

Donald Elmslie Robertson Watt

To know medieval Scotland, fitting together the tessera which have survived and sketching the outlines of what is missing to show them in a possible whole picture, engaged the energies of a generation of scholars in our post-1945 universities; they benefited from expansion in the older universities, and saw the history of Scotland find a respected place in teaching. Their day is past, but their work speaks for them, and for no-one more firmly and lastingly than for Donald Watt. His career from 1953, apart from one year at Columbia University, New York, was spent in the new Medieval History department of St Andrews University, where he was a lively teacher with an appreciative student following, though discourse on medieval Europe and a specialist treatment of Edward I gave little scope for discussing his research interests. He was active in university affairs after the 1966 act made more room for lecturers on Senate and Court, in no way a radical, but constructively firm in a way which did not always fit the aims of Principal Watson. In 1977 his scholarship was recognised there by the conferment of a personal chair in Scottish Church History. His home was a warm place in which his wife, Helen, and their two daughters balanced his absences in the study with his concern for family life. They shared a love of hill-walking, and of highland dancing, while he could turn a mean spadeful in the vegetable garden.

The youngest son in the prosperous family which owned Aberdeen University Press – a printing business, as the word Press properly implies – he attended Aberdeen Grammar School and then Aberdeen University. Interrupted by a spell in the RAF for national service, he took first class honours in history there in 1950; his teachers included the distinguished medievalist Kathleen Edwards, responsible, as he acknowledged, for directing his interest to the medieval church. Afterwards he came up to Oriel College (1950-53) as a Carnegie scholar to research and take his D. Phil (1957) on 'Scotsmen at Universities between 1340 and 1410', supervised by A B Emden, who published major prosopographical works on medieval Oxford and Cambridge graduates.

From this work in 1977 came his *Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Graduates to A.D. 1410*, the fruit of thirty years dedicated research into archives in Britain and continental western Europe, and the work by which his name will persist in bibliographies for generations to come. I have a copy of his first proposal (in 1958) to publish such a dictionary, describing how for 1340-1410 he had found 450 biographies, only a 'handful' of the subjects having been 'noticed by historians' despite the importance of the whole scholarly cadre to contemporary Scottish society. He proposed to extend the period of study backwards and to produce in four years work 'a reference book of permanent value to historians of the period' 1200-1410. In fact the book took another eighteen (or so) years, appearing in 1977 and never off our desks since then, with the careers of eleven hundred Scots or servants of Scotland who attended university from the first appearance of such institutions in the twelfth century to the foundation of St Andrews University. It has been acknowledged in works of the past thirty years as a masterly, indeed flawless, record, with full references drawn from published work and archives from Aberdeen to southern Italy. Upon this, its pages say, you can rely.

There is far more of value to the scholar in his twenty-page introduction than its brevity might suggest, but it is of a technical character, indispensable to the neophyte in ecclesiastical history. The text identifies 'those in Scottish society who had the new type of higher education' including some who were non-Scots in origin and career but picked up a Scottish post as they advanced. But there is no treatment of the place in Scottish society of the graduate clergy, no fulfilment of the suggestion he made in 1958 that he would shorten his thesis to provide an introduction to the dictionary. I am unsure whether we should regret his revised decision, but the fact that his thesis, with (as I recall) much to say on the social background and motivation of the clergy, remains effectively unpublished, suggests that he did not find extending his analysis back before 1340 a congenial prospect. I think he would agree that his *Dictionary* will have a much longer life than would another treatment of the medieval Scottish church, even from his own pen.

