that also included working with journalists and on radio and TV. *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001, republished in 2007 and 2011), written with his most important scholarly collaborator, Lizanne Henderson, showed the commitment to 'people's history' that he had first developed in his essay on the impact of the Reformation on folk culture in *The People's Past* two decades earlier. In 2004 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and in 2015 an Honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

In the last four years as Professor of Scottish History at Glasgow he was head of the university's Crichton Campus in Dumfries, returning to where his academic journey had begun in Dumfries Academy, where he had been head boy in 1961–2. He continued to live in the area during a very productive retirement, active as ever as researcher, speaker, organiser and collaborator. His main publications were edited volumes on Scottish ethnography: the *History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland 1000 to 1600* (2011, with Lizanne Henderson) mentioned above, and *Dumfries and Galloway: People and Place c.1700–1914* (2019, with Kenneth Veitch). He also published an edited collection, *Why Scottish History Still Matters* (2012), and *The Battle of Largs* (2017), a return to his early interest in the Norse involvement in Scottish history.

Ted's extrovert, charismatic personality and wonderful sense of humour made him a peerless communicator and teacher, the life and soul of any gathering. In company and conversation he was disarmingly, even alarmingly, direct and honest, unable to abide pretentiousness in any form. But he was also immensely kind and empathetic, genuinely and deeply interested in everyone he met, and unfailingly supportive of others.

All these qualities inspired great affection on the part of many students, colleagues and the general public, and the love of many friends. A poignant testimony of this is the personal contributions to the webpage set up by the School of Humanities at the University of Glasgow for tributes to him (https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/humanities/latestnews/headline_831503_en.html): by the time of his funeral on 25 January, two dozen had been received from former colleagues, collaborators, scholars and students (including two whom he taught at the beginning of his career: Michael Russell, President of the SNP, and David Caldwell, recently President of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland). So many of these spoke of his ability to listen and take interest in others and his willingness to give so generously of his time, the astonishing range of his knowledge

and his deep compassion for those he studied. Somehow he found the time for all this, and never seemed burdened by any of it. He lived life to the full in ways that would have taken anyone else many lifetimes.

With his passing Scotland and its diaspora has lost not only one of its greatest, most gregarious and passionate academic personalities, but a historian of unprecedented breadth and openness. He was intellectually fearless and always inspiring. There never was, and never will be, a scholar with such a range of research, capacity for originality or gift for communication. He redefined what it meant to be an academic historian, and what Scottish history could be. He was not only a historian of the people's past, but during his long and active career he was always the people's historian above all else.

DAUVIT BROWN

This is an expanded version of the obituary first published in The Herald on 22 January 2022.