Gordon Donaldson, eminent Scottish historian, prolific writer of international repute and HM Historiographer in Scotland, died in his eightieth year on 16 March 1993 at Cameron Hospital, Windygate, Fife. He bore with fortitude and courage the cancer which afflicted him.

Born in Edinburgh on 13 April 1913, the third child and youngest son (his elder brother, William, died in infancy) of Magnus Donaldson and Rachel Swan, Donaldson was educated at Broughton Elementary School, 1918-21 (where a teacher’s account of Alexander III’s death at the cliffs near Kinghorn caught his imagination), and at the Royal High School, 1921-31, where his academic gifts were soon discernible. In the preparatory school, he was proxime accessit to the dux and in his senior years was dux in Latin, Greek, English and History, winning the India Prize and Stevenson Club Prize. He served as a prefect and - perhaps appropriately - was head of Scots (one of the four ‘nations’ of Scots, Picts, Angles and Britons to which pupils were attached). In 1931 he distinguished himself as dux of the school, amply fulfilling the expectations of his parents who in sending him to a fee-paying school endured an element of sacrifice, for which he was immensely grateful. His distinguished record also meant that, half-way through his school career, he qualified for remission of fees, on merit, which came as a help to his family. He admired his teachers as models not only of education but of language, dress and conduct. The history and classics teachers he found very good indeed, but he owed most to his teachers in modern languages and mathematics who appreciated his diffidence and sensitivity. As in many a school, there was also a ‘brute’ who was able - at least in those days - to reduce a class of fourteen-year old boys to tears by lashing them with his tongue. Gordon always had his nose in books, was never athletic, loathed games, and was, at his own estimation, physically timid.

When he came to head for University, Donaldson managed with difficulty to escape from the traditional route of the classics - an early indication of his persistence and resistance. University would have been impossible without financial help. He gained a scholarship from school and won sixth place in the University Bursary Competition; to supplement his awards, he undertook some casual tutoring. His first year at Edinburgh (1931-32) was spent mastering British History and Political Economy: he gained the medal in Ordinary British History but won no merit certificate in Political Economy. In his second, he concentrated on Honours British History, and, again, took the medal, Ordinary European History, where he gained a second-class merit certificate, and Philosophy (Logic and Metaphysics), where he also received a second-class certificate. He was medallist in Ordinary Scottish History, came second in the Honours course in Political Science, and took the Honours class in Constitutional History in his third year. He devoted his final year to Honours European History and a Special Subject. In selecting his Special Subject, where the overwhelming preference was for Economic History, then reckoned a soft option, Donaldson chose Scottish History, which lacked popularity on account of its reputation for fortnightly essays. R K Hannay, who held the Scottish History chair and earlier had been Curator of the Historical Records in Register House, was ‘a brilliant scholar, a brilliant teacher’, who rather than lecture took his Honours students through the source material. Hannay’s great interest was in the Reformation period, and the second term of his class was devoted to the years 1542-1567. That, for Donaldson, proved a very valuable training: it set him on his career as a Scottish historian and gave him a taste for archives which was later to become his profession for some years. In Hannay’s Honours class, he won the James Elliot Prize.

On graduating with first-class Honours in History in 1935, Donaldson chose not to follow the advice of Hannay and Basil Williams, Professor of History, which was to make for Oxford. Nor did he take up the suggestion of D P Heatley, his teacher in Honours British History of whom he had a high opinion, to remain in Edinburgh. He listened instead to D B Horn who remarked that “Professors Williams and Hannay have a natural belief in the superiority of their own university” and recommended instead London as the place for postgraduate study. Donaldson enjoyed London immensely, in the company of other poor students who were always counting the pennies, and found he could have received no better training than at the Institute of Historical Research, with Sir John Neale as his supervisor. His PhD topic was an Anglo-Scottish one, and R K Hannay reappeared as external examiner. In London, he gained the David Berry Prize from the Royal Historical Society in 1937 and graduated in 1938. He intended to remain in London, which he so enjoyed, were a post to turn up, and had no wish to return to Edinburgh. Yet posts were scarce: he had applied, with Neale’s support, in 1936 for an assistant lectureship at University College, Cardiff with no success; and in 1937, when his scholarship ran out, was an unsuccessful candidate for appointment as a second-class clerk in the Register House. He came runner-up, and got the next vacancy, without further interview, in 1938. By the end of that year, the Keeper and Curator had drawn up plans for the greater security of the records in an emergency, plans which were put into effect when news came that Germany had invaded Poland and that war was imminent.

For a spell, Donaldson took his turn at fire-watching, for Register House was considered safe except from a direct hit; but by 1940 the older records were removed for safe-keeping to Morenesh Lodge on Lochtayside where Donaldson found himself exiled till 1942. There he began transcribing the Court Book of Shetland, 1602-1604, and abridging the Protocol Book of James Young for the Scottish Record Society; he was also engaged on the St Andrews Formulare, which he had started with Christopher Macrae under the older records were removed for safe-keeping to Morenesh Lodge on Lochtayside where Donaldson found himself exiled till 1942. There he began transcribing the Court Book of Shetland, 1602-1604, and abridging the Protocol Book of James Young for the Scottish Record Society; he was also engaged on the St Andrews Formulare, which he had started with Christopher Macrae under the commendation of Dickinson who told Glasgow’s new principal that the chair ought to have been “offered in the very first instance in favour of a candidate who made no discernible contribution to the scholarship of his discipline; was promoted Reader at Edinburgh in 1955, after the award of his DLitt in 1954; was an applicant for Glasgow’s Chair of Scottish History and Literature in 1961, with the commendation of Dickinson who told Glasgow’s new principal that the chair ought to have been “offered in the very first instance with acclamation to Donaldson”. As Glasgow dithered, Donaldson finally withdrew in what Dickinson called ‘good Scottish pride’. In a way everything worked out appropriately, for Donaldson succeeded to the Edinburgh chair in 1963 which he adorned for sixteen years, and the succession of another candidate at Glasgow gave Scottish History there an impetus and vitality which it needed and deserved.

His didactic skills in the Ordinary class which he personally conducted for many years from the Romans to the present century attracted a very sizeable audience; his lectures were meticulous, well-timed and expertly delivered, but he preferred to keep to his typewritten text, probably the consequence of the exceptional nervousness he had to overcome in his earlier years when addressing the public. His Honours class on the period 1567-1637 was by contrast austere, and took the form of dictation, with chapter and
verse supplied for everything he said, but there was neither discussion nor were the sources placed before the class for examination. The market for Scottish Historical Studies inevitably remained small; but at graduate level, where he conducted his seminars on the London model, hordes of research students swarmed to the Department under his leadership.

Author of over thirty books, innumerable articles and countless addresses, Donaldson made an outstanding, incalculable contribution to his subject. His volume in the *Edinburgh History of Scotland* (1965) remains the best general study of the period a generation after its publication; his *Scottish Reformation* (1960) broke fresh ground in its marshalling of source material; and *All the Queen's Men* (1983), which he jokingly described as ‘unreadable’, was a formidable prosopographical study of power and politics in Mary Stewart's Scotland. But it is his work as a record scholar, particularly his volumes of the *Register of the Privy Seal*, which confers on him a kind of immortality.

Outspoken, and at times acerbic, he could prove a formidable adversary and fierce critic: his correcting pencil hovered involuntarily over all he read; he enjoyed trouncing all he considered bogus in Scottish historical writing, particularly the common romantic image of the Highlands, clans, and clearances; he displayed a marked antipathy to kilts, bagpipes, Burns' nights, and all that made Scots, to his mind, 'ridiculous'. An inveterate letter-writer to *The Scotsman*, he could never decline a challenge to dispute with the BBC over pronunciation or its Anglocentric presentation, with the editor of the *Daily Express* on bishops and the Kirk, or with fervent nationalists intent on dissolving the Union to which he was so firmly attached. Though brought up within the Church of Scotland, he became confirmed in the Scottish Episcopal Church in 1943, was recognised as one of its liturgical experts and served on many inter-Church committees, but latterly found himself estranged from his Church's innovations in worship which he flatly refused to countenance.

A Shetlander by descent, Donaldson loved to return to his 'Isles of Home' and had a life-long passion for the sea and for sailing. He also thought his Shetland background brought a certain detachment in his approach to Scottish history. His distinguished services were recognised in his election as President of many learned societies: the Scottish Ecclesiological Society (1963-65), the Scottish Church History Society (1964-67), the Scottish History Society (1968-72), the Scottish Record Society (1981-1993), the Scottish Records Association, and the Stair Society (from 1987); he was an Honorary Vice-President of the Royal Historical Society; a member of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (1964-82); and of the Scottish Records Advisory Council (1964-87), served on the executive of the National Trust, and for five years edited the *Scottish Historical Review* (1972-77). He was honoured with the award of honorary degrees at Aberdeen in 1976 and at Stirling in 1988; was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1976; a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1978; was appointed HM Historiographer in Scotland in 1979; was the recipient of a *Festschrift* in 1983, was awarded a CBE in 1988; and received from the King of Norway the St Olav's medal in 1992.

Gordon Donaldson was simply incomparable: we shall not see his like again.

JAMES KIRK