To the influence of his teacher and supervisor add that of the annual meetings of historians interested in medieval Scotland, the first in 1957, where he urged the decisions taken to list, with source-references, the bishops and senior clergy of the Scottish dioceses, to investigate the manuscript authorities for Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon*, written in the 1440s and published in 1759, and to produce an atlas of Medieval Scottish History by collaborative effort. The first of these gave us a first draft *Fasti*, almost entirely his own research, published in cyclostyled form (1959), and ten years later a printed second draft incorporating additions from many sources. From 1994 he took up a new conference-sponsored project: to establish the succession of abbots and priors who headed Scottish religious houses. There was little in the bank when he began but fortunately he found another joint editor who could share in the library and archive research. By the time of publication of *Heads of Religious Houses* (2001) his health was deteriorating, but he had already turned to complete work on the *Fasti*. In 2003 the 'revised' edition of this was published, expanding 385 pages of the second draft to 503 pages, with new information from several scholars – but mainly from Watt and (an innovation) a fellow-editor. *Heads of*

Houses and *Fasti* are indispensable reference tools, saving each scholar of the period hours of labour in establishing the context from which comes the document he studies.

The Atlas project, with maps from many scholars including Watt, published in 1975, did sterling service as a teaching aid and in showing the holes where cartography ought to have been possible but work on the sources had not been done. A second edition was planned and appeared in 1996. 'Professor Donald Watt continued as a tower of strength throughout, mixing cajolery, encouragement and participation in the task in hand in equal and generous measures' wrote the editors.

For several years he was the Scot active on international bodies planning studies of aspects of the medieval western church. One such intends to describe the work of local councils in each province; Donald's contribution, *Medieval Church Councils in Scotland*, appeared in English (2000) and German, and shows how much more can be added to a subject well travelled by Victorian scholars by greater attention to papal decrees and decisions of councils of the whole church. He had already won recognition for participation in such efforts by a detailed account of the Scottish sees and bishops before 1198 (when the series of papal registers begins) published as *Series Episcoporum Ecclesiae Catholicae Occidentalis, Series VI Britannia etc. Tomus I Ecclesia Scoticana*. The full title reveals that *Britannia etc* are England and Wales; Scotland and Scandinavia were also in Series VI, but the first completed and published volume was his Scotland (1991), to which another Fellow, Dr Barbara Crawford, contributed Caithness, while Donald published 'the Isles', technically a Norwegian diocese, in a periodical. The plan was to present title and text in the Latin language, thus ensuring a privileged readership. In the British volumes at least the text will be in English, not the least of Donald Watt's determined stands for common sense.

As early as the 1950s he had urged a new edition of Bower's *Scotichronicon* based on the standard histories of Christian Europe available in the 1440s, interwoven with, even dominated by, a parallel narrative of Scotland. We all used the 1759 edition, though it lacked a translation and a modern index; a year's work by Watt revealed that it also ignored a manuscript preserved in a Cambridge college belonging to the author and preserving his emendations. These lacunae he set out to remedy in a new edition published in 9 volumes between 1987 and 1997. Volume 8 (1987) was wholly his work, but it was the maquette for the series, produced by Watt with seven contributory editors. Each volume has a Latin text with critical apparatus, a facing translation and detailed historical notes identifying sources used, all subject to rigorous scrutiny by his eagle eye even where his had been the productive hand. For this daunting task he retired early to make time for co-ordinating editorial work, standardising the contributions and raising the finance for publication. With ancillary material it stands completed as ten volumes on our shelves, a tribute to what team-work and the PC can achieve when driven by the determination of a dedicated scholar.

His honorary doctorate from Glasgow University (2000) was a late acknowledgment of this scholarly production, but silently also of his outstanding capacity to organise a team, to cooperate and to secure cooperation among others, to maintain impetus until completion. He fell out with no-one in any of these collaborative efforts, and we all shared in the warm welcome given to the volume of essays presented to him to mark the completed *Scotichronicon*.

He was for eight years joint editor of the *Scottish Historical Review*, for four president of the Scottish History Society, served on the councils of learned societies and on a committee of the RSE. He was an elder and treasurer of his Kirk and headed the successful effort to establish in St Andrews the Cosmos Centre for its young people. One night in the fifties he arrived at our door in Edinburgh, stranded by fog on his way from seeing Helen whom he was to marry. He told us all about her, and I reckoned he was the luckiest man in Scotland. He was, and he deserved to be.

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