
Professor Geoffrey Barrow

By David Torrance

Medieval Historian

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Born: November 28, 1924; Died: December 16, 2013.

Geoffrey Barrow, who has died aged 89, lived just long enough to see published a "classic" edition of his seminal work, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, which first appeared nearly half a century ago. A lucid and authoritative analysis of Scotland's tumultuous coming of age in the Wars of Independence, its game-of-thrones narrative brought him an international reputation.

Having pieced together from surviving evidence a vivid and almost day-by-day account of Bruce's tactics, his crowning at Scone, his defeat by the English and his life as a fugitive, Professor Barrow teased out the interplay between his subject and the very concept of a Scottish nation. His thesis was that between 1290 and 1329 a singularly Scottish identity emerged in campaigns against the English, culminating in the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314.

Hailed as the first modern book on medieval Scottish history a few years after it was published in 1965, it later enjoyed an additional four editions and further plaudits. The historian Michael Brown said its reach and impact had travelled well beyond Scotland; Tom Devine considered it Barrow's masterwork, while Gordon Menzies simply declared it the best book on Scottish history ever written. That such a statement was not dismissed as hyperbole said everything about the book's impact.

Geoffrey Wallis Steuart Barrow was born on 28 November 1924 in Headingley near Leeds, the son of Charles Embleton Barrow and his wife Marjorie (née Stuart). Initially educated at St Edward's School in Oxford, the family moved to the Scottish Highlands when Geoffrey was just 14, and he continued his education at Inverness Royal Academy and the University of St Andrews. At Pembroke College, Oxford, he completed a B.Litt. thesis on 'Scottish royal ecclesiastical policy, 1107-1214', giving an indication of what his focus would be as an historian.

He moved even further south in 1950 when he took up a lectureship at University College, London, also marrying (the following year) Heather Elizabeth (née Lownie), with whom he later had one son and one daughter. Academically, he made his reputation in 1953

with a prize-winning essay on 'Scottish rulers and the religious orders, 1070-1153'. The book *Feudal Britain* followed in 1956, the first rounded study of Britain in the Middle Ages, although Prof Barrow would soon turn his attention to Scottish feudalism rather than the Anglo-Norman variety.

In 1961 he became Professor of Medieval History at King's College, Durham, where he edited scholarly volumes on Malcolm IV and William I, subsequently moving a little further north to Newcastle University. In 1973 he published a collection of his scholarly articles, *The Kingdom of the Scots*, editing *The Scottish Tradition* the following year. Also in 1974, he finally returned to Scotland as the first Professor of Scottish History at the University of St Andrews.

There, one of his students was a young Alex Salmond, whom, appropriately, he tutored in Scotland's Wars of Independence. Prof Barrow later told the diplomat Paul Henderson Scott that the future First Minister was his star student, correctly predicting that he was, the professor's words, going places. Years later, the SNP leader would repay the compliment by praising Prof Barrow as the historian who has perhaps more than any other raised the quality of interpretation of the period. Indeed, Salmond prized his tutor's book on Robert Bruce and often alluded to it.

Inevitably, Salmond was later compared with the Bruce himself, and it was easy to see the appeal of Prof Barrow's prose and subject to his modern incarnation. "The stature and the statesmanship of King Robert I appears enhanced rather than diminished when we see him grappling with political difficulties and often failing to find an easy or brilliant solution," wrote Prof Barrow in his 1965 book. "Above all, he had to manage the community of the realm, impalpable, inarticulate, yet always a force to be reckoned with; wayward to lead, yet impossible to drive." Prof Barrow was that rare combination, reflected his colleague Michael Lynch: a record scholar but also a historian with the gift of memorable prose.

An unlikely supporter of independence given his Yorkshire roots, Prof Barrow also possessed an iconoclastic streak which he explored in a 1980 lecture - *The Extinction of Scotland* - after succeeding Gordon Donaldson as the Sir William Fraser Professor of Scottish History and Palaeography at the University of Edinburgh. He dwelled on the previous year's devolution referendum, which had produced a majority for a Scottish Assembly, but not by enough for it to become a legislative reality.

"In the months preceding the Referendum of 1979, I remember in particular three utterances by members of the Scots upper middle class," recalled Barrow. "A distinguished scientist solemnly assured me that 'we are a very poor country and always have been'. The head of a well-known girls' school declared that 'we have never been good at governing ourselves and managing our own affairs'. An eminent philosopher of advanced age asked me: 'What is going to happen to my pension?'" These statements, judged Barrow, were the quintessential voice of the Scots bourgeoisie.

Away from politics, Prof Barrow's writing covered the entire spectrum of Scottish medieval history, spanning the period from the Dark Ages to the 14th century, and while at Edinburgh University he published *The Anglo-Norman Era in Scottish History* (1980) and *Kingship and Unity: Scotland, 1000-1306* (1981). When he retired in 1992 his publication list extended to more than 90 items, including eight books and 86 articles, essays and pamphlets, plus numerous encyclopedia entries and countless reviews. "Truly", observed breathlessly a 1993 *Festschrift*, or volume of essays by colleagues and admirers, "he bestrides his world like a Colossus."

Even in retirement, Prof Barrow remained Professor Emeritus at Edinburgh and in 1992 he published another collection of articles titled *Scotland and its Neighbours in the Middle Ages* and, in 1999, edited *The Charters of King David I*. "As a head of department he spread an atmosphere of kindness and good-natured bonhomie," observed a 1993 tribute, "which encouraged both a personal loyalty and genuinely close working relationships."

"That was smashing" was typical of Barrow's exclamations to students and colleagues, while he made a point of writing individual letters to his departing students. He was elected to Fellowship of the British Academy in 1976 and the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1977. He was made Ford's Lecturer at the University of Oxford in 1977, and awarded an honorary D.Litt. by the University of Glasgow in 1988. He was also involved in the Scottish History Society (as chairman and president), the Saltire Society (as president), the Royal Historical Society (as literary director and vice-president) and the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (as a member